Mothering community. Surviving the post-nation in Arundhati Roy's *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*

Rossella Ciocca

Abstract
In continuity with the postcolonial socially concerned agenda and the modernist roots of the genre in the 1930s, a streak of the Indian postmillennial novel confirms its vocation as a concerned form of cultural activism. Within this trend, we find *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* by Arundhati Roy (2017). The novel weaves together the stories of a whole universe of people and follows their efforts in creating and defending their community against communalism in a country which is increasingly suffering from internal factionalism. In particular, the narration intersects the characters' destinies with some of the gloomiest and murkiest episodes of contemporary Indian history. Continuing in fictional terms her life-long commitment against neo-liberal economic globalisation and the threats the rise of Hindu nationalism poses to democracy, Roy confirms a gift for storytelling which is genuinely, and almost daringly, literary. The aim of this paper is to assess not only the breadth of this novel's capacity to tackle thorny political issues, but also to account for its quintessentially artistic devotion to stylistic expertise and original rhetorical proficiency, demonstrating once again the capacity of creative writing to develop social and moral worldviews through its formal experiments.

Key-words: mothering, community, post-nation.

1. State of the post-nation(alist) novel

The Indian Anglophone novel of the new millennium has allegedly marked a passage from a previous preponderantly postcolonial mood to a variety of new trends. Speaking about the novel of New India, many scholars (Varughese 2013; Gupta 2015; Tickell 2016; Anjaria 2019; Chattopadhyay, Mandhwani and Maity 2019) have recently investigated the explosion of popular fiction along the mass-market vectors of a great number of genres and subgenres. Prose narratives, easily written,

ISSN 1824-3967

easily published and easily consumed by a new public of metropolitan readers, constitute the major novelty in the contemporary literary sphere of the subcontinent. At the same time, the turn of the century has also seen a second and somewhat antithetical trend in literature (Sunder Rajan 2019: 4): one in which the commitment to record, and denounce, the dramatic social and cultural turmoil of contemporary India makes of the novel still one powerful and determined agent of social critique. In continuity with the postcolonial attitude, with its socially concerned agenda, and the modernist roots of the genre in the 1930s[1], also this last streak of Indian narrative confirms its vocation as a concerned form of cultural activism. With a difference. Whereas the nation-state was conceived as one, or maybe the major, catalyst of novelistic imagination before independence and the focus of postcolonial, allegorical or realistic[2], consideration in the post-independence era, the post-millennial novel which has engaged with India's increasing globalisation, not only questions the very substance of the national project, sometimes it tends to discard it altogether. Adhering to the category of fiction as 'counter-discourse' (John Marx 2008: 599), this new literary output tends to reflect upon the right, and indeed the moral duty, to express internal dissent, and to promote a renovated interrogation of the 'idea of India' (Khilnani 2003), articulating the passage from a national and nationalist to a post-national and a definitely anti-nationalist sense of belonging. Indeed, from the deepest disillusionment with the promises of the post-colonial state[3], and strenuously antagonising the more recent appalling forms of Hindu majoritarian nationalism[4], a different way to

[1] I am talking of course of the literary tradition sprung from the 1934 manifesto of the *All-India Progressive Writers' Association*, a group of radical intellectuals that proclaimed that literature had to fight against obscurantism and deal with the basic problems of existence; inaugurating "a turn to realism that established a new mode of social criticism" (Marino 2017: 178).

[2] This is a reference to Jameson's contentious assumption of the postcolonial-novel-as-national allegory (1986).

[3] As remarked, among many others, by Bill Ashcroft: "The nation-state has been critiqued in postcolonial analysis largely because the post-independence, post-colonised nation, that wonderful utopian idea, proved to be a focus of exclusion and division rather than unity; perpetuating the class divisions of the colonial state rather than liberating national subjects." (2008: 30).

[4] Many intellectuals lament the fact that history in school textbooks is being rewritten and that minorities are increasingly excluded from political representation in favour

conceptualise community is evoked. These new, other than national, feelings of appurtenance circulate through different, material, or immaterial, territories, like for example "through city spaces, through global connections, and through shared politics" (Daiya 2019: 154). In this respect, Arundhati Roy's second novel, *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, far from addressing a sort of "deterritorialized globalism" (Singh 2018: 12), develops instead a particularly insistent poetics of location and community, often conceived as alternative, subversive spaces and heterotopias (Gopinath 2020).

