

**“Too much blood for good literature”: Arundhati Roy’s *The Ministry of Utmost***

***Happiness and the question of realism***

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Arundhati Roy’s nonfictional writing has been interpreted as the epitome of an emerging “realist impulse” at the heart of postcolonial literature since 2000, and a move away from the reflexive and metaphorical style of her first novel, *The God of Small Things*. This article reassesses the opposition between fictional and nonfictional writing by addressing Roy’s second novel, *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* (2017). Rather than endorsing a concept of realism understood as transparent, documentary representation of reality, *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* proposes a contradictory and digressive poetics whereby fictional and nonfictional elements coexist. Roy’s critical stance on realism encompasses both her commitment to engage with contemporary history and her questioning of literature’s ability to do justice to suffering. Accordingly, Roy’s second novel reframes the literary concept of realism as an “aesthetic of the inconsolable” aiming to address what is left over from nonfictional accounts of politics and history.

**Keywords:** Arundhati Roy; realism; the postcolonial novel; aesthetic of the inconsolable

“Realism is in its very nature a paradoxical form” (Levine 2010, 15)

This article suggests that Arundhati Roy’s second novel, *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, provides a complex engagement with the question of realism. Roy seems, on the one hand, to be faithful to the premise of realism as commitment to truthful representation of social reality. Yet her novel also reframes this drive to represent through the use of digressions that question the narrative closure of realism. This contradicting logic does not result in a postmodern play with textuality but rather in a form of digressive realism with potential ethical implications, what will be defined an “aesthetic of the inconsolable”. This aesthetic mode moves away from the conventions of realist fiction in order to maintain realism’s

deeper ethical imperative. This reading of Roy's novel aims hence to contribute to recent debates over postcolonial realism and Roy's return to fiction after decades of journalism.

In a recent essay, Ulka Anjaria (2016) includes Arundhati Roy among contemporary authors whose work is marked by a "realist impulse" in contrast to postcolonialism's emphasis on hybridity, the past and allegory. The realist impulse, writes Anjaria, is defined as a "transition in representational mode, style, and/or medium" involving

a new textual engagement with the contemporary world, as evident in gestures such as stories set in the present rather than the past and the trimming of modernist, metaphorical, and metafictional language for a more stripped-down and less ostensibly self-conscious aesthetic. (278)<sup>1</sup>

This is a major "shift" that, according to Anjaria, has characterised postcolonial literature "since around 2000", manifesting a more sustained attention to the contemporary world and a "new aesthetic sensibility, based on increased transparency, that strips away metaphor, allegory, and other marks of literary self-consciousness" (278). Arundhati Roy's turn to nonfiction, after the publication of her Booker Prize-winning novel *The God of Small Things* in 1997, provides Anjaria with a telling example of a widespread turn from aesthetics to politics, from fiction to nonfiction, from magic realist/modernist style to a more sober representation of reality. Anjaria addresses, by way of example, the phrase "the cost of living", first adopted by Roy in her novel in a "metaphorical" way, as a symbolic, literary expression of "historical injustice" (281). In Roy's subsequent nonfiction, the term "the cost of living" has changed meaning, passing from symbolic to literal: from allegory of historical injustice, the term "cost of living" comes to signify, in Anjaria's analysis, a very literal reference to "how the lives of common Indians are quantified by the state" (281). The new

“realist impulse” of postcolonial literature after 2000 is thus characterised by Anjaria as a turn towards the contemporary world rather than the past, and an “aesthetic of transparency that verges on the banal, [thematizing] the bearer of ‘bare life’ rather than the conflicted subject” (280).

Ulka Anjaria’s excellent reflections on contemporary realism offer a starting point for considering the publication in 2017 of Arundhati Roy’s second novel, *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, 20 years after *The God of Small Things*. Can the publication of her second novel following 20 years of political activism shed new light on the realist impulse of contemporary literature? Does the novel take part in this realist turn or is it a sort of relapse into a postcolonial modernist aesthetic? In a review of the novel published in *The Atlantic*, Parul Sehgal (2017) considers whether this book can be rightly qualified as a novel, and portrays it as a “companion piece to Roy’s political writings” in which Roy emerges more as a “pamphleteer” rather than a novelist. The question is further complicated by the debates that have unfolded for decades about Roy’s “nonfictional” style. While the novel and the essay are different genres, critics such as Graham Huggan (2014) have argued that Roy’s essays never ceased to be somehow “literary”, suggesting that Roy’s essay “The Greater Common Good”, for instance, “effectively deconstructs many of its own best arguments by drawing attention to itself as a playful piece of highly literary investigative writing” (709). Similarly, Julie Mullaney (2002) observes that even the most convincing arguments proposed in Roy’s essays are often “undermined by attendant, problematic ‘rhetorical’ confections which appear in what can be described as her ‘hyperbolic’ style and her use of dangerous moral equivalences” (64). These comments indicate that Arundhati Roy never abandoned metaphoricity, self-reflection, and literariness even in her most political, *nonfictional* works. Roy’s commitment to realism, in other words, has not prevented her from adopting a metaphorical, reflexive, symbolic writing style to tackle urgent social issues.

