Reconfiguring Discourses of Human Rights and Development in Arundhati Roy's The Ministry of Utmost Happiness

Crystal Baines

The increased failure of the protection of human rights in South Asia has led this region to view the very concept of human rights with some suspicion. Communal tensions persisting since the colonial period, civil wars, extreme measures of censorship, and abuse of power often instigated by governments that comply with a neo-liberal global economy call into question the purpose and effectivity of especially international agents of human rights within the region. Certain religio-political factions frequently demand the expulsion of social justice and

rights-based international NGOs and liberal humanitarian projects since they are viewed as 'foreign' and 'inappropriate' to South Asia specific socio-cultural issues. It is easy to discount human rights as a Euro-American concept which in the post-cold war global economy has conflated into liberal humanitarianism. Such liberal humanitarianisms, according to Crystal Parikh, "evacuates political subjectivity and social desire from those whom it addresses, ascribing to them instead abject victimhood" (2017, 3). The implication of this form of humanitarianism is that the prerequisite to victimhood is the obscuration of the individual's right to have rights and the simplistic acknowledgment of victims as human beings that need saving. Are critics of human rights in the global south, then, justified in their claims that the liberal humanitarian narratives are condescending of the population they purport to save and unsuitable for the multifaceted problems specific to the same regions they presume to solve? It goes without saying, that this discourse of liberal humanitarianism does drastically reconfigure itself in its adopted geo-political landscapes outside Euro-American shores. But what happens to human rights, its discourse and to liberal humanitarianism within postcolonial and decolonial discourses of development in South Asia? This paper explores the complex reconfigurations of liberal humanitarianism and human rights within South Asian neoliberal development narratives depicted in Arundhati Roy's *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* (2017). I consider how the narrative of

the white (western) man's new burden, when replaced with the developing brown man's burden of national development in India, reconfigures or completely rejects the supposedly alien discourse of western human rights within postcolonial and decolonial trajectories of globalization.

In the process of these reconfigurations, the narrative considers new, or reconsiders already existing conceptualizations of human rights obliterated by hegemonic discourses of colonialism. As Parikh acknowledges, human rights discourse after all, has become globalized in scope, and it is "increasingly "pluralized" in texture, as human rights instruments have come to address the plight of particular groups that are considered in need of distinct care" (2017, 5). In this sense, deprecating human rights as entirely western is not only hazardous, but it also rules out the possibility of vibrant and effective local rights movements to emerge, the way it does in the novel. For instance, Roy in her descriptions of the development and urbanization projects of twenty first century neoliberal Delhi that strives to shed deprecating epithets such as "developing" and "Third World", brings to the fore new possibilities of imagining human rights according to changing economic policies. As such, this paper specifically focuses on Roy's query into the development projects that engulf the city of Delhi, resulting in drastic and irrevocable changes in the city's demography. The novel's microscopic view of the human collateral damage in macroscopic neoliberal devel-

opment projects of the megapolis invites the reader to question the very conceptualization of "development" in the so called "Third World" setting. In this context it is important to consider the "development projects" and the violence they inflict on certain citizens in terms of neoliberal political and economic rationality, which according to Wendy Brown, emerges as "governmentality – a mode of governance encompassing but not limited to the state, and one that produces subjects, forms of citizenship and behaviour, and new organization of the social" (2003, 37). This paper later focuses on a dissenting "new organization of the social" produced as resistance by neoliberal configurations of power. This "new organization" and its subjects titled 'Jannat' in the novel traverses with the socio-economic trends of neoconservatism, right-wing triumphalism, and consumerism, envisioning the possibility of a utopic space within and without neoliberal governmentality. But first, since Delhi's development projects feature as visible signs of the neoliberal socio-economic order in the novel, I find useful to read development, as Arturo Escobar (1995) suggests, as a discourse of power. When read in this framework, development projects geared towards the "supercapital" (Roy 2017, 100) megapolis model are often revealed to be nefarious enterprises, endorsed by "a powerful weave of nationalism, neoliberalism, and postcolonialism" (Kaul 2019, 3) that weed out the urban subaltern who is more a hindrance than an asset to the neoliberal free market economy.