The novel deals largely and in depth with history, and with all the concerns that fashion the post-national ethos of the contemporary literary production of a serious standard. The violence of the state, the internal colonialism of the centre imposed upon plundered peripheries, environmental emergencies, persisting casteism, religious communalism, police sadism, the blind brutality of the mob, the predicament of the damned, the underdog, *the unconsoled,* to whom the novel is tellingly dedicated. Through her strenuous attachment to the subaltern voice, Roy develops a narrative which is still about the conditions of her homeland but expresses itself quite directly against the "the devil's pact between nation and capitalism" (Ashcroft 2013: 14) which in India has characterised the coeval neoliberal turn, producing the paradox of an expanding middle class, whose aspirational global citizenship goes hand in hand with the most virulent resurgence of religious parochialism (Hindutva). Hence, if there still were a viable idea of the Indian nation, then this would be *a state of the nation* novel. As things stand, we can call it a narrative diagnosis of the post-nation conditions.

1.1. From activism to literature

Since the 1990s indeed, Roy has targeted, through her non-fiction, Indian globalisation, with its spectacular deregulated growth of the economy, its transnational market's expansion abroad and its cultural retrenchment at home. The attendant dramatic social

---

of a more widespread presence of Hindu people in positions of power. Moreover, in an attempt to make religion an eligibility criterion for Indian citizenship, in 2019 a bill, envisaged to grant citizenship's rights exclusively to non-Muslim immigrants, has been passed by India's lower house of parliament.

transformations in the destabilising forms of urbanisation, slum sprawl and ghettoisation, dislocation and relocation movements, ecological disasters provoked by the massive exploitation of natural resources and infrastructural development, nuclear weapon proliferation, and the increased eruption of violence along caste, ethnic, gender, religious and political fault lines, are just some of the issues tackled in her essays[5]. *In The Ministry of Utmost Happiness,* her sceptical view goes even further, not limiting to one or another of those issues but weaving a very complex, all-embracing arras of the Indian contemporary condition as a globalised 'post-Nehruvian' neo-liberal state. If it is, in general, assumed that there has been a move away from the vast ambition of the monumental 'baggy monsters' of the '80s and '90s, with Rushdie, Seth, and Mistry to set the model, still we find that this novel indexes the greatest possible number of events that have in the recent past affected the lives of people. In this sort of "elegy for a bulldozed world" (N. S. Roy 2017), public memory is knitted with the threads of the gloomiest and murkiest episodes of modern Indian history, from Partition to the Emergency, from the Bhopal gas leak disaster in the '80s to the Kashmiri uprisings of the '90s[6], from the Godhra train burning and subsequent crowd killings in Gujarat in 2002 to Adivasis' displacement and dispossession in the ongoing context of the Green Hunt operation[7] and the Government-Maoist confrontation in Central India.

---

[5] In the last twenty years Roy has incessantly written on contemporary Indian politics and culture. In 2014, her numerous essays were collected by Penguin India in a five-volume set; in 2019, her nonfiction was collected in a single volume, *My Seditious Heart.*

[6] At the time of independence, in 1947, Kashmir was one of the independent princely kingdoms, having a majority-Muslim population and a Hindu king who decided to join India promising a referendum, which never took place. The modern Kashmiri struggle for independence was inflamed in 1990, transforming Kashmir into one of the most densely militarised areas in the world with continuous violations of civil and human rights.

[7] Operation Green Hunt, was unleashed against the "Maoist" rebel headquarters in the jungles of central India, in particular in the forest once known as the Dandakaranya, which stretches from West Bengal through Jharkhand, Orissa, Chhattisgarh, parts of Andhra Pradesh and Maharashtra, and that is home to millions of India's tribal people.

Taking, once again, its route to "the goal of hugeness" (Chaudhuri 2008: 114), and giving voice to actors traditionally silenced in Indian social life, *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* strongly advocates and re-endorses the traditional principled "capacity of the novel to make sense of political history" (Tickell 2019: XXXI). Yet, Roy is able to negotiate her social sensitivity through a specific literary focus: spearheading her personal way into creative writing with an aesthetic resolve which eschews any temptation of sociological determinism[8]. She has indeed conceived a narration which is not just a mirroring of reality but an exploration of form and the creation of a universe.

