FROM THE EUROPEAN SOUTH 16 (2025) 22–36

https://www.fesjournal.eu

Oddkin and alter-families. 'Staying with the trouble' in *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* by Arundhati Roy

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ABSTRACT

"The task is to make kin in lines of inventive connection as a practice of learning to live and die well with each other in a thick present" (Haraway 2016, 18). With these words, Donna Haraway, in *Staying with the Trouble. Making Kin in the Chthulucene*, started to reason on the role of new possible forms of 'oddkin' to contribute to the redefinition of living with, becoming with, and dying with, on this planet. By reading Arundhati Roy's *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* (2017), this contribution aims at inquiring into new practices of kin-making, in particular from, the perspective of adoptive forms of maternity and inter-racial, inter-caste, and inter-religious communities, with an eye and a sensibility for new arrangements for human-animal cohabitation and life-death intercourse. Conceived as a chance for endurance in discomfort and devastation, Roy's novel explores possibilities to cope with trauma through inventive, less structured, ways of making family and building alternative communities: beyond singularities, looking for innovative relational ontologies, and unexpected mutual interactions between mourning and survival.

Keywords

Arundhati Roy, D. Haraway, oddkin, community, compost, mourning, survival

The present age needs stories to recuperate a lost and damaged sense of community, a participatory sense of co-dwelling of humans and non-humans, in remembrance of those that have passed away, and looking at an uncertain future drawing hope from dismal situations. As Donna Haraway put it in her *Staying with the Trouble* (2016): "multispecies storytelling is about recuperation in complex histories that are as full of dying as living, as full of endings, even genocides, as beginnings" (Haraway 2016, 10). In an epoch of a renewed sense of impending crisis and surpluses of sorrow, the philosopher was not interested in a complete reconciliation or restoration, but, nonetheless, she remained "deeply committed to the more modest possibilities of partial recuperation and getting on together" (Haraway 2016, 10).

Arundhati Roy's social fable*, The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* (2017), weaves together the stories of a whole universe of people and creatures trying to cope with loss, death, and marginality. In a country, the Indian nation, which is increasingly suffering from internal violent factionalism and the evils of an aggressive developmentalism poisonous to humans and non-

humans, the novel follows the efforts of a bunch of liminal identities and unconventional 'families of choice' (Weston 1991) to create and defend an unorthodox queer commonality in search of partial forms of 'recuperations' and a chance of 'getting on together'. The narration intersects the characters' destinies with the life of fellow creatures, in general stray animals, with whom to share food, place and affects, on the constant shifting border between fall and survival, and, more radically, between life and death. The novel will be analyzed from the perspective of the relationship between 'kin' and 'kind', from the point of view of queer maternity and the necessity of mourning, as well as from the standpoint of human and non-human alliances and kinships.

Kin and kind: queer maternity and 'families of choice'

As Raffaella Baccolini has recently reconstructed in detail (2017, 28), there is a strict etymological tie between the word kind, as benign, compassionate, loving, and the word kin, meaning family, race, breed. Likewise, the word gentle shares the same root with the Latin gens/gentilis, as belonging to the same clan or family. 'Kin' being at the root of kindness like "gens/gentilis" is at the heart of gentleness, there follows that kindness and gentleness are historically linked to the idea of being necessarily good to one's breed, to one's blood.

The occasions for deconstructing this peculiar and exclusivist bond have been recently focused upon by critical theory but literature, as usually occurs, has been path-breaking. As Haraway herself pointed out, she was moved in college by Shakespeare's punning between *kin* and *kind* in the famous quote from Hamlet – "A little more than kin, and less than kind" (1.2.65) – answering, in an aside, King Claudius who had hailed him as "cousin Hamlet, and my son" (1.2.64).[1] Indeed in the chapter "Making Kin not Babies" (Haraway 2016), and again in the volume *Making Kin not Population* (Haraway 2018), the American philosopher, in advocating for the creation of a less limited, less naturalized family formula, recalls how the kindest are not always necessarily kin, whereas encouraging other-than-natal kin, and a sense of community crafted through shared values and mutual responsibility (in her term: *response-ability*) opens up new possibilities for the planet and all of its creatures.