In *Encountering Development* (1995), Arturo Escobar argues that although development is now a certainty in the social imaginary as the only means to solve social and economic problems, the idea of the "Third World" in particular, "has been produced by the discourses and practices of development since their inception in the early post- world war II period" (1995, 4). He suggests that considering development as a discourse of power and language system makes it possible to maintain focus on domination and the pervasive effects of development. Scaffolding his argument on Foucault's reasoning of discourse analysis, he remarks that discourse analysis creates the possibility of "stand[ing] detached from [the development discourse], bracketing its familiarity, in order to analyze the theoretical and practical context with which it has been associated" (Foucault 1986, 3); it gives one the possibility of singling out "development" as an encompassing cultural space and, at the same time, of separating oneself from it by perceiving it in a totally new form (Escobar 1995, 6).

Accordingly, in reading the novel, I first consider the physical violence wrought by the development schemes on the lower class and socio-culturally peripheral citizens of the city. I then go on to argue that the narrative's principal characters in Jannat, Anjum, Tilo, and Miss Udaya Jabeen, in physically and figuratively "separating" themselves from the encompassing cultural space of development, offer renewed liberal humanitarian

discourses of resistance that emerge against and within modernizing systems of development that dehumanize the poor. The narrative suggests that the singular focus on international or nationalist rights interventions is futile, since both the international and local apparatuses of welfare and human rights are ultimately dependent upon and therefore complicit in the narrow neoliberal visions of modernization and development. Instead the narrative's focus on cultural and social nonconformists offers new humanitarian imaginaries of equity and ethics.

The Ministry of Utmost Happiness is a sprawling kaleidoscopic view of socio-political views pertaining to urban north India. The novel maps the many collective and individual resistance movements as casualties of the postcolonial, neoliberal, national project to make India "the world's favorite new superpower" (Roy 2017, 100). However, there are no victims among the main characters. Instead what the novel envisions, as the title suggests, is a cultural utopia embodied in a local community of the "Unconsoled"[1]. One can identify two main narrative strands among many within this utopic space: one revolves around Anjum, a formidable and motherly hijra, who after living for a while with a small transgender community in Old Delhi goes off to live in a graveyard where she is gradually joined by a motley group of social rejects to establish a guest house cum funeral parlour called 'Jannat'. Among those she is joined by is recluse social justice activist Tilottama. Tilo, a former

architecture student from Kerala and the three men in love with her, form the second narrative of the novel. During a visit to her former lover Musa, a Kashmiri militant fighting for Azadi, Tilo finds herself entrenched in the long-standing territorial conflict when she is captured by Indian forces. The two women's narratives offer a mediatory view of the various modes and state apparatuses that dehumanize individuals that already occupy the margins of Indian society. The other significant storylines that entwine with that of the two women are that of Saddam Hussein, a Dalit disguised as a Muslim to escape upper caste Hindutva persecution, and Comrade Revathy, a Maoist (she only appears in the form of a missive from the grave) from Andhra Pradesh, whose daughter Miss Udaya Jabeen, begotten by a police gang rape, is adopted by Anjum and Tilo. The characters make a clear distinction between 'Jannat'[2], their home of socio-cultural deviants, and 'Duniya'[3], the world that wants nothing to do with them. The novel's central locus in Delhi provides a commentary on how burgeoning problems specific to India are aggravated by neoliberal economic policies that tout urban based economic development as a national project and solution to heteronormative class and caste driven struggles and anxieties of the marginal.