In *The Work of Literature* (2015), where the term 'work' signifies both the process of artistic production and the artefact, Derek Attridge refers to literature in terms of 'event', something that implies a process that takes time and produces consequences. He posits the specificity of literature as invention, an apprehension both of inner and outer worlds, the creation of new human geographies, new cultural and psychological constellations (p. 29). And Arundhati Roy herself defines a work of fiction like "the opposite of an argument" and more like "creating a universe"[9].

In her novel, whereas the issues tackled share some of the author's 'argumentative' posture, the world created has its own thickness. In *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness,* we find the complexity and the ambiguities of the real world plus the capacity proper to true literature to convincingly conjure up a new configuration of existence: to realize an *event* in Attridge's sense. Then, if creative writing is able to develop social and moral theories through its formal experiments (Mohanty 2011: 5), Roy's novel excels in this very epistemic dimension of literature. To regain attention and focus on "genre, form, and aesthetics" (Anjaria 2015: 2) and realising, in opposition to *distant reading*, some kind of "close reading with a worldview" (Apter 2004: 108), is thus a way of fully recovering the

---

[8] On this see Anjaria (2015: 2-3) and Tickell (2019: XXIX).

[9] "You know, it's like doing everything you can to create a world in which you want people to wander […]. I'll have to find a language to tell the story I want to tell. By language I don't mean English, Hindi, Urdu, Malayalam, of course. I mean something else. A way of binding together worlds that have been ripped apart." (Roy, Interview on *Democracy now*, 20 June 2017)

specificities through which the novel articulates not only its reading of reality but also its *vision* of possibilities in reality. Focusing on writing as writing allows for an assessment of fiction's capacity to transform situated historical and political realities into something completely autonomous and powerfully new, something which is able to speak to an age and, in the meantime, to provide wider and deeper insights into the multi-layered dimensions of the human.

2. Creating community

2.1. People

The novel's plot is constructed upon two main storylines focused through two narrative perspectives. The first, in the third person, follows Anjum, born Aftab, a *hijra* (transsexual) forced early in her life to negotiate an interior 'Indo-Pak' struggle between her two diverging physical and psychological selves: "She, raging at her glands, her organs, her skin, the texture of her hair, the width of her shoulders, the timbre of her voice." (Roy 2017: 122). When, subsequently, she falls prey to confessional mob killings in Gujarat and is spared only because "killing Hijras brings bad luck" (p. 62), the narration follows the character's almost impossible mourning process in its negotiations with the trauma of survival.

> She tried to un-know what they had done to all the others – how they had folded the men and unfolded the women. And how eventually they had pulled them apart limb from limb and set them on fire. But she knew very well that she knew. (pp. 61-2)

The second storyline, in the first person, follows Tilo, a lonely and awkward woman (with many biographical details in common with the author), who experiences the horrors of the Kashmiri civil war occupying the centre of a male triangle drawn by men who all love her. Musa, a Kashmiri freedom fighter, whom she loves in return and is in touch with during his years in hiding; Naga, a left-wing double-dealing journalist whom she marries as a cover; and Biplab Dasgupta, the narrator of this narrative section, a senior official of the Indian Intelligence Bureau, professionally involved in the Kashmiri conflict, whose flat she rents after leaving her husband.

Tilo's character is connoted by an aura of elusive restlessness, stubbornness, and unintelligible-ness, which makes her appear both adamant and fragile. She is described as having no ties, except for the dogs that she feeds in the park. Even though she cares for everyone, she is portrayed as a creature immured in "the country of her skin", without any real human bond, who basically "wanted to be free to die irresponsibly, and for no reason" (p. 159).

Her whereabouts and motivations are tentatively reconstructed by the *landlord* (Biplab Dasgupta) who, himself adrift in an existential and professional crisis, tries to understand Tilo's world and mindset, living in her flat after she moves. For him: "The absence of the person who lived here … [was] so real, so palpable, that it … [was] almost a presence." (p. 144). Biplab, hooked on alcohol, fear, and danger, is followed through his final coming to terms with his addictive personality, a "single-mindedness coupled with acute guilt and useless remorse" (p. 428). He is the spokesperson of the establishment, and the foremost witness of the failure of the government's military policy; his eyes have seen too much, his view is not so much ferocious or cynical as desperately disenchanted and abysmally hopeless. Giving voice to the regime's standpoint by adopting this senior officer's stance is, for Roy, a way to condemn state violence *from within.* At the same time, by recognising the multisided implications of civil warfare, she elaborates a strategy of perception which does not shun complexity. Through a perspectivist, prismatic strategy of narration, she confirms the foundational dialogic quality of the novel (Bakhtin 1981) and gives reality its politically contentious due.