Furthermore, if her nonfictional writing is undoubtedly marked by a commitment to truth, factuality and reality, her second novel does not renounce this commitment, but certainly complicates what it means to depict the contemporary world “realistically”. *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* reframes realism by critiquing the idea that reality is linear, coherent, and easily captured by documentary representation. Arundhati Roy herself, in the introduction to a 2009 collection of essays titled *Listening to Grasshoppers*, had already indicated how the ability to tell the “truth” of a social and political situation involves a “factual precision” based on concern with accurate “objective” understanding, but also a “real precision” that goes beyond documenting or collecting facts and rather transmits, empathically, the subjective experience, the way reality is witnessed, and “the epic scale of what is really going on” (Roy 2009, xi–xii). The friction between a “realist impulse” and an aesthetic of reflexivity, metaphor and metafiction, is an element *interior to* each of Roy’s writings, fictional and nonfictional pieces alike. From this point of view, Arundhati Roy’s work does, indeed, as Anjaria claims, take part in a renewed attention to a “realist impulse” in contemporary writing. However, her writing cannot be reduced to an idea of realism committed to transparency, the banal, and the abandonment of figurative and rhetorical texture. Rather than the contemporary “realist impulse”, Roy’s aesthetic is closer to Anjaria’s pivotal description of a “realism in the colony”, indicating a form that is “highly metatextual, founded on variegated textual fields and constituted not by ideological certainties but by contradictions, conflicts, and profound ambivalence as to the nature of the ‘real’ world being represented, and the novel’s ability to represent it” (2012, 5).<sup>2</sup>

Factual and poetic elements cut through each of Roy’s writings: the dichotomy *traverses and inhabits* each text; it does not separate them out into stable fictional and nonfictional categories. This unresolved tension emerges in a vivid and striking way in *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*. This long fictional text is constellated by authorial intrusions and

digressions in which Roy reiterates the concerns, views and standpoints that have characterised her essays for two decades: her critique of neoliberal capitalism, the dispossession of Adivasi, environmental destruction, the violence of the caste system, and the brutality of the Indian government. However, this work features all elements of novelistic writing – fictionality, length, plot, and characters. *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* is, however, a novel at war with itself, revealing a major paradox at the heart of the genre. As Catherine Gallagher (2006) puts it, the novel as a genre “is not just one kind of fictional narrative among others; it is the kind in which and through which fictionality became manifest, explicit” (337). However, while being a quintessentially *fictional* medium, the novel “has also been widely regarded as a form that tried, for at least two centuries, to hide its fictionality behind verisimilitude or realism, insisting on certain kinds of referentiality and even making extensive truth claims” (337). In Roy’s novel, fictional plot, characters and narrative time are constantly broken by long authorial interventions; realism does not equal an aesthetic of transparency but, rather, an unrelenting interrogation of the paradox of the novel’s truth claims. Its “realist” dimension can be grasped as a constant shift between truth-claims and self-reflexivity, a negotiation between the referentiality proper to nonfictional writing and the fictionality proper to novelistic representation.

Roy’s logic of digression and self-questioning results in what I call an “aesthetic of the inconsolable”. While manifesting Roy’s undiminished commitment to tell the truth and to witness important political and social events in contemporary India, the novel refuses to reduce the representation of reality to a mere “document”. Instead, it emphasises the inability of writing to offer any sort of “consolation”, healing or reconciliation. Accordingly, this essay will explore three aspects of *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* from the point of view of Roy’s questioning of realism: the representation of one of the main characters, Anjum, who belongs to the Hijras, or transgender community in India; the use of digressions and authorial

intrusions; and, in conclusion, the way in which Roy's novel reframes the realist impulse as an "aesthetic of the inconsolable" that opposes any simplistic faith in the powers of consolation of the literary representation.