In the recent past, the more systematic disciplinary and political efforts to deconstruct the genealogical-biological nexus between kin and kind, making kin as *oddkin*, date back to the early 1990s *Queer Nation* turn.[2] With the publication of *Families We Choose: Lesbians, Gays, Kinship* (1991) for example, the anthropologist Kath Weston dedicated her attention to new relational constellations, formed among people very often rejected by their families of origin. These new kin/kind communities included friends, lovers, housemates, biological but also non-biological children, all united by the desire to live in solidarity and create lasting bonds in new formations defined as 'families of choice'.

Of course, within the traditional, patriarchal, heteronormative conception of family as the *locus* of ontological correspondence between kin and kind, one special role has always been crucially occupied by motherhood. Maternity, as integral part of the female functional identity and mission to procreate in order to ensure social stability, has been usually associated with a paradigm of practices such as conception, pregnancy, and breastfeeding, which reaffirm the centrality of biogenetics in the categorization of 'real' motherhood, regarded as superior to alternative, non-biological forms of maternity.[3] This ideology, defined by Shelley M. Park as *monomaternalism*, is closely related to other factors that play a crucial role in the sociopolitical landscape, *in primis* patriarchy, and heteronormativity, but historically also capitalism and colonialism, which have uprooted existing forms of motherhood in other cultures and across different historical periods (Park 2013, 7). In opposition to the hegemonic definition of *monomaternalism*, Park had developed the term *polymaternalism* to indicate different types of queer motherhood, such as multi-mother families resulting from open adoption, same-sex parenting, multiple marriages and extended families, within the milieu of affective non-normative relationalities.

Indeed, the concepts of free *maternage* and *polymaternalism* are useful theoretical frameworks for analyzing the forms of *oddkin* in Arundhati Roy's novel, as both protagonists Anjum and Tilo become mothers and co-mothers under very unconventional circumstances, challenging biological essentialism and parenthood linked to heterosexual marriage and blood relations.

The novel's plot is constructed upon two main storylines. The first follows Anjum (born Aftab), a *hijra*[4] 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). Despite her difficulties, Anjum becomes a sort of star in the world of hijras, being interviewed constantly by NGOs, human rights groups and journalists as well as by fashion magazines and the popular press, and with her aggressive femininity is considered a queen of style.[5]

The second storyline follows another woman: Tilottama (Tilo for short), whose character is connoted by an aura of singleness, restlessness, and precariousness which makes her appear both indecipherable and fragile. She is described as having no ties, except for the dogs that she feeds in the park. Tilo devotes herself to the documentation of the horrors of the civil war in Kashmir, and even though she is portrayed as caring for everyone, she appears like a creature immured in herself, without any real human bond, who basically "wanted to be free to die irresponsibly, without notice and for no reason" (Roy 2017, 159).

In the novel, motherly love develops where it seemed it could never take root and, with the strength of a powerful leaven, takes on unpredictable forms.

Anjum meets a lost, or most probably abandoned, little girl outside a mosque, the *Jama Masjid;* the weeping child grasps her offered finger and seems to actively choose her for a mother. The hijra decides to adopt the baby girl and brings her in the *Khwabgah*, the community where she lives with other transgender people and their guru. The *Khwabgah* is already a sort of 'chosen family', where kinship ties are not centered around blood relations and, least of all, biological procreation. As Gayatri Reddy emphasizes in her ethnography devoted to the study of the social and affective identity of hijras in South India, "central to the understanding of family is a notion of caring, indexed principally through a temporal (and spatial) dimension of 'being there'" (Reddy 2005, 151). 'There', in the *Khwabgah*, the care and well-being of the orphan are not solely the responsibility of Anjum, but also of the other dwellers who together form a community of co-mothers: "And so, by default, Zainab – the name Anjum chose for her – stayed on in the *Khwabgah* where she was lavished with more love by more mothers (and, in a manner of speaking, fathers) than any child could hope for" (Roy 2017, 31). Zainab is the one able to appease the 'Indo-Pak' war in Anjum's body. She made her finally feel "like a generous host rather than a battlefield" (Roy 2017, 30), unearthing in her a deeply buried maternal craving, so strong as to overwhelm and monopolize her whole affective life: "Zainab was Anjum's only love" (Roy 2017, 30).