The social, political, and economic setting of the story is a contradictory confluence of what Nitasha Kaul refers to as PNN, "postcolonial neoliberal nationalism",

which functions as governmentality in the context of India (Kaul 2019, 6). She argues that "hegemonic projects, such as those of the right wing in the present, owe their success to how they weave together what are generally perceived to be contradictory aspects of nationalism and neoliberalism" (Kaul 2019, 6). It is a confluence where neoliberal practices get legitimized "as a matter of nationalist pride for they are deemed to enable the "rise" of postcolonial India" (Kaul 2019, 7). In present day India, PNN is governmentality that wants to emulate the West in terms of neoliberal policies but keeps it at bay in terms of ideas of secularism. It is a model, as depicted in the novel, that dismantles the welfare state, retrenches civil liberties, annuls environmental protections, and disregards the secular codes of law by reinforcing a Hindutva state. Such hegemonic projects inevitably exclude a majority that does not fit within the PNN framework, thus widening the categories of the subaltern in the postcolonial neoliberal nation. Central to Roy's scattershot polemics against breaches of justice and inequality is the Jannat community's humanity. The nonlinear fragmentation of the narrative is often metaphorically reflected in the fragmentation of persona and diminished humanity in a city that receives a facelift in neoliberal modernization.

In the chapter titled "The Nativity" which marks the baby, Miss Udaya Jabeen's timely advent in a furore of protests in Jantar Mantar, New Delhi, the peripheral hu-

man, political, and economic entities (from Jannat) converge with their neoliberal fundamentalist persecutors (from Duniya). On this day, Miss Udaya Jabeen's mother, Comrade Revathy leaves her on the pavements of Jantar Mantar with the hope that one of "the many good people at Jantar Mantar" (Roy 2017, 431) would take care of her. Coincidentally, Anjum, driven by "her long-standing desire to "help the poor" organizes a trip to the same location to "see for themselves what the "Second Freedom Struggle" the TV channels had been broadcasting was all about" (Roy 2017, 111). Roy manipulates the central location of Jantar Mantar to offer a tour guide-like commentary of the expanding city, pockmarked with numerous infrastructural development projects. She humanizes the city in disturbingly feminized imagery:

> Gray flyovers snaked out of her Medusa skull, tangling and untangling under the yellow sodium haze. Sleeping bodies of homeless people lined their… pavements…*Old secrets were folded into the furrows of her loose parchment skin. Each wrinkle was a street, each street a carnival. Each arthritic joint a crumbling amphitheater where stories of love and madness, stupidity, delight and unspeakable cruelty was played out for centuries. But this was the dawn of her resurrection.* Her new masters wanted to hide her knobby, varicose veins under the imported fishnet stockings, cram her withered tits into saucy padded bras and jam her aching feet into pointed high-heeled shoes... It was the summer Grandma became a whore. (Roy 2017, 100, emphasis added)

The narrative adopts a sexist male gaze to represent the city as an ailing old woman straining under the weight of centuries long colonial plunder and decades long national capitalist modernization. The simultaneous humanization, objectification, and demonization of the city paint a disturbing image of an old woman battered by violent historical assault, and whose mangled body is now receiving a painful makeover to be prostituted to a new master with new, though equally exploitative demands. The humanization of the city as a grandmother, already abused, and whose body is prepared for further molestation heightens the gravity of the exploitation and environmental damage that occur within the national neoliberal framework. The artificial makeover of rapid infrastructural development indicates the superficiality and fragility of ad hoc plush development that really does nothing in eradicating the socioeconomic problems of the country. "Her knobby varicose veins" and other physical defects refer to the poor and the slums in the city (Roy 2017, 100). Poverty – mirrored in slum and squalor – is an ugly blot on the shiny veneer of a neoliberal cityscape. The state's plaster-solution to the abhorrent visibility of poverty is forceful eviction and demolition:

> "People who can't afford to live in cities shouldn't come here," a Supreme Court Judge said, and ordered the immediate eviction of the city's poor. […] So surplus people were banned. In addition to the

regular police, several battalions of the Rapid Action Force […] were deployed in the poorer quarters. (Roy 2017, 102)