### **A body waging war on itself: Contradicting representation**

Arundhati Roy locates the contradiction between fiction and history at the core of every character in *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, as a defining ontological quality. The novel's engagement with contemporary reality is marked by deep contrasts and by a narrative style that emphasises discordance and antagonism. Indeed, *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* cannot be easily summarised into a linear plot. It is set partly in Delhi, partly in Kashmir; it ranges temporally from the 1990s to the present day, and weaves together the stories of faraway characters together. One of the main strands of the plot concerns the story of Anjum, a Hijra, or transgender, living in the neighbourhood of Shahjahanabad, Old Delhi. Named Aftab at birth and mistaken for a boy by everyone apart from her mother, Anjum is in truth an hermaphrodite and does not fit into the gender norms of her society. At a young age, she is enthralled by a Hijra called "Bombay Silk", who lives not far from her family home. Anjum decides to follow "Bombay Silk" and to become a Hijra herself, moving to the commune where local Hijras live and work. Anjum embarks on a successful life as a Hijra: she rises to superstar status and is constantly interviewed and paraded in TV shows, newspapers and magazines as a representative of India's transgender community. As a character, Anjum epitomises what ethnographer Gayatri Reddy (2005) has called the "hyper (in) visibility" of Hijra in India today, a status which does not challenge the marginality of the Hijra community, even though it renders the Hijra "mainstream" through popular films, scholarship and journalism (2–3). Roy's fiction can be seen as part and parcel of this current widespread interest for the Hijra in India, but also a challenge to the representation of the Hijra as an

object of curiosity and disciplinary scrutiny. In fact, Anjum refuses popularity and visibility after experiencing traumatic events during a trip to Gujarat when a friend of hers, being caught in the violence of the 2002 anti-Muslim riots, is killed by a mob.<sup>3</sup> Broken and haunted by memories of the atrocities, Anjum abandons her successful life as a member of the Hijra community and retreats to a graveyard, where she settles in a shack and starts a new business, “Jannat Guest House and Funeral Services”, along with a blind Imam and a Dalit ex-security guard who adopts the nickname “Saddam Hussain”. The story of Anjum reveals a central aspect of: while Anjum is a fictional character, who lives apart from the real world – or what Hijras call “Duniya” – her life is deeply entangled in real, contemporary historical events.

A turning point in the novel occurs when Anjum and Saddam Hussein take part in the “India against corruption” protest in Delhi in the summer of 2011. During the protest, they discover and adopt an abandoned infant. The two central, real-life figures from “India against corruption” feature in the novel: Anna Hazare, a retired military whose hunger strikes came to symbolise and showcase the anti-corruption movement, and Arvind Kejriwal (renamed “Mr Aggarwal” and nicknamed “The Accountant” in the novel), a former Tax Revenue officer who took part in the anti-corruption movement and then founded the Aam Admi Party.<sup>4</sup> Anna Hazare and Arvind Kejriwal become “fictional” characters and even interact with other characters of the novel.

The first strand of the novel ends by staging a confrontation between Anjum and Arvind Kejriwal. Their head-to-head revolves around the discovery of the abandoned baby. While Anjum wants to keep the infant – as she will eventually do – Arvind confronts her by arguing that the child should be handed over to the police. The argument between Anjum and Arvind Kejriwal represents a clash between an element of the factual, “realist” dimension of the novel (in the form of an actually-existing politician) and an element of its fictional, novelistic nature (an invented character). But, more radically, the skirmish reveals the profoundly

contradictory engagement with historical reality that pervades *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* as a contemporary “realist” novel. Roy vividly describes the contest between Anjum and Arvind Kejriwal. There is a discord between “a revolutionary trapped in an accountant’s mind” and “a woman trapped in a man’s body”; between Kejriwal “raging at a world in which the balance sheets did not tally”; and the Hijra, “raging at her glands, her organs, her skin, the texture of her hair, the width of her shoulders, the timbre of her voice”; he “fighting for a way to impose fiscal integrity on a decaying system”, she

waiting to pluck the very stars from the sky and grind them into a potion that would give her proper breasts [ ... ]. He, who filled in forms and ticked boxes. She, who never knew which box to tick, which queue to stand in, which public toilet to enter. [ ... ] He, reduced by his certainties. She, augmented by her ambiguity. He, who wanted a law. She, who wanted a baby. (Roy 2017, 122)

This passage shows a radical mirroring of the two characters: they are antithetical, divided by everything and in disagreement on everything; they are upside-down versions of each other. The opposition is symptomatic of a wider contrast between mind and body, the discursive and the physical, the rational and the irrational, certainty and doubt, narrow-mindedness and ambivalence, masculine and feminine, critique and conformism. The two characters show the conflicting encounter in the novel between historical document and fictional representation.