2.2. Places, spaces and (heter)onomastics

In *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness,* a series of places are more than just settings; some spaces are loaded with symbolic overtones and build a geography of iconic/ironic onomastics. The first of these places is the *Khwabgah*, "the House of Dreams", the *haveli* with the blue door where the woman Aftab followed lived with seven others like her (p. 19). It is the first community where Aftab can become Anjum, "the *mehfil*, the gathering" (p. 4) of many selves she is eager to transmute into, after having been entrapped in the strictures of heteronormativity. Another distinctly queer

and overflowing place is the *Jantar Mantar*, the old eighteenth-century astronomical 'observatory' in New Delhi, where all kinds of ragged protesters, dropouts, nuts and intellectual dreamers[10] are observed and minutely described in their orbits, which, singularly taken, may appear random and even eccentric, but altogether considered, are structurally essential to the upkeeping of social pluralism. Here, in the "tubby old Gandhian" (p. 101) who is fasting to death against corruption, and who "electrified Hindu chauvinists" (p. 103), Roy sarcastically portrays Anna Hazare[11] and the way his 2011 crusade was craftily appropriated by Narendra Modi's followers. Amongst the very long train of *Jantar Mantar*'s types, there is also another well-known activist in whose features it is easy to recognise a self-ironical metanarrative projection of the self-same author (pp. 105-6). But the very spirit of the place is paramount in yet another character, Dr Azad Bhartiya, "the free Indian", witty author of a newsletter entitled 'MY NEWS AND VIEWS', where he explains the reasons for his eleven-year-long hunger strike:

> I am fasting against the following issues: I am against the Capitalist Empire, plus against US Capitalism, Indian and American State Terrorism/ All kinds of Nuclear Weapons and Crime, plus against the Bad Education System/ Corruption/ Violence/ Environmental Degradation and All Other Evils. Also I am against Unemployment. I am also fasting for the complete obliteration of the entire Bourgeois class. Each day I remember the poor of the world, Workers/ Peasants/ Tribals/ Dalits/ Abandoned Ladies and Gents/ including Children and Handicapped People. (p. 126)

The *Jantar Mantar* location, with its teeming humanity, builds an anthropological patchwork, a well-meant chaos that doesn't make up for social justice but nonetheless expresses, symbolically, the ultimate drive to Indian social utopianism and, concretely, one of

[10] "Communists, seditionists, secessionists, revolutionaries, dreamers, idlers, crackheads, crackpots, all manner of freelancers." (Roy 2017: 101)

[11] Kisan Baburao Hazare, popularly known as Anna Hazare, is an Indian social activist who led movements in favour of rural development, and against corruption in public life. In April 2011, he started a hunger strike to exert pressure on the Indian government to enact a stringent anti-corruption law. The fast led to nationwide protests in support.

the last bastions of actual Indian democracy: the freedom to speak and take sides, which being more and more at risk is crucial to defend.

The Shiraz cinema, on the other hand, is the dystopic enforcement of horror upon beauty. Once a theatre where movies were screened, it has been converted by the Indian secret service into a detention and interrogation, i.e. torture, centre for Kashmiri rebels. The traces of the ceilings' old flashy and cheap splendour create a ghastly contrast to the slippery, bloody floors where young men squat down like hens, many reduced to shapeless heaps of torn limbs (p. 331). But Kashmir, once 'heaven on earth', is altogether a location of horror and the utopic turned dystopic. A paradise transformed into a graveyard. A place where the living are only dead people, pretending[12].

> Death was everywhere. Death was everything. Career. Desire. Dream. Poetry. Love. Youth itself. Dying became just another way of living. Graveyards sprang up in parks and meadows, by streams and rivers, in fields and forest glades. Tombstones grew out of the ground like young children's teeth. (p. 314)

In another spurt of black humour, Kashmir becomes a sort of transit point from which to speed *jihadis* to their heaven, where the *houris* are waiting for them. Amrik Singh, one of the torturers, refers to himself as the *Jannat Express*, the train to Paradise.

Conversely, a somewhat lighter wordplay transforms the actual graveyard where Anjum seeks repair from her memories of terror, into a sort of mundane, minor paradise. *Jannat* is the name given to the guest house and the funeral parlour she and a group of other 'unconsoled' build around the tombstones in the graveyard, an unconventional paradise among the graves.