Neoliberalism is thus a space project, which produces not just economic but also spatial unevenness that impacts the biopolitics of the city and village scape. Changing space relations and biopolitics reconfigure the very conceptualization of humanity and citizenship since it produces a surplus of people that is stumbling block to the spatial and corporate expansion of the city "to become supercapital of the world's favorite new superpower" (Roy 2017, 100). In a profit driven environment, a surplus of people that cannot contribute to furthering the economic agenda of the international and domestic capitalist class, while taking up valuable space i. e. profitable real estate, is not only a hindrance but also disposable. Relocation for the "surplus people" equals disposability by death: "'Where shall we go?' the surplus people asked. 'You can kill us, but we won't move,' they said. There were too many of them to be killed outright'" (Roy 2017, 102). Hence, the makeover is demonstrative of the more insidious effects of neoliberal development which not only projects its development agenda as solution to the problems of underdevelopment while exacerbating economic inequality in India, but also reinforces what Gayatri Spivak calls a "classed apartheid" (2004, 529) in a lethal form that sanctions institutionalized killing.

As the narrative progresses, Roy's creative voice merges with that of the activist, as she strips metaphor and simile to describe the ruthless impact of development-oriented neoliberalism on the non-capitalist human being. It is her focus on development's collateral human damage that enables the reader to distance herself from development and consider it as a discourse of power. She writes, "away from the lights and advertisements, villages were being emptied. Cities too. Millions of people were being moved, but nobody knew where to" (Roy 2017, 102). Given the adverse effects of the beautification project on those that distort the outer-markings of the neoliberal economic veneer, the state is met with lower class resistance: "In slums and squatter settlements…people fought back" (Roy 2017, 102). But resistance in turn is countered with either palliatives or extreme repression: "Across the road, […] the police and bulldozers were lined up for the final assault" (Roy 2017, 102). Kaul refers to such situations as the "politics of the absurd" (Kaul 2019, 12). She argues that the postcolonial neoliberal nation co-constructs the idea of the nation and the economy as a strategy of governmentality that creates a political subjectivity that can no longer question the conditions of neoliberalism. Nationalism, in the national development project, she writes,

> […] gets mobilized as a natural part of the affective politics, while questions of ideologies, distribution of wealth, survival, and/or livelihood that ought to

be central to politics are put into the "safe house" of economy beyond the realm of public debate. […] What is more, the technocratically determined idea of rationality in governance makes conflicts of interests become unidentifiable. That which is most obviously in view becomes structured in such a manner that it is naturalized and rendered obscure from questioning. (Kaul 2019, 12-13)

The ideal subject of this postcolonial nation-state is the one who accepts without questioning the postcolonial neoliberal nation of governmentality. The PNN model of governmentality thus not only creates a new form of urban subalternity but also depends on its survival and perpetuation on this same subalternity. The narrative's investment in neoliberal subalternity considers the human being not merely as organic entity but also as a structural unit, defined and sustained by a sovereign state:

There were too many of them to be killed outright. Instead their homes, their doors and windows, their makeshift roofs, their pots and pans, their plates, their spoons, *their school leaving certificates, their ration cards, their marriage certificates,[…]their lifetime's work*, the expression in their eyes, were flattened by the yellow bulldozers imported from Australia. […]They could flatten history and stack it up like building material. (Roy 2017, 103, emphasis added)

The forceful evictions are simply not a matter of displacement, space contention and loss of human life, but it is also an obliteration of the non-capitalist individual's political subjecthood. The destruction of vital administrative records is a denial of citizenship. The insidious disenfranchisement that follows physical displacement acquits the state of all responsibility towards the citizen of no economic and electoral value. The erasure of citizenship is thus contradictory even to the American and Western European development discourses that historically projected capitalism as a moralizing venture, where profit-making was promoted as a righteous method to reduce the income gap. The arbitrary deprivation of nationality is expressly prohibited in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the document and discourse that the capitalist enterprise presumes to uphold (UN 1948, Article 15). The political ideology of justice that accompanied the huge structural inequalities of the post-cold war economic system in this instance is blatantly violated in the Indian development narrative.