Furthermore, both “the Accountant” and Anjum live in a state of self-contradiction; they are at war with themselves along with the world around them. They protest against their inner being as well as their own material conditions of existence. Anjum, in particular, since her youth, has not fitted into the masculine identity given by “his” parents at birth and has been in



a constant battle against her own body. While still called “Aftab”, at 14 Anjum discovers that his body “had suddenly begun to wage war on him” (Roy 2017, 23–24): while his inner personality is growing feminine, his body shows prominent characteristics of masculinity, which Anjum will try to hide throughout her life. Her voice, for example, “sounded like two voices quarrelling with each other instead of one” (29). As Nimmo, a Hijra friend of Anjum’s, reveals to her, Hijras are inherently contradictory beings, living in a state of unhappiness because they are in constant war against themselves, experiencing a riot that corrodes their very being and most intimate sense of self:

What are the things you normal people get unhappy about? [ ... ] Price-rise, children’s school-admissions, husband’s beatings, wives’ cheatings, Hindu-Muslim riots, Indo-Pak war – *outside* things that settle down eventually. But for us [ ... ] [these] are all *inside* us. The riot is *inside* us. The war is *inside* us. Indo-Pak is *inside* us. It will never settle down. It *can’t*. (23; original emphases)

Anjum’s inner contrasts derive from the “other-worldliness” (Nanda 1986, 6) of Hijras, their exclusion from society because they cannot be identified as either male or female. Hijra characters in Roy’s novel reveal a deeper logic at work in the text: the contradiction, war, and unhappiness inhabiting their subjectivities cannot be solved by pitting the *inside* of the character – fictional, intimate, bodily, psychological – against the *outside*: history, politics and the wider situations defining contemporary reality.

### **Intermezzo: Arundhati Roy and digressive realism**

*The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* seems to challenge one of the main features traditionally ascribed to realism, especially in Georg Lukács's concept of it as a "solution-bringing" synthesis of subjectivity and objectivity. As Lukács (1950) put it in his *Studies in European Realism*, realism cannot be seen as "some sort of middle way between false objectivity and false subjectivity, but on the contrary the true, solution-bringing third way" (6). Accordingly, Lukács points out that the "central category" of realist literature

is the type, a peculiar synthesis which organically binds together the general and the particular both in characters and situations. [ ... ] True great realism thus depicts man and society as complete entities, instead of showing merely one or the other of their aspects. (6)

Nicholas Robinette (2014) observes that by combining "documentary immediacy and elaborate formal structure, realism solders together a vision of historical forces unavailable to the fragmented perspective of the individual" (2). Roy's attempt to go beyond the partial and the interested certainly resonates with the realist drive to capture reality as a meaningful totality and to go beyond a symptomatic expression of fragments of history. However, in contrast to Lukács's notion of realism as synthetic type, Arundhati Roy's commitment to reality is unable to merge the contradictions that run through her novel (masculine and feminine identity, subjectivity and objectivity, fiction and history, representation and critique, body and discourse, inside and outside). Instead, she keeps reality and fiction, society and self, in a state of permanent antithesis and juxtaposition.

Roy's novel does not solve the central dilemma of realism – what Fredric Jameson (2013) calls realism's "hesitation", the opposition between the impulse to *represent* reality and the project of *transforming* it: "it is never very clear whether this form simply registers the

advanced state of a given society or plays a part in society's awareness of that advanced state and its potentialities" (4). Realism is caught between a mimetic and a critical impulse; subjective and objective perspectives are in constant state of friction. From this point of view, Roy's novel oscillates between the documentary and the critical, between the idea of merely registering reality as it is and the project of showing the possibility that the world can be transformed and that alternative realities can be imagined. Her work moves away from the Lukácsian ideal of merging the subjective and the objective in a synthetic way. Instead, her prose indicates a pessimism of the intellect that keeps the antagonism open at the heart of each character, refusing to unravel any of the contrasts they inhabit. The historical events and political figures mentioned in the novel are traversed by the irruption of the "unreal". For this reason, Roy's "realism" does not equal a transparent, unproblematic representation of reality. Instead, her commitment to telling the truth reframes realism as a digressive form of representation that defies aesthetisation and narrative closure.

The characters in Roy's novel do not correspond to the synthetic, solution-bringing ideal of the type; rather, they might exemplify what Michael Löwy (2010) has aptly called the current of "irrealism" running through realism as a form of artistic and literary representation. Löwy defines "critical irrealism" as a tendency existing in realist literature, yet unassimilable to a rigid definition of realism as truthful representation of reality. "Irrealism" should not be opposed to realism, but rather seen as the critical, rather than conformist, impulse at its heart. Löwy explains that the term "critical irrealism" can be applied to:

*oeuvres* that do not follow the rules governing the 'accurate representation of life as it really is' but that are nevertheless critical of social reality. The critical viewpoint of these works of art is often related to the dream of another, imaginary world, either

idealised or terrifying, one opposed to the [ ... ] reality of modern, meaning capitalist, society. (214)

Löwy's comments capture a form of expression that, while being "realist" in the sense of referring to really existing social and political realities, aims to critique them by juxtaposing an alternative world – imagined, utopian, or unreal. In their recent work on the theory of world-literature, the Warwick Research Collective build on the notion of "irrealism" and coin the term "fighting realism" to describe peripheral, postcolonial forms of literary realism that cannot be assimilated to the conformist notion of realism. The "fighting realism" of postcolonial literature entails representational strategies "whose investment is not merely in mapping present realities but in the revelation of possible futures and emergent social orders" (WReC 2015, 77).