Despite the focus on the unconventional relational dynamics within the *Khwabgah*, Roy avoids sentimentalizing it. Instead, she captures the complexities, contradictions, and struggles for authority that define its internal dynamics. One notable example is the parental conflict between Anjum and Saeeda. While Anjum is on a pilgrimage to Gujarat, where she becomes trapped in ferocious religious riots, Saeeda steps in as a substitute mother to young Zainab. At Anjum's return, her traumatic survival has rendered the hijra even more jealous and pathologically anxious about her exclusive claim over the child. Eventually, unable to recover and re-establish a healthy connection with her daughter, she departs, leaving her community and marking the temporary conclusion of the polymaternal experiment.[6]

In the second thread of the novel, also Tilo becomes an adoptive mother through a still more meandering and erratic way. At first, when she gets pregnant from a Kashmiri freedom fighter, whom she loves, she decides to have an abortion. She is not able to accept a child of her own and 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. The woman's reluctance stems from her complex relationship with her genetic mother, Maryam Ipe. Maryam, having conceived Tilottama through a caste-crossing union, had placed the baby girl in an orphanage to later adopt her, without acknowledging her as her biological daughter. The protagonist's unhappy story underscores how hypocritical the conception of the biological family can be; rather than being 'just natural', *kin* is in truth always regulated by legislative, economic, religious, and, in

India, caste considerations that determine which types of relationships are deemed acceptable and legitimate in society.[7]

Tilo's view of motherhood, nonetheless, undergoes a drastic shift when, walking among the protesters gathered at the astronomic observatory known as Jantar Mantar, she witnesses the appearance of a newborn illuminated by the blinding light of a neon sign and surrounded by the city's refuse.

> 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. (Roy 2017, 95-96)

The chapter, titled "The Nativity", clearly alludes to the Christian epiphanic episode, yet in this context, it sheds its religious aura while retaining a hopeful vision of a better future. The arrival of the baby carries a distinct queer symbolism, diverging from the notion of "reproductive futurism" (Edelman 2004) that upholds patriarchal and heteronormative family structures.[8] Instead, the infant represents a new queer kind of projection into the future, emphasizing connections that transcend genealogical lineage. This vision aligns with the idea of "solidarity beyond reproductive futurity" (Curti 2017, 18), as Tilo herself expresses when she takes in the orphan: "She could not remember when last she had been this happy. Not because the baby was hers, but because it wasn't" (Roy 2017, 138).

Roy presents the arrival of Miss Udaya Jebeen as an auspicious event for the community, a symbol of a hopeful time to come marked by a reassuring optimism: "things would turn out all right in the end. They would, because they had to. Because Miss Jebeen, Miss Udaya Jebeen, was come" (Roy 2017, 438).

On the other hand, the letter left with the child by her biological mother Revathy demonstrates how motherhood, even within the precincts of blood relations, can prove very far from being acceptable and/or 'natural'. In her case, a crushed and raped Maoist fighter, childbirth can become the most disheartening and alienating of all experiences. For this mother, the newborn represents a foreign body with which she cannot establish a connection and that she will never recognize as part of herself: "When she was born, I frankly felt hatred for her and I thought to kill her. I felt really she was not mine. Really she is not mine. Really if you see her story that I have written here, I am not her mother" (Roy 2017, 417-418).

In the narrative economy of the novel, the appearance of this second adopted daughter serves as a connecting bridge between the two strands, facilitating the meeting of the two protagonists. Anjum and Tilo will become co-mothers and co-responsible for raising little Udaya Jebeen along with the other members of a community of survival, the 'chosen family' of the Jannat cemetery.

Life, death, and mourning in the Jannat cemetery

"Death is a nothing, a void, a terrifying and sinister terminus, whose only meaning is that there is no meaning." (Plumwood 1993, 102)

Lamenting the fact that death in modernity has come to be perceived as just a source of alienation and separation, devoid of deeper significance or meaning, in *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature,* Val Plumwood invited us to embrace a more life-affirming understanding of death as an integral part of the human experience. Instead of viewing human essence as separate from the natural world, she exhorted us to recuperate a sense of unity and embeddedness in Zoe, transforming our understanding of both death and human existence as deeply and meaningfully interconnected, aiming for a perspective that could reunite mankind to nature and life to death.

In Haraway's theoretical and sentimental 'staying with the trouble', mourning takes thus a crucial relevance. Feeling the loss and grieving is considered a path to understanding the entangled fabric of shared living and dying. Without sustained remembrance and genuine mourning, she argues, there is no chance to access the awareness of our dependence on and relationships with the countless other beings with whom we share our place of dwelling and co-becoming (Haraway 2016, 39-40).