However, this is not to say that the liberal humanitarian narrative is entirely absent from development discourse. It is just that it exists only for the human who has capital, who can borrow credit and consume. Following the evictions of the now homeless, stateless non-citizen subalterns of Delhi, Roy writes, "And people (who counted as people) said to one another, 'You don't have to go abroad for shopping anymore. Imported things are available here now. See, like Bombay is our New York,

Delhi is our Washington and Kashmir is our Switzerland' " (2017, 103). New York, Washington and Switzerland stand here as metonymy for First World developed status which the postcolonial neoliberal consumer wishes to import and appropriate. According to Molly Geidel in Peace Corps Fantasies (2015), "what is most irresistible about development fantasies is modernization's promise of homosocial intimacy through participation in capitalist relations" (2015, ix). But to expose the interstices of this deeply rooted social and economic fallacy, Escobar encourages us to consider development discourse in its historical context. He writes:

> To see development as a historically produced discourse entails an examination of why so many countries started to see themselves as underdeveloped in the early post–World War II period, how "to develop" became a fundamental problem for them, and how, finally, they embarked upon the task of "un-underdeveloping" themselves by subjecting their societies to increasingly systematic, detailed, and comprehensive interventions. (Escobar 1995, 6)

The post-World War II American and western European initiative in taking to task the white man's new burden to modernize and develop the less economically accomplished countries, considered economic development as the primary measure for social welfare. This is a premise first based on the perception of certain conditions and economic systems in Asia and Africa as "backward",

"unscientific" and "stagnant". For instance, successive governments of post-independence India and Sri Lanka in the 1940s and '50s proposed resolutions for economic and political governance based on secular socialist models. Such proposals were unsuccessful due to political complacency, narrow-visioned electoral strategies and policy errors. The neoliberal capitalist model emulated by America especially from the late 1970s was perceived as the democratic model that posed under the banner of freedom. The minimization of state regulation on economic systems was perceived as liberty that fostered international equal relations and moral social standing (Bhardan 1984; Kelegama 2000; Mukherji 2009). In her sprawling description of the New Delhi cityscape, Roy facetiously notes, "Kmart was coming. Walmart and Starbucks were coming, and in the British Airways advertisement on TV, the People of the World (white, brown, black, yellow) all chanted Gayatri Mantra" (2017, 101). Kaul points out a fallacy of development specific to India's postcolonial condition. She writes, that the appeal of the postcolonial neoliberal project derives from "the promise of a future where the healing of the colonial wound can only be complete by achieving a level of consumption and lifestyle "like the West"" (Kaul, 2019, 12). The argument here is: "what the west consumes we have a right to consume as well". Open economic policies, hence, not only pushed South Asia into the rat race of modern globalization but it also thrives to mimic and appropriate the popular cultural and economic symbol-

ism of the west as a visible albeit superficial manifestation of liberty and equality.

Indeed, the liberal and neoliberal premise that deregulation of the economy facilitates globalization and equity was made on a moral high ground scaffolded upon a human rights discourse beginning post World War II. Not unlike the Western development discourse that specially promoted the American "good life" as the aspirational model to the rest of the world, moral and ethical criteria of the protection of human dignity was chartered in the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights under American tutelage. However, as Parikh observes, American liberalism and neoliberalism, which have enjoyed global hegemony since 1989, "and their interfaces with the international human rights regime…have rendered an alternative genealogy of human rights fragmented and scattered in terms of any *political movement*" (2017, 8). It is in this context that she notes in the conflation of the human rights discourse with liberal humanitarianism, a crucial distinction that must be made in terms of recognizing and retaining the redeeming potential of human rights. Costas Douzinas in his essay, "Seven Theses of Human Rights" writes, that "the (implicit) promise to the developing world is that the violent or voluntary adoption of the market-led, neoliberal model of good governance and limited rights will inexorably lead to Western economic standards" (2013). It is this same unregulated, duplicitous neoliberal humanitarianism and

development that *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* encourages one to reconsider. I consider below how the development narrative often overlaps with the neoliberal humanitarian discourse in the novel to the extent that their conflation is indistinguishable.