The term "fighting realism" can, indeed, signal a sort of realism that is highly political, embattled and weaponised, not content with merely stating that the world is all that is the case. But it can also be grasped as indicating a digressive, unreconciled literary form that is pitted against realism while not totally foreign to it: a negative literary representation of the world aimed at challenging the exclusions and excisions of the canons of realist representation by juxtaposing the vision of an alternative world. It is, precisely, this clash of "present reality" and "possible future" that defines the state of unhappiness, or non-reconciliation that animates the characters in Roy's novel: these characters cannot settle permanently and peacefully within either the frame of fiction or the terrain of history. They are, at the same time, part and parcel of the contemporary world and reacting against it. Thus, Anjum's new life in the graveyard is accompanied by a new friendship with a Dalit ex-security guard who wants to be called "Saddam Hussein," because, as a Dalit whose family has been killed by upper-caste Hindus, he identifies with the image of the Iraqi dictator being

killed by Americans. Fictional characters assume the semblance or name of real characters, while contemporary figures become part of the novel. This logic of permanent swap and contrast pervades the narrative itself and challenges its own closure. Indeed, a striking aspect of *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* is the recurrent suspension of the narration through references to historical events, which are described and analysed by Roy in long digressions and authorial intrusions that would suit a nonfictional piece of writing.

In one of the authorial intrusions that define the novel, Roy denounces any supposed claim to a simplified “reality” made by documentary narrative. This critical interruption appears, most vividly, in the intermezzo of the novel, the shift from the first part, concerning Anjum, to the second part of the book, Tilo’s story. This intermezzo occurs mainly in chapter three, “The Nativity”. This chapter starts by recounting the arrival of the infant that will be subsequently discovered by Anjum during the protest in Delhi. After one page describing the appearance of the baby, however, the narration turns into a description of the historical events that occurred in 2011. Roy’s chapter begins with a reference to the birth of the infant in the forest of central India and her mysterious discovery in Delhi, but after only a few paragraphs the prose moves, almost imperceptibly, to a 16-page overview of contemporary Indian politics. The shift from the fictional part narrating the appearance of the baby to Roy’s essayistic analysis of Indian politics happens very subtly, in the course of a paragraph where Roy writes:

Around her [the baby] the city sprawled for miles. Thousand-year-old sorceress, dozing, but not asleep, even at this hour. Grey flyovers snaked out of her Medusa skull, tangling and untangling [ ... ]. Old secrets were folded into the furrows of her loose, parchment skin. Each wrinkle was a street, each street a carnival. [ ... ] Her new

masters wanted her to hide her knobby, varicose veins under imported fishnet stockings [ ... ]. (2017, 96)

The paragraph transfers the pronoun “she” from being a reference to the character (“around *her* the city sprawled”) into pathetic fallacy: the city itself (“*her* Medusa skull”) is personified as a decrepit old lady undergoing cosmetic treatment for the sake of profit and the rise of India as a capitalist superpower. Roy’s description of Delhi makes visible the violence and inequality behind the making of the place as a “world class city” which, as Gautam Bhan (2009) has noted, has led to the disavowal of the rights of the poor, “the rise of neoliberal ideologies” and an increasing “aestheticisation” of poverty (131). The novelistic narration fades into a lengthy critique of the cover-up of economic injustice through the re-branding of Delhi as a destination for tourism and financial investment. The baby, introduced at the beginning of the chapter, will only re-appear several pages later: “It was there [ ... ] that our quiet baby appeared” (Roy 2017, 116). The digression, however, is not external to the narration. Rather, along with views on the rise of Hindutva and a neoliberal capitalist regime in India in the 21st century, this digressive passage testifies to Roy’s engagement with the deeper ethical impulse of realism to represent meaningfully a conflictual and fragmented reality -- what Lukács called the realist writer’s “thirst for truth” (1950, 11). From this point of view, realism does not necessarily involve harmony and coherence: to depict a conflictual and chaotic reality of contradiction, the realist writer needs to avoid a reconciling style and stage instead, in literary form itself, social oppression in its full violence.