Haraway emphasizes that neither the capacity nor the practice of mourning is a human prerogative, but developing the capacity to feel the loss of the innumerable lives taken away can lead conscious people to become more respectful of the complexities of life beyond the dubious privileges of human exceptionalism.

In Anjum's story, when she falls prey to confessional mob-lynching in Gujarat and is spared only because "killing Hijras brings bad luck" (Roy 2017, 62), the narration follows the character's almost impossible mourning process in her negotiations with the distress of survival amidst a pervasive presence of the dead:

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. (Roy 2017, 61-62)

The memories of the trauma experienced and the sorrow for the innocent victims of communalist inter-religious carnage lead Anjum to self-exile in a cemetery. As other critics have already highlighted, in the novel a presiding motif of the graveyard or the necropolis emerges, connecting its principal settings.[9]

In the Kashmir plot the image of the graveyard is widespread and rhetorically articulated at every possible level, from pure tragedy to grotesque: "In Kashmir when we wake up and say 'Good Morning' what we really mean is 'Good Mourning'" (Roy 2017, 279). Known as 'heaven

on earth', Kashmir is altogether a location of horror where utopia turns into dystopia: a paradise transformed into a graveyard. A place where the living are only dead people, pretending.[10]

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. What will in time become a shelter for *pariahs* of all kinds takes the name of *Jannat* after the Arabic word for garden, referring symbolically to 'heaven', the place where Islamic believers are rewarded in the afterlife paradise (Mendes and Lau 2020, 77).

At first the cemetery is just a place of unredeemable sorrow: "She told them she wasn't living in the graveyard, she was dying in it" (Roy 2017, 67). In time, to domesticate and personalize the dwelling, Anjum decides to expand the structure by incorporating the graves and building rooms around them, creating a guest house for other people like herself in search of a "home, a place of predictable, reassuring sorrow – awful, but reliable" (Roy 2017, 66).

The structural connection between life and death deepens when the *Jannat Guest House* also becomes a *funeral parlour*, with access limited to the corpses discarded by the other cemeteries and the official burial homes. Through this compassionate initiative, Anjum subverts care and mourning patterns and redefines kinship paradigms. The unusual, both spiritual and physical, alliance between the living and the dead, spatially marked by the presence of graves in the living spaces of the residents, creates a passage between worlds: "(illegally, just a crack), so that the souls of the present and the departed could mingle, like guests at the same party" (Roy 2017, 398).

In this limbo, which made "life less determinate and death less conclusive" (Roy 2017, 398), the bodies who had in life been denied affection and a place to belong, find a residence where they can peacefully rest, while the living, escaping from a life of social marginalization and multifarious precarities,[11] find here a sanctuary which is also a continuous memento of the atrocities of the world outside.[12] As a liminal, heterotopic space, the graveyard is a place where mourning is not devoted to the entombment of remembrance but, on the contrary, to unearthing and actively expressing grief. In the wider community, where people from different creeds, castes, and genders assemble,[13] a series of symbolical funerals serve first and foremost to remember and to denunciate the many losses the survivors have experienced. A checkered shirt is buried by Anjum's friend Dayachand, now Saddam, who in choosing a Muslim alias had tried to distance himself from the mad fanaticism of his Hindu co-religionists. The burial serves to remember, pay homage to, and vindicate the memory of his father, a low-caste tanner who had been slaughtered in the streets by a Hindu cow-protection mob. Udaya's indigenous biological mother Revathy, who had committed suicide after being tortured and raped by the police, is likewise symbolically interred in an act of respect and spiritual hospitality, but also of telling off about her tragic death and even more tragic life. The pot of ashes of Tilo's mother is

buried in a quest for ritual appeasement between 'natural' daughter and 'adoptive mother', not forgetting the difficulties of their strained, genealogical relationship.