Having followed the human evictions from the New Delhi slums and squatter settlements with the precision and outrage of an activist, Roy turns one's attention to how the state and international regimes respond to the blatant human rights violations wrought by the city's state sanctioned beautification project. Firstly, the narrative refers to a random but concerned Christian priest, highlighting the grassroots religious and social conscience and appeal for justice: "Father-John-for-the-Weak sent out a letter saying that, according to police records, almost three thousand unidentified dead bodies (human) had been found on the city's streets last year. Nobody replied" (Roy 2017, 103). This is not to suggest that international and domestic networks of capitalist neoliberal proponents are completely oblivious to the loss of shelter, income, citizenship, lives and humanhood of the city's poor. In fact the novel notes that corporate sponsored "competitive TV channels covered the story of the breaking city in "Breaking News"… they asked the poor what it was like to be poor…The TV channels never ran out of sponsorship for their live telecast of despair" (Roy 2017, 103). On the contrary, there is a large-scale dramatization of poverty that func-

tions as diversion from the cause for poverty. The very same neoliberal framework responsible for the problems, creates a disjuncture between itself and its victims in disguising itself in the garb of humanitarian concern. It is the perfect alibi for the nefarious effects wrought by neoliberal development. But what is more insidious about the publicity that poverty receives is that it serves as advertisement for what-not-to-become: poor and underdeveloped. Projection of poverty as despair and squalor is psychological blackmail of the upper middle class that sustains itself on credit-driven consumerism. The humanitarian rhetoric that magnifies the problems of the poor, thus, not only cloaks the fissures in the system but also manipulates the despair it has created to its own economic advantage. Furthermore, institutionalized humanitarianism couches the disposability of the poor in a rhetoric that still objectifies the poor as collateral damage and human debris— a necessary sacrifice by the Indian state for the greater good and equity of the consumer class: "Experts aired their expert opinions for a fee: Somebody has to pay the price for Progress, they said expertly" (Roy 2017, 103). What is more alarming, to me personally, was to find this same rhetoric mirrored in the language of development literature of the United Nations:

> There is a sense in which rapid economic progress is impossible without painful adjustments. Ancient philosophies have to be scrapped; old social institu-

tions have to disintegrate; bonds of caste, creed and race have to burst; and *large numbers of persons who cannot keep up with progress have to have their expectations of a comfortable life frustrated. Very few communities are willing to pay the full price of economic progress.*

— United Nations, Department of Social and Economic Affairs, Measures for the Economic Development of Underdeveloped Countries, 1951(cited in Escobar 1995, 4; emphasis added)

Escobar cites the above as "one of the most influential documents of the period, prepared by a group of experts convened by the United Nations with the objective of designing concrete policies and measures 'for the economic development of underdeveloped countries'" (Escobar 4). The report modeled after the Harry Truman's vision of the '50s which initiated a new era of understanding and management of world affairs, through extending American support to less economically successful countries, specifically reflects the method by which the "American dream of peace and abundance be extended to all the peoples of the planet" (Escobar 2017, 4). The capitalist humanitarian discourse clearly attributes poverty to personal failure rather than systematic constraints and institutionalized violence.

I find Escobar's method of viewing development as a discourse of power relations useful in distinguishing hegemonic humanitarian regimes from the emancipato-

ry communities, imaginaries, and narratives in the text. Thinking of neoliberal humanitarianism as a discourse helps focus on processes by which it draws on imperialist models and becomes complicit in the neoliberal economic agenda. The community of Jannat however, in their physical and figurative distance from the tumult of development confronts hegemonic discourses and systems of language that exclude beings, especially the human and/or subaltern that does not fit into specific dominant economic and ideological systems of development. Instead, it offers a refreshingly curious reverse-discourse on the upholding of one's rights through diverse empathy.