Following Foucault (1998), the cemetery can be considered one of the canonical heterotopic spaces which are everywhere and yet always open up a dimension of alterity and liminality. These are institutional places which are penetrable yet not freely accessible, requiring special rituals or behaviours; in this case, a space which

[12] "In Kashmir when we wake up and say 'Good Morning' what we really mean is 'Good Mourning'" (Roy 2017: 279).

demands purification and is in the meantime highly polluting, the most sacred and the most unholy of places.

The *Jannat-guest-house-cum-funeral-parlour,* hosted in the crumbling hospital graveyard for unclaimed bodies, functions as a threshold space par excellence. It's the extreme border between life and death – "[s]he told them she wasn't living in the graveyard, she was dying in it (p. 67) – a place devoted to death and mourning which helps recover a faint, dim will to live; a "fort of desolation" which slowly transforms itself into a "home, a place of predictable, reassuring sorrow – awful, but reliable" (p. 66); a place where people gather out of extreme need in the awareness that "[n]eed was a warehouse that could accommodate a considerable amount of cruelty" (p.6). A Garden of Eden that houses stray animals and stray humans, who live in rooms erected around tombstones and build a swimming pool without water; whose defining features are resilience and resistance rather than innocence.

As the cemetery comes to function as a secular sanctuary against factionalism, casteism, and State repression, its space mirrors the evils of the world (here called *Duniya*), exhibiting the injuries of gender violence, religious intolerance, and terrorism. In its being an alternative space which reflects the inequities of reality rather than erasing them, the graveyard is also the contrary of utopia, a very imperfect counter-site where every sort of weird persons manage to recuperate a daily routine and a queer sort of normalcy, a community against communalism that suffers society's injustice but strenuously clings to an alternative social pact based on the most *Enlightened* of human bonds: empathy[13].

2.3. Ironies

To surf along the edge of tragedy without succumbing to the temptation of indignation or melodrama, Roy needs formal cleverness. In general, her capability to make words resonate with truth and sincerity is reached through a tight literary texture. Without losing naturalness or spontaneity, she employs a vast array

[13] I am here of course thinking about Rousseau's conception of the social bond as primarily depicted in the *Discourse on the Origin and Foundations of Inequality Among Men* (1755).

of stylistic artifices ranging from enumeration to *ex abrupto* and, almost regularly, alternating climax to anti-climax with insistent comedown effects of *bathos*[14]. She knows how to be idyllic and poetic and how to be scornful and sour. Very often emotional, she never lapses into sentimentalism. To explore the unpredictable, hyperbolic, aspects of human folly or reality's ability to, normally, frustrate any sort of expectancy, she explores the whole range of rhetorical forms of detachment and dissimulation: from mild, good-humoured irony to bitter, acid sarcasm; from absurdist, surreal *grotesque* to desperate, tragic, nihilist, black-humour.

Stylistically, in her deploying for each place a peculiar grade of ironic distancing, Roy tends to characterise the part of the novel that is set in the *Khwabgah* through wit and a sort of indulgent, affectionate comedy of manners; while the part in the *Jannat* graveyard is characterised by a tone that is often evocative and inspired, sometimes lyrical, and often incongruous and bizarre. The *Jantar Mantar*'s sequence, on the other hand, constitutes a sort of exuberant *tour de force* of caricature, an inventorial game of references and *double entendre* while the ordinary mess of the *Duniya*, 'the brutal reality out there' as opposed to the more circumscribed spatiality of the other dimensions, appears as predominantly focused through the lenses of deforming *grotesque* and excruciating satire.

Dayachand, for example, is a Hindu *untouchable*, a leatherworker by profession, who has seen his father beaten to death for having transported a cow's carcass, under the unfounded suspicion that he had killed the animal. Roy makes the surviving, tragically caste-conscious, Dayachand pick out a Muslim alias and adopt the name of Saddam Hussein (chosen for his bravery in meeting his death sentence). Amongst the petty daily works Saddam-Dayachand is obliged to devise, he manages to get an auspicious appointment as a security guard. His first assignment consists in guarding the signature exhibit of a show of everyday artefacts made of 'stainless steel':

[14] See for example the poetic stanza by Dr Azad Bhartiya composed as a reply to police's interrogation in form of "just from habit" beating, where the initial idyllic tone turns into an *ex abrupto* quite explicitly rude invective (p. 133).