In the *Jannat* cemetery, to soothe is not to console. On the contrary, burying the dead is a way to ritualize sorrow and cement the bonds of the victims into a community of resistance. As Filippo Menozzi (Menozzi 2019) rightly observes, Arundhati Roy's representational strategies align with artistic practices that resist narrative closure and disrupt the notion of art as a source of consolation (31). Indeed, "The Unconsoled," to whom the novel is explicitly dedicated, are testimony to the fact that mourning is here conceived as a form of anti-consolatory practice and politically active strategy not for forgetting damage and death, but for surviving with the wounds and the scars. As Haraway convincingly contends, the work of mourning is not to be opposed to practical action; rather, sustained remembrance and grief are the premises of any durable and informed response. And in what she depicts as "living with the ghosts" (Haraway 2016, 39) – like Roy's protagonists quite literally do in the 'Jannat guest-house cum funeral parlour' – the American intellectual finds the starting point of any new possible beginning. A new beginning that in the *Jannat* cemetery not only seeks to include the dead within the community of the living, but also ensures that non-human entities are embraced as part of a more authentic understanding of life as uninterrupted, all-inclusive, circular, continuum.

Human-animal alliances and kinships

In her 'ecosophy', Haraway emphasizes the necessary centrality of relationality as rooted in the interdependence among vulnerable bodies. Navigating the theoretical constellation of new materialism, she reimagines the concept of community, not as solely human-centered but as inclusive of non-human entities and the broader environment. This stance, challenging human exceptionalism with its speciesist view, encourages a moral posture attentive to forms of collaboration and existential sharing. In advocating for an "ethics of inclusivity," capable of surpassing an anthropocentric moral attitude, Carolyn Merchant's "partnership ethics" (Merchant 2005) [14] likewise had required attentiveness and responsibility toward all life forms. This approach, promoting a holistic unity of humans and non-humans as cohabitants of a shared cosmos, matched with Val Plumwood's ecofeminist notion of the "relational self" (1993: 154-155), which moved beyond dualistic oppositions to foster relationships of respect and care across species and systems. In Pramod K. Nayar's posthumanist terms, this becomes the displacement of the notion of Anthropos, in favor of the recognition of the contribution of all the other living creatures in evolutionary processes. Conceiving of humans not as autonomous and self-sufficient beings but as "an assemblage, co-evolving with other forms of life" (Nayar 2014: 13), this line of thought, in order to recognize the interconnected and interdependent nature of all beings, calls for redefining kinship and family ties.

As we are here trying to demonstrate, the theme of forming unconventional alliances and kinships is central to all aspects of *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*. In the novel, the various damaging impacts of neo-liberalism, casteism, religious and nationalist extremisms come to affect not only humans but also the whole ecosystem and the lives of the non-human. By exploring the processes of modernization and the consumerist turn that have radically reshaped the landscape and life-style in the Indian cities, Roy critiques the various plights of the marginalized communities and the degradation of their environments. Above all, she emphasizes the agency of non-human beings in her narrative.

In a conversation with Shohini Ghosh (2021), Roy rejects the interpretation that implies the occurrence in her writing of plenty of animal, vegetal and other natural presences as devices to create a magical realist atmosphere. She rather suggests taking them at face value, exactly like a recognition of the central role non-human creatures play in her life and thus in her stories.

> No matter where I go. I knew every plant and worm and fish and insect; they were characters in my life. As oppressive as the humans around me were when I was growing up, the river and the insects, the rain and mud were my pals.[15]

Even in the most densely populated metropolitan *milieu*, Roy's perceptions are attuned to detect non-human activity.[16] She explicitly recoils from anthropocentric exceptionalism and states her incapability of looking at the world, or even thinking about it, with only humans at its centre: "How can we take anything – any discourse, any ideology, any religion even – that is exclusively about human beings seriously?"[17]

Indeed, as noted by Alex Tickell (Tickell 2018, 100), the urban setting of the novel involves components of the pastoral, with the city presented as a kind of urban jungle, populated as it is by a cast of dogs, birds, horses, cows and numerous other species.

But displaying the author's "fascination with wounded and precarious ecology" (Monaco 2019, 79), this pastoral is very often portrayed as decay. From the very beginning of the novel, Roy presents an apocalyptic scenario in which increasing production and relentless mass consumption are the main factors responsible for animal mistreatment and anthropogenic destruction. In this circle of toxic life, cows and buffaloes are exploited in the dairy industries and subjected to constant administration of drugs and medications; these, after their death, are indirectly ingested by the scavenger birds, condemning to extinction also the holy vultures, in the Parsi religion symbols of purification for their capacity to eliminate carrions in a natural manner. Many other species are also trapped in such bleak life cycles, such as hens deprived of their maternal instinct to speed up egg production. Similarly to John Coetzee's provocative comparison between the extermination of the Jews and industrial farming in *The Lives of Animals* (1999), Roy draws a parallel between the deprivation of motherhood in hens and that

experienced by the 'Mothers of the Disappeared in Kashmir', mothers whose children have been kidnapped, tortured, or killed by the Indian army, and reduced to being just "inefficient, unproductive units, living on a mandatory diet of hopeless hope" (Roy 2017, 300).