A few weeks after Anjum and Tilo adopt a baby from Jantar Mantar, they receive a letter from her biological mother Revathy, a lower caste militant Maoist, who has just been killed by government forces. In the letter she writes, "In the forest everyday police is burning, killing, raping poor people. Outside there is you people to fight and take up issues" (Roy 2017, 431). Her letter is neither addressed to the government nor any form of institutionalized human rights organization. It is addressed to Anjum, a transgender woman; Tilo, a Keralite activist of dubious inter-caste origins; Saddam Hussein, a converted Dalit; and to a motely group of social rejects that live in Jannat, a guest house cum funeral parlour in a Delhi graveyard. Anjum and Saddam Hussein, the co-founders of the funeral parlour determine that, "The one clear

criterion was that Jannat Funeral Services would only bury those whom the graveyards and imams of the Duniya had rejected" (Roy 2017, 84). As indicative of the collective's name, 'Jannat' (paradise), Roy envisions a utopia for the "people who do not count as people" because they do not fit into heteronormative, neoliberal, national, capitalist discourse. She manipulates her role as writer to exercise her poetic license in imagining what is near impossible. According to Bill Ashcroft and Lyman Sargent, utopia is no longer a place but "the spirit of hope itself", the essence of the desire for a better world (Sargent 2000; Ashcroft 2012). And according to Frederic Jameson, 'practical thinking', especially in the postcolonial context, represents a surrender to the system. For Jameson, "the Utopian idea, on the contrary, keeps alive the possibility of a world qualitatively distinct from this one and takes the form of a stubborn negation of all this" (Jameson 1971, 110-111). The novel's metatextual awareness of the utopic nature of Jannat is evident when the hijras make a distinction between their own world and what they call the "Duniya" or the mainstream society conditioned by upper-caste, heteronormative neoliberal capitalist ethics that treat those who do not fit the systemic criteria as non-human or human debris. But "practical thinking" and "economic realities" aside, Ashcroft observes that "postcolonial writing is suffused with future thinking…[with] a belief in the reality of liberation, in the possibility of justice and equality, in the transformative power of writing and

at times in the potential global impact to be made by postcolonial societies" (2012, 2). Within the formation of Jannat the novel explores the ethical, moral and etymological conditions in which alternative economic and political communities can emerge as possible solution and rejoinder to neoliberal economy and institutional humanitarianism.

The novel is acutely aware of the skepticism that such alternative discourses and envisionings could be met with. During their field trip to New Delhi's Jantar Mantar, the Jannat crowd, in their conspicuously deviant appearance, draws the attention of two young filmmakers who were "making a documentary film about Protest and Resistance" (Roy 2017, 114):

> […] [O]ne of the recurring themes of the film was to have protestors say, "Another World is Possible".[…] Anjum, for her part, completely uncomprehending, stared into the camera. […]We've come from there […]from the other world. The young film-makers […] exchanged glances and decided to move on rather than try to explain what they meant because it would take too long. (Roy 2017, 114)

While this brief encounter offers a critique of the fashionable NGO funded international humanitarian art projects that have no impact beyond the financial gain and superficial individual recognition that the artist receives often at the expense of underprivileged misery,

Roy points out the tendency of the mainstream understanding to view the prevailing dominant economic and cultural discourse as the only certainty.

The scripted slogan and Anjum's reaction to it is also reflective of the distinction between utopia and utopianism. According to Ashcroft and Ernst Bloch, utopianism is a process, it is the energizing of the present with the anticipation of what is to come. (Ashcroft 2012; Bloch 1988). In postcolonial literary visions such as Jannat, utopia can be a "geographical region, a culture, a local community, a racial identity, conceived in a disruption of conventional boundaries…" (Ashcroft 2012, 6). For the filmmakers "another world" is still a process, a possibility of what could be, while for Anjum "another world" is already achieved utopia because of her sense of empathy. Anjum's way of envisioning the possibility of resistance through empathy is an alternative that the middle-class consciousness cannot imagine or recognize, since empathy is an affect at complete logger heads with the individualism which the capitalist economy thrives on.