The digression refers to the movement against corruption that led to the formation of the populist Aam Aadmi Party (or “Common Man’s Party”) the following year. Roy’s analysis of the anti-corruption movement and the Aam Aadmi Party aligns with the analysis proposed by critics in the *Economic and Political Weekly*, who describe the Party’s rhetoric as containing

“unthinking hyperbole, self-righteous condescension, superficial reasoning, loud sloganeering and a good deal of reactionary politics” (Shukla 2013, 16; see also Rajagopal 2012). In an article published in *The Hindu* in August 2011, Roy critiqued the anti-corruption movement for being casteist, urban and, in fact, for not fighting for the poorest of the poor (Roy 2011). In the novel, the anti-corruption movement is seen from a very critical perspective. It is narrated from the outside, through Roy’s own authorial perspective and, at the same time, from the inside, through the experience of the characters taking part in the event. This shift allows Roy to occupy more than one position at the same time: the digressive excursus into politics cannot be detached from the story, because the characters are in it, and because it serves as a way of locating their actions, of giving a historical background to the plot. However, the fictional and the historical elements in the digressive passage are not merged or conflated. Rather, the co-presence of fictional characters and historical events manifests the multiple positions that the narrative voice can assume. Roy’s writing, as Alex Tickell (2007) puts it, “resists a ‘single story’ or a single exclusive perspective . . . we must remember that authorial perspectives are sometimes contradictory and changeable and do not exclude other interpretations” (xiv).

Anjum and her friends take part in the protest, which not only includes the anti-corruption activists but also a wide range of groups, from representatives of the victims of the Bhopal gas disaster and mothers of Kashmiri rebels killed or “disappeared” by the Indian Army, to the Hindu nationalists and supporters of Anna Hazare. Anjum and her friends’ presence at the protest is “interrupted by a long-haired, bearded young man in floaty, shabby clothes and an equally shabbily dressed girl [ ... ]. They were making a documentary film about Protest and Resistance” (Roy 2017, 109). This “interruption” introduces a third perspective on the scene: alongside Roy’s authorial standpoint and the characters, the documentary-makers occupy a third space, that of outsiders aiming to produce a “realist” representation of the event. It turns

out, however, that these young documentary-makers are unable and unwilling to do justice to the voices and experiences of the different people gathered at the event. They choose only those who provide “good visual texture” (110) and omit what Anjum tells them because they do not grasp what she is saying: they “decided to move on rather than try to explain what they meant because it would take too long” (110). Anjum’s testimony is simply erased from the film, edited out of the final “realist” account, because her experience is unassimilable to the demands for simplicity, catchiness and linearity proper to these young filmmakers’ documentary style.

Roy’s “fighting realism” distances itself from any appeal to transparency and factual description. The realism of *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* is a realism of contradiction and complexity, aiming to encompass experiences that are excluded from monologic representations of reality. Anjum’s statement in front of the young filmmakers is a very telling and enigmatic phrase, which they hastily decide to set aside: the filmmakers “set up their camera while they were talking and asked Anjum to look straight into the lens when she spoke” (Roy 2017, 110). When Anjum speaks, however, communication falters: “They had no idea what ‘Duniya’ meant in Anjum’s lexicon [ ... ]. ‘Hum doosri Duniya se aaye hain,’ she explained helpfully, which meant: We’ve come from there . . . from the other world” (110). This statement is striking because it shows that only pre-packaged, pre-understood elements of the protest get through to the filmmakers and their work. Anjum’s use of the word “Duniya” refers to “what most ordinary people thought of as the real world” (30), a word that Hijras oppose to their own world, the “other-worldly” marginalised transgender community living on the edges of “Duniya”. The first message enclosed in her erased testimony is that Anjum is a Hijra: she does not belong to “ordinary”, heteronormative Indian society. But her sentence also includes another important message: Anjum tells the young filmmakers, in a way, that she comes “from the other world”, meaning that she is not from



the real world, but from the world of the novel itself, the fictional world to which she belongs as character of *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*.

Anjum declares her fictionality in a section of the novel devoted to a realist engagement with the contemporary world. She cannot take part in the documentary because she is fictional, and belongs to the other world of the novel. At the same time, she cannot take part in the documentary because her experience is unassimilable, marginal, incomprehensible and irreducible to what the filmmakers expect. The digression at the heart of Roy's novel does not prevent a full commitment to truth, but it eludes the limitations of a realism of transparency that would enclose the text into a pacified, reconciled whole free from contradiction. Through this political intermezzo, Arundhati Roy destabilises the fictionality of her novel while reclaiming a space for those experiences that are irreducible to nonfictional discourse. Roy's **digressive** realism is charged with deeper ethical and political valences and suggests what could be called an "aesthetic of the inconsolable", which emerges most vividly in the second part of her novel.