Such correlation highlights the thin line that separates human pain and trauma from that of non-human beings, dismantling the ontological preconceived notions that regard humans as separate from all other creatures. The shared suffering among species is also illustrated through the *flaneuristic* experiences of Tilo, who, while wandering among the marginalized and the waste of the city, encounters the sight of children and animals similarly trying to survive and resist the depressing conditions of poverty and environmental degradation that characterize urban peripheral areas.

> She walked through miles of city waste, a bright landfill of compacted plastic bags with an army of ragged children picking through it. The sky was a dark swirl of ravens and kites competing with the children, pigs and packs of dogs for the spoils. (Roy 2017, 234)

Despite the state of desolation and decay that permeates marginal spaces, there are also areas which become sites of resistance and contestation, where humans and non-humans form 'bizarre' alliances, or literally *oddkin* in the sense meant by Haraway. The *Khwabgah*, the first community where Aftab can become Anjum, 'the *mehfil*', "the gathering" (Roy 2017, 4) of her many selves, welcomes not only individuals of all genders, but also abandoned and mistreated animals; and all residents establish multispecies and symbiotic relationships based on cooperation, coexistence, and sharing. A clear example of this is Zainab's passion for animals, which she tenaciously saves from exploitation and captivity.

> She wanted to free all the half-bald, half-dead white chickens that were pressed into filthy cages and stacked on top of each other outside the butcher shops, to converse with every cat that flashed across her path and to take home every litter of stray puppies she found wallowing in the blood and offal flowing through the open drains. She would not listen when she was told that dogs were unclean […] She did not shrink from the large, bristly rats that hurried along the streets. (Roy 2017, 36-37)

The girl also grows in symbiosis with a little goat that she manages to rescue from *Eid* slaughter[18], and who, thanks to the care of its owner, is able to survive for the *Guinness record* of sixteen years. Similarly, other *hijras* intertwine bonds with many other creatures, and together they build a daily life marked by acts of connection and sharing, such as Ustad Kulsoom Bi and the parakeet Birbal sleeping together, or Razia and the pigeons conversing about the introduction of subsidies for stray cats.

A form of symbiotic relationship is that which develops between the hijra Anjum and the dog Biroo, a beagle that escaped from a pharmaceutical research laboratory. The experimental procedures have caused the dog to suffer from frequent epileptic seizures and a form of behavioural instability. The bodies of Biroo and Anjum become testimonies to the torture and

oppression they have suffered, to which the two characters attempt to resist by sharing their lived sufferings and creating an interspecies affiliation based on moments of pure and innocent intimacy, such as the simple habit of sharing the same food: "He drank everything Anjum drank, ate everything that she ate – biryani, korma, samosas, halwa, falooda, phirni, zamzam, mangoes in summer, oranges in winter. It was terrible for his body, but excellent for his soul" (Roy 2017, 83).

Equally special is the emotional bond between Saddam and the white mare Payal. The two become not only companions but also co-workers, and their relationship never turns into a hierarchical and asymmetric one. On the contrary, they generate an alliance of mutual understanding and respect, as highlighted by the imperceptible connection between the man and the mare during the skit staged for selling horseshoes to superstitious Hindus.[19]

Another example is the relationship between Tilo and her dog *Comrade Laali*: when she takes the foundling Udaya to her apartment, as if in symbiosis with her human counterpart, also Laali becomes a mother after giving birth to puppies on Tilo's landing. The two not only become mothers individually, but almost simultaneously share the same maternal experience connected by reciprocal familial affection.

The *Jannat Cemetery* likewise becomes an asylum open not only to human refuse but also to other discarded creatures, a sort of Noah's Ark of injured animals.