An exquisitely made half-scale, but absolutely life-like, stainless-steel Banyan tree, with stainless-steel aerial roots that hung all the way down to the ground, forming a stainless-steel grove. (p. 75)

Defending and preserving this example of democratic artistic installation, a triumph of equality and accessibility for everybody to touch and experience, requires Saddam-Dayachand to remove his sunglasses with the result of seriously damaging his eyes which get irretrievably burnt by the glare of the metal planes of the installation. As elsewhere in the novel, the category of the *politically correct* with its superficially progressive affectations meets the ferocious eye of the author's satirical distrust. The consequences are obviously nothing less than Dayachand's dismissal and the beginning of his serious ophthalmic ailments.

The Kashmir storyline is formally framed within an even more radical cast. Besides the narrative sections set in the area that are obviously full of abrasive realistic details, there is also a concentrated *summa* of rhetorical desolation in the 36 pages (pp. 271-306) of Tilo's "ragged archive" of "odd pictures… scraps of stories, and inexplicable memorabilia"(pp. 270-1). Collected in long years without apparent pattern or theme of interest, this is a true repository of Kashmiri horrors. Here Roy proves a champion of the freezing sketch and the arresting snapshot, calling to mind the dry prose of Sadat Hasan Manto, showing the same capacity to check the reader through halting, icing details of human brutality. The evidence of how far the mix of hatred and ideology can lead otherwise perfectly normal people is conveyed in a language that intentionally refuses to take charge of dread and articulates extraordinariness through the absence of emphasis and an unwavering, detached stance. In the "press clippings and […] diary entries", which compose her Kashmiri collage, black humour proves the prominent stylistic mark.

More news:
Two young men have been picked up from a petrol pump nearby.
The crowd goes rigid.
The army has already announced that they've killed two militants here in Chithi Bandi. So now it has to produce bodies. The people know how real life works. Sometime the script is written in advance (p. 281).

'Writing' indeed is, in itself, a fairly insistent rhetorical trope in the novel – always, some way or another, connected to meaning and sense in one's life. From the very beginning, a foundational question is whether it is possible to live outside language (p. 8), and positively the idea of editing one's life (p. 35) is considered a precise existential opportunity. In the case of Anjum, for example, to rewrite a simpler, happier life for herself, in favour of her adopted daughter, means to make of herself a much simpler, happier person (p. 34). Repeatedly the importance of writing is used to underscore the huge difference between being present in history or being written out of it (p. 51), as well as the importance of being able to author one's part in one's own story (p. 259).

2.4. Motherhoods

Fundamental in this activity of authoring one's life to try to survive the horrors of history is the issue of mothering. Maternity, as a theme, plays a key role in the novel. Motherhood, as well as daughterhood, stand out as real pivotal forces. Two lost, in truth discarded, little girls are central in the lives of the protagonists. Both are, for different reasons, incapable of being biological mothers: Anjum because of her transsexual identity, and Tilo for very deep-seated subjective reasons.

The first abandoned child of the novel, Zainab, is the one able to appease the 'Indo-Pak' war in Anjum's body; she made her feel "like a generous host rather than a battlefield" (p. 30). Grasping her offered finger, the child seems to actively choose the transvestite *hijra* for a mother, unearthing in her a deeply buried maternal craving. "Zainab was Anjum's only love" (p. 30).

The second rejected child is Miss Jebeen the Second (Miss Jebeen the First was Musa's daughter, killed during the Kashmir occupation by Indian forces), an Adivasi baby girl abandoned by her crushed and raped Maoist mother, and rescued by Tilo to save her from the police.

In contrast with Anjum's deep-rooted propensity towards mothering, the character of Tilo is portrayed as definitely dubious about love and marriage and, above all, about motherhood. She herself is the daughter of a high-caste mother who had conceived her

with an outcaste lover[15]; she had been abandoned in an orphanage and after a few months had been adopted by her true mother without ever being officially recognised as her natural daughter. She is not able to accept a child of her own, and when she gets pregnant by Musa, she decides to have an abortion. She is resolved not to put another version of herself into the world, convinced, as she is, that she will prove an even worse mother than her own. But, quite unpredictably, even she is capable of mothering somebody else's child: "She could not remember when last she had been this happy. Not because the baby was hers, but because it wasn't." (p.138)