### **"Too much blood for good literature": The aesthetic of the inconsolable**

Roy's novel cannot be easily qualified as realist because its engagement with real life is constantly undermined by references to fictionality, contradiction, and irrealist critique. However, at the same time, Roy's insertion of lengthy accounts of current Indian politics prevents her novel from being characterised as *non-realist*. The novel shows, from this point of view, that the concept of "reality" itself is highly contradictory and problematic: rather than resembling the coherence of a plot, reality is made up of discordant, dissonant elements that cross each other and fight against each other. Anjum, indeed, expresses this concept vividly by explaining that "fallen people" like her, the "unconsoled" people (to whom the

novel itself is dedicated), inhabit a space that falls beyond and outside reality. As Anjum explains it:

Once you have fallen off the edge like all of us have [ ... ] you never stop falling. [ ... ] This place where we live, where we have made our home, is the place of falling people. Here there is no *haqeeqat* [reality]. *Arre*, even *we* aren't real. We don't really exist. (Roy 2017, 84)

This claim to non-reality is, however, in sheer contrast with the characters' participation in real political events and even Anjum's exchange with a really-existing political leader.

Moving from Delhi to Kashmir, the second part of the novel continues through the first-person monologue of a servant of the Indian Government's Intelligence Bureau and the stories of his university friends Tilo, Musa, and Naga, and their involvements in the Kashmir war.<sup>5</sup> The second part centres on the story of Tilo (whose biographical details resonate with those of Arundhati Roy herself) and her love-story with Musa, a Kashmiri rebel fighter. The representation of deeply contradictory characters "at war" with themselves pervades the narration of Tilo and Musa's vicissitudes. Thus, Musa qualifies "his people", the people of Kashmir, as "schizophrenic" and torn inside:

we were fighting and dying in our thousands for Azadi [Kashmir's freedom from India], and at the same time we were trying to secure cheap loans from the very government we were fighting. We're a valley of idiots and schizophrenics. (Roy 2017, 359)

This state of “schizophrenia,” which in this context means being caught in an unsolvable double bind, a set of self-contradictory acts and positions, also concerns the main characters of the second part of the novel: the first-person narrator is a senior officer in Indian Intelligence in Kashmir who eventually endorses the cause of Kashmir’s liberation, while Tilo and Musa are marked by unreconciled stories and have to take decisions that go against their most profound wills and desires. The novel is an act of protest, in which fiction constantly contradicts and disrupts the very concept of reality, showing how the making of the real is the product of battle and survival.

*The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* is dedicated “To the Unconsoled” -- which might refer to those symbolised by the novel’s characters: the marginalised already so named Hijra and the people of Kashmir. The state of being “unconsoled”, indeed, not only emerges from the violence, loss, and brutality they suffer; they are unable to reconcile with and adjust to reality as it is. The schizophrenic, broken, shattered status of the characters results in the “aesthetic of the inconsolable” that marks Roy’s reframing of realism. An explanation of this kind of aesthetic appears in chapter eight, “The Tenant”, in which Tilo browses through the “recoveries” sent by Musa to her flat in Delhi: pieces of information, memories, testimonies, and documents relating to the struggle in Kashmir. The chapter is interrupted by the recovery of a notebook written by Tilo herself many years earlier; it is titled “The Reader’s Digest Book of English Grammar and Comprehension for Very Young Children” but in truth contains testimonies about the atrocities committed by the Indian army against the people of Kashmir. The notebook includes short fragments or vignettes about life under the occupation. Stylistically, these notes resemble Arundhati Roy’s nonfictional mode. For instance, each vignette concludes with a mock multiple choice questionnaire, meant not to be answered literally, but to stimulate the reader to consider what the moral message to be gathered from each situation could be, a formal choice that can also be found in Roy’s essay on Anna

Hazare (Roy 2011). One of these vignettes is titled “Nothing”. It is telling because it does not concern any specific episode of violence or brutality but instead, seems to anticipate a critique of the novel itself, and hence might be understood as a sort of meta-comment on the writing of *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*. Roy writes:

I would like to write one of those sophisticated stories in which even though nothing much happens there’s lots to write about. That can’t be done in Kashmir. It’s not sophisticated, what happens here. There’s too much blood for good literature.

Q1: Why is it not sophisticated?