> Between Zainab and Saddam, they had turned the graveyard into a zoo... There was a young peacock who could not fly, and a peahen, perhaps his mother, who would not leave him. There were three old cows that slept all day. […] A small tortoise – an abandoned pet – that Saddam had found in a park […] Several cats came and went. (Roy 2017, 399)

And also the green world thrives. Despite the general situation dominated by poverty and struggle for survival, the bare life in the cemetery has in the vegetal abundance of the garden its vindication and counterpart: "brinjals, beans, chillies, tomatoes and several kinds of gourds, all of which, despite the smoke and fumes from the heavy traffic on the roads that abutted the graveyard, attracted several varieties of butterflies" (Roy 2017, 399).

Actually, such vegetal profusion is not surprising. As Adami (2022, 561) subtly suggests, the very meaning of the graveyard soil, despite its obvious connection to death and lack of life, in its being "a compost pit of ancient provenance" (Roy 2017, 399) quite literally alludes to the process of alteration of biological matter which transmutes dead organic corpses into new configurations of animal and especially vegetal life. In a way, Roy's heterotopy seems a possible objective correlative for Haraway's concept of the "children of compost" (Haraway 2016, 134-168) as a metaphor for the diverse and interconnected forms of life that arise from the process of composting. This idea emphasizes the importance of nurturing relationships within ecosystems and acknowledges the entanglements of human and non-human lives in the Anthropocene. Embracing decay, regeneration, and transformation as ethical and relational

practices, Haraway argues that, just like compost contributes to the growth of new life, the cultivation of diverse relationships and kinships among species helps foster resilience and adaptability in the face of ecological and political crises.

Indeed, at the very beginning of the novel, Anjum's mourning seclusion in the cemetery is compared to vegetal life in the sense of desolation and passivity. She behaves and feels like a tree, without flinching at the stones the casual urchins throw to her, without craning her neck to read the insults scratched into her bark: "When people called her names – clown without a circus, queen without a palace – she let the hurt blow through her branches like a breeze and used the music of her rustling leaves as balm to ease the pain" (Roy 2017, 3). In any case, the vegetal trope has only temporarily the sense of defeat and lack of vitality. In the long run, it can rather be interpreted as an existential choice. Following a very long series of mythical and literary arboreal transformations (Concilio 2021), Anjum is just one of the many human creatures, usually women, who choose to flee the world of violence and dichotomic separation to embrace a vital perspective characterized by qualities such as growth, adaptability, resilience, interconnection and symbiosis. For Anjum, the notion of adopting a plant-like existence seems to imply the conversion in favour of a profounder way of accepting and understanding life and death intercourse. In time, her vital energy is slowly able to sprout again and rebranch.[20]

To conclude, the *Jannat* community, with its human and animal waste, the traces of death, abandonment, and injustice, represents an actual possibility for surviving in times of despair and discomfort by simply and bravely "staying with the trouble." The formation of unusual alliances and kinships as *oddkin* is the leitmotif that makes of the cemetery, with its mothers, co-mothers and co-children, with the living sharing house with the dead, with its stray and injured animals and with its vegetal twisted resilience, the *locus* of a hamlet where there are no hierarchies but everyone is connected to the other, learning to co-exist, co-operate, and co-become through mutual care and support.

Notes

[1] Indeed it is usually believed that the source was an Elizabethan proverb, 'the nearer in kin, the less in kindness', while in John Lyly's *Mother Bombie* (1594) the saying was: "the greater the kindred is, the less the kindness must be" (4.1, 21).

[2] *Queer Nation* was an activist movement founded in March 1990 in New York to fight against anti-gay prejudice and the escalation of violence connected to the spread of the HIV virus.

[3] I am pleased here to recognize my indebtedness to the promising young scholar Miriam Eleonora Rastelli, for her insightful reflections concerning the relationship between queer maternity and Roy's novel.

[4] I borrow from Alex Tickell (2018) the description of India's *hijras:* "a name that refers to gay or transgender men, or eunuchs, who cross-dress and have surgery and/or hormone treatment to live as women, and which can also encompass a broader range of non-hetero-normative markers including the male use of cosmetics and forms of camp behaviour. *Hijra* communities arguably have a long-established place in the cultural world of Mughal old Delhi, in which eunuchs were employed in the

zenanas of the aristocracy and highly accomplished courtesans trained in dance and music were the nominally independent adjuncts to a male elite world of drinking parties and poetry gatherings" (Tickell 2018, 102). As Kumar Pushpesh underlines (2020, 177), historically Hijras held key official roles within the Mughal reigns, such as managing finances and trade, and were favored as "non-blood kin" over "blood kin" due to the dynastic's propensity for inheritance-related conflicts. However, the East India Company's transphobic policies led to the dismissal of hijra officials, marginalizing them and leaving them unemployed. This marked the beginning of colonial efforts to enforce heteronormative gender structures, influencing middle-class consciousness in India during British rule.