The apparition of the girl in the *Janta Mantar* is constructed as a queer version of nativity:

> She appeared quite suddenly, a little after midnight. No angels sang, no wise men brought gifts. But a million stars rose in the east to herald her arrival. One moment she wasn't there, and the next – there she was on the concrete pavement, in a crib of litter: silver cigarette foil, a few plastic bags and empty packets of Uncle Chip. She lay in a pool of light, under a column of swarming neon-lit mosquitos, naked. Her skin was blue-black, sleek as a baby seal's. (pp. 95-6)

As evidence of this sort of miraculous quality of Miss Jebeen, Roy chooses to end the novel by resorting to the idea of the baby as an auspicious creature whose coming had set in motion auspicious events.

> "[…] things would turn out all right in the end. They would, because they had to. Because Miss Jebeen, Miss Udaya Jebeen, was come." (p. 438)

Actually, through this second adopted daughter, the two narrative strands find a final convergence, on an almost happy note, and are able to integrate each other and to complete the narrative puzzle. This newborn is destined to make Anjum and Tilo meet and to seal an unconscious pact for the transformation of the graveyard's people into a real possible community.

---

[15] In an interview (20 June 2017), Roy declared that Tilo was conceived as the possible fictional child of Ammu and Velutha in *The God of Small Things*, had their story ended differently.

From the novel's very beginning, in reality, we apprehend that maternal love is one of the few possible redemptive energies in the strained body of the nation. But it is not the 'regular', taken for granted, familiar love of biological mothers; it is a secondary, oxymoronic 'learned impulse' whose prime energy is acceptance, and whose trajectory can be tortuous, like Anjum's mother's moving effort to learn how to love a son who is going to become a daughter shows (p. 11).

Indeed, this bravely acquired disposition to pursue identification with deviancy and marginality has in Roy's universe a clear political purpose. In its twisted and meandering course, this unconventional force seems able to bring the two adoptive mothers together not only to take care of the two unwanted girls but to provide a right of residence, and metaphoric citizenship, to all the human rubble of outcasts, freaks, and various kinds of outsiders gathered in the graveyard's guest house. Adoptive love inscribes Roy's rebellion not only against heteronormativity but versus the 'blood and soil' *cum* religion nationalist rhetoric. It confronts the boosting discriminative Governmental policy towards non-conformant citizens. It is an answer to the aggressive posture of the Hindutva regime with its homogenising anti-minority stance.

To conclude, Roy's community shapes a counter-discourse of the post-nation and makes this emerge from the very inner logic of narration, playing with literary models and genre conventions. Like in a sort of moral, but still very realistic, fable, or like in a romantic comedy, the *Jannat* cemetery in Delhi becomes the site of two funerals and a wedding. A checkered shirt for Dayachand's brutalised father and the pot of ashes of Tilo's mother are buried in a quest for ritual appeasement. A month later, the wedding between Zainab and Dayachand is celebrated and the story closes its circle going back to the beginning, with a repeated visit to the shrine of the unorthodox, heretical, martyr of trans-cultural and religious syncretism Hazrat Sarmad Shaheed[16]. The saint, who had taught

[16] Hazrat Sarmad Shaheed (1590-1661) was a Persian mystic and poet who moved to India. Originally Jewish, he converted to Islam declaring nonetheless, in his poetry, that he was neither Jewish, nor Muslim, nor Hindu. Sarmad was accused of atheism and unorthodox religious practice and finally, under Aurangzeb, put to death for heresy.

Aftab's mother to accept and love him as Anjum, is called again to offer a benediction to the new couple formed by the abandoned-Hindu-daughter adopted by a Muslim *hijra* with the orphaned-Hindu-outcaste who has taken a Muslim alter-identity.

By soothing, through ceremony, some of the pains of the tragic past, a psychological space is cleared for this group of irregular people to go on and to begin a daily negotiation with happiness, which, despite the stylistic dominant of the novel, is not satirical as the author explicitly declares:

> […] we need to redefine what is being defined for us as the path to happiness or to progress or to civilization… Happiness is not a building or an institution that is there forever. It's fragile. And you enjoy it when you can, and you may find it in the most unexpected places[17].

This is a story of a battle for happiness, fought, and somehow won, in one of these most unexpected places.

References

Anjaria, Ulka (ed.), 2015, *A History of the Indian Novel in English*. C.U.P., Cambridge.