Q2: What is the acceptable amount of blood for good literature? (Roy 2017, 283)

The short fragment poses an important question: is it possible, ethically and epistemologically, to aim to write “good literature” when confronted with the atrocities of the contemporary world? Is literature a good response to “blood” – meaning here the war in Kashmir, but also the suffering experienced by Dalits, Hijra, Adivasi, and other oppressed and exploited peoples in the subcontinent today? The answer that Roy seems to give is a resounding “no”. She clearly states that there is “too much blood for good literature” and that the only answer to this excess of violence, injustice and brutality would be nonfictional, in the sense of nonfiction writing, but also of abandoning the search for the literary in order to engage in political activism. However, this comment occurs in the chapter of a *novel*, hence it should not be understood as a dismissal of fictional writing as a whole. The point of this passing comment on blood and literature seems to be that any kind of literary representation, no matter how “good”, will be forever unable to do justice to “blood”: the suffering, violence and grief endured by people in a situation such as the war in Kashmir. The specific “unconsoled”, and inconsolable, status of this novel and its characters derives from this sort

of failure: literature's inability to represent a reality of suffering in full, and to right the wrongs being done in the real world. This implies that Roy's digressive kind of realism aims to avoid becoming an aestheticisation or commodification of violence. Instead, Roy's prose grapples with the deeper political and ethical angst of a socially committed writer. Roy's novel does not turn away from the political drive of literary realism; rather, her divided and unreconciled novel captures a rift in conventional realism, which exhibits the ethical imperative demanded by experiences of suffering.

Arundhati Roy's second novel outlines the key aspects of an aesthetic of the inconsolable at the heart of literary realism: a commitment to narrating historical experiences to which no form of representation – no matter how “good” – will ever be able to do justice. The people described in the novel remain inconsolable because their grief cannot be overcome by the fact that a book has been written about them. Roy's writing, from this point of view, cannot be seen as a transparent document to be charged with simple truth-claims, but neither should it be seen as a mere escape from reality. The political value of Roy's aesthetic of the inconsolable lies in the tension between these two polarities, pulling in incompatible directions: the unsolvable antinomy between the aim to represent reality and the will to transform it. Roy's emphasis on the inconsolable can be seen as part of what Tammy Clewell (2004) has described as the “anticonsolatory practice of mourning” which “has gained widespread currency among contemporary memorial makers, artists, and critics who seek commemorative forms intended to provoke and hurt, rather than console and heal” (199). This anti-consolatory aesthetic, writes Clewell, “compels us to refuse consolation, sustain grief, and accept responsibility for the difficult task of remembering the catastrophic losses of the twentieth century” (199). Arundhati Roy's representational strategies align with artistic practices that challenge the narrative closure and the work of mourning that any ideal of art as consolation would provide. Caught between the real of history and the potentialities of

fiction, the political dimension of Arundhati Roy's novels and essays lies in her ability to resist any kind of consolation. Her prose does not reject realism, but reframes it as a digressive, "fighting realism" of contradiction, protest and denunciation, unsettling the space of literature with antagonism. Through her inconsolable characters and unreconciled narratives, Arundhati Roy reclaims a role for fiction as repository of experiences at odds with hegemonic ways of living and understanding the contemporary world.

### Notes on contributor

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<sup>1</sup> Anjaria's study resonates with Joe Cleary's (2012) remark that a renewed emphasis on realism can rebalance the hegemonic position of "modernist-associated terms such as hybridity, polyphony, pastiche, irony, and defamiliarization" in postcolonial studies, which has led to overlook realist literature in the past decades (265).

<sup>2</sup> In her introduction to realism, Linda Nochlin (1990) observes that realism should not be seen as a "styleless" or "transparent" style, because realism is "no more a mere mirror of reality than any other style" whilst "the role played by actual objective investigation of the external world in the creation of realism cannot be ignored" (14–15).

<sup>3</sup> Ashgar Ali Engineer (2002) provides an overview of the riots in light of the history of "communal violence" and describes the riots as a "carnage meticulously organised and executed" (5053). After an attack against a train carrying Hindu pilgrims, the Hindu nationalist party (BJP) backed a pogrom against Muslims in the region, provoking thousands of deaths and what Jaffrelot (2003) has described as a genocidal "ethnic cleansing" perpetrated by Hindu nationalist factions (14).

<sup>4</sup> The "India Against Corruption" (IAS) movement is an urban, anti-political, populist and middle-class phenomenon aimed at "absolving the middle classes from their own responsibilities in fostering corruption" (Khandekar and Reddy 2015, 239). The movement emerged in Delhi at a time when protest movements were spreading worldwide, from Cairo to New York, during the summer of 2011.



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Originally part of the IAS, Kejriwal distanced himself from Hazare in the following year and founded the Aam Admi Party, which became the ruling party in the National Capital Territory of Delhi in 2015.

<sup>5</sup> Arundhati Roy has been deeply vocal about her support for the independence of Kashmir since 2010, when she faced arrest for sedition for her remarks on Kashmir not being an integral part of India. She contributed a nonfictional piece titled “Seditious Nehru”, which outlines the historical roots of the military occupation of Kashmir since 1947, to *Kashmir: The Case for Freedom* (Ali 2011, 125–131).