[5] Filippo Menozzi (2018, 23) interestingly speaks about the character of Anjum in terms of a superstar who epitomizes the status of hyper(in)visibility of hijras in India. A status which does not challenge their social marginality but at the same time renders them 'mainstream' through popular films, journalism, and academic research.

[6] In any case, once grown up, Zainab will be able to reestablish the lost bond with her adoptive mother and move again with her Big Mommy Anjum to the polymaternal community of the *Jannat* Cemetery.

[7] Actually, as Judith Butler (2022) has convincingly pointed out, family's implicit "naturalness" does not indicate nature as its foundation, but rather the set of legal, religious, and social norms that have naturalized it, determining who can legitimately conceive, to whom the offspring belongs in the line of descent, and what can be officially recognized as kinship. In reality, the recognition of filiation and consanguinity transcends biological genealogy and is often intertwined with socioeconomic issues: "the blood that ostensibly holds people together is a highly condensed and invested metaphor for social regulations governing inheritance and property relations" (Butler 2022, 29).

[8] According to Lee Edelman (2004), the Child is the pivot around which reproductive futurism is structured, elevating to cultural law the ideologies of heteronormative families while viewing queer sexuality as a social disease due to its non-procreative nature.

[9] As efficaciously noted by Alex Tickell (2018): "If Roy's second novel can be categorized as a work of the living city then, it is also a work of death, one that stages the metropolis as a necropolis, and as a place of death-in-life, as much as it also explores the subjective accommodation of death and loss by the living" (Tickell 2018, 101).

[10] References are indeed innumerable: "Death was everywhere. Death was everything […] 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" (Roy 2017, 314).

[11] In Mendes and Lau's critical reading of the novel the theme of precariousness is pivotal: "TMOUH is all about multiplicity and multitudes: its teeming cast of characters is exceedingly plural. Many of the characters are in precarious societal and political situations. Inhabited by (even crammed with) many of the oft-othered in India, this is a novel which opens up new spaces of precarity" (Mendes and Lau 2020, 71).

[12] "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 person manages to recuperate a daily routine and a queer sort of normalcy" (Ciocca 2020, 192).

[13] Over time, the cemetery becomes a destination for both new and old acquaintances of Anjum; some merely visiting their deceased end up joining the residents in the creation of a community of relationships.

[14] The partnership ethics advocated by Carolyn Merchant in her seminal work *Radical Ecology. The Search for a Livable World* (2005) is grounded on relations among all forms of living organisms: "A partnership ethic holds that the greatest good for the human and nonhuman communities is in their mutual living interdependence" (Merchant 2005, 83).

[15] For this interview, see: https://archive.aperture.org/article/2021/02/02/arundhati-roy-the-city-as-a-novel. Accessed December 11, 2024.

[16] "and it's not just pets on leashes. There are crow conferences, street-dog conclaves, horse confabulations, monkey madness" (Roy 2021).

[17] Roy, 2021.

[18] In this which is known as the 'Festival of Sacrifice', Muslims perform the ritual sacrifice of an animal, usually a goat, or a sheep, whose meat is divided into three parts: one-third is given to the family, one-third to relatives and friends, and one-third to those in need.

[19] "In the daytime she was Saddam's business partner. […] He stationed himself outside the hospital gates and busied himself with one of her hooves, tapping it worriedly with a small hammer, pretending he was re-shoeing it. Payal went along with the charade. When the anxious relatives of seriously ill patients approached him, Saddam would reluctantly agree to part with the old horseshoe to bring them good luck" (Roy 2017, 77).
[20] In Adami's words: "the employment of trees is not a mere stylistic embellishment but a strategy to reverse the dominant perspective of binary division between nature and humanity by suggesting lines of connection that redraw human hierarchical verticality as environmental horizontal interconnectedness" (Adami 2022, 562).

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