Anjaria, Ulka, 2019, *Reading India Now: Contemporary Formations in Literature and Popular Culture,* Temple U.P., Philadelphia.

Apter, Emily, 2013, *Against World Literature: On the Politics of Untranslatability*, Verso, London.

Attridge, Derek, 2015, *The Work of Literature*, O.U.P., Oxford.

Ashcroft, Bill, 2013, "Re-writing India", in K. Sen and R. Roy (eds), *Writing India Anew: Indian-English Fiction, 2000-2010*, Amsterdam U.P., Amsterdam, pp. 29-46.

Bakhtin, Mikhail M., 1981, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, The University of Texas Press, Austin.

Chaudhuri, Amit, 2008, *Clearing a Space: Reflections on India, Literature, and Modernity*, Peter Lang, New York.

Chattopadhyay, Bodhisattva, Mandhwani, aakriti and Maity, Anwesha (eds), 2019, *Indian Genre Fiction: Pasts and Future* Histories, Routledge, New York.

Daiya, Kavita, 2019, "Gender, Sexuality, and the Family in South Asian Fiction", in A. Tickell (ed.), *The Oxford History of the Novel in English*,

[17] Roy, Interview on *Democracy now*, 20 June 2017.

Vol. 10: *The Novel in South and South East Asia Since 1945*, O.U.P., Oxford, pp. 144-157.

Dawson Varughese, Emma, 2013, *Reading New India. Post-Millennial Indian Fiction in English*, Bloomsbury, London.

Foucault, Michel, [1984] 1998, "Different Spaces", in J. D. Faubion (ed.), *Aesthetics, Method, and Epistemology: Essential Works of Foucault, 1954-1984*, Vol. 2., The New Press, New York, pp. 175-185.

Jameson, Fredric, 1986, "Third-World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism", *Social Text* 15 (Autumn), pp. 65-88.

Gopinath, Swapna, 2020, "Gendered Spaces Captured in Cultural Representations: Conceptualising the Indian Experience in Arundhati Roy's *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, Humanities 20, 9, 2, pp. 1-10.

Gupta, Suman, 2015, *Consumable Texts in Contemporary India: Uncultured Books and Bibliographical Sociology*, Palgrave Macmillan, London.

Khilnani, Sunil, 2003, *The Idea of India*, Penguin, London.

Marino, Alessandra, 2017, "Resisting Slow Violence: Writing, Activism, and Environmentalism" in R. Ciocca and N. Srivastava (eds), *Indian Literature and the World. Multilingualism, Translation and the Public Sphere*, Palgrave Macmillan, London, pp. 177-197.

Marx, John, 2008, "Failed-State Fiction", *Contemporary Literature*, 49, 4, pp. 597-633.

Mohanty, Satya P. (ed.) 2011, *Colonialism, Modernity, and Literature*, Palgrave Macmillan, New York.

Roy, Arundhati, [2017] 2018, *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, Penguin, London.

Roy, Arundhati, 2017, "Extended interview with Indian writer Arundhati Roy talking about her new novel *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*", *Democracy Now*, https://www.democracynow.org/2017/6/20/full_extended_interview_arundhati_roy_on, last accessed February 20, 2020.

Roy, Nilanjana S., 2017, "Arundhati Roy's second novel is a powerful elegy for a bulldozed world", *Business Standard,* https://www.business-standard.com/article/current-affairs/arundhati-roy-s-second-novel-is-a-powerful-elegy-for-bulldozed-world-117053000545_1.html, last accessed February 20, 2020.

Singh, Armadeep, 2018, *The Indian Novel in the 21st Century, Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Literature.* https://www.lehigh.edu/~amsp/The_Indian_Novel_in_the_21st_Century.pdf, last accessed February 25, 2020.

Sunder Rajan, Rajeswari, 2019, "The Novel of India", in A. Tickell (ed.), *The Oxford History of the Novel in English*, Vol. 10: *The Novel in South and South East Asia Since 1945*, O.U.P., Oxford, pp. 3-43.

TICKELL, ALEX (ed.), 2016, *South-Asian Fiction in English: Contemporary Transformations*, Palgrave Macmillan, London.

TICKELL, ALEX, 2019, "Introduction", in A. Tickell (ed.), *The Oxford History of the Novel in English*, Vol. 10: *The Novel in South and South East Asia Since 1945*, O.U. P., Oxford, pp. XVII-XXXIV.