Parikh in *Writing Human Rights* elaborates on the theory of the obligation to the Other, based on the premise that we as individuals in a society have an ethical responsibility specifically towards the Other. This sense of obligation she argues, which arises from a point of empathetic discomfort, facilitates an active implementation of dor-

mant human rights literacy. The ethical critique she proposes here subsists on the alienating or disarming effect that the Other induces in one. She suggests that one's sense of personal responsibility towards the Other arises "with a certain discomfort with our skin, the difficulty of 'living (at home) with ourselves' when brushed by the Other who is the impossible subject of rights" (Parikh 2017, 87). By "Impossible Subject" she means, "the subject for whom political justice and legal redress remain unavailable, but whose claims impel the ethical project of human rights politics nevertheless" (Parikh 2017, 86-87). It is this same sense of empathy evoked from an acute awareness of your own comfort zone in contrast to another's despair that prevails in Anjum's graveyard community. After having listened to Comrade Revathy's letter of the cultural, societal and institutional violence unleashed upon the Adivasi communities and the harrowing experience of her rape, "Each of the [Revathy's] listeners recognized, in their own separate ways, something of themselves and their own stories…" (Roy 2017, 432). Furthermore, the plausibility of empathy arising out of stark difference salvages Jannat from appearing a naively idealistic literary trope.

In addition to this, Anjum actively rejects two principal positions ascribed to her by the national neoliberal development discourse: the victim and the subaltern. During her years as a performing hijra at the Khwabgah in Old Delhi (a small hovel ghetto of hijras), Anjum is

celebrated and sought after for her striking appearance, charisma, and eloquence by NGOs and documentary filmmakers, who construct a new knowledge of academic orientalism for the consumption of the western academic and humanitarian forums. Similar to the young filmmakers at the Jantar Mantar, they approach with preconceived notions of a transgender victim narrative:

> Over the years Anjum became Delhi's most famous Hijra. Film-makers fought over her. NGOs hoarded her…In interviews Anjum would be encouraged to talk about the abuse and cruelty that her interlocuters assumed she had been subjected to by her conventional Muslim parents, siblings and neighbours before she left home. They were invariably disappointed when she told them how much her mother and father had loved her… "Others have horrible stories, the kind you people like to write about," she would say. "Why not talk to them?" (Roy 2017, 30)

Anjum's response is an outright rejection of what Parikh says is "humanitarian intervention [that] depends upon eliciting the assent of "powerful people" and a "leisure class" who consume human rights narratives" (Parikh 2017, 87). Upon Anjum's gradual disillusionment with capitalist humanitarian intervention that evacuates her political subjectivity and ascribes her to nothing more than a pathetic image of vulnerability and victimhood, she resorts to an alternative subjecthood that refuses to be "saved". Furthermore, in refusing to be confined by

the conditions of the postcolonial neoliberal nation, the individuals at Jannat remain as human beings and citizen of a utopic space, and not subalterns of a larger postcolonial neoliberal nation state that penalizes them. Nationalism and national projects and their failures are central to postcolonial utopian thinking. Partha Chatterjee for instance, sees nationalism as a blow against decolonisation processes, because postcolonial nations are forced to adopt "a national form" that is hostile to their own cultures in order to fight against the western nationalism of colonial powers (Chatterjee quoted in Ashcroft 2007, 3). In the context of the novel, neoliberalism is the new economic model India appropriates to accessorise the already borrowed garb of nationalism. But this time, instead of appropriating this new model to fight the West, neoliberal practices are sanctioned as a matter of national pride, development and route to an equal footing with the West. Anjum's rejection of the PNN triad that subalternizes people like her, therefore, could be read as a decolonising utopian process at odds with national, economic, and cultural visions of mainstream India.

In an even more revolutionary gesture, Anjum also appropriates the mainstream's dehumanization of her humanity. In a final and absolute gesture of renunciation Anjum moves out of the Khwabgah and choses to live among the dead:

> She lived in the graveyard like a tree…When she
> first moved in, she endured months of casual cruelty
> like a tree would - without flinching…When peo-
> ple 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 rus-
> tling leaves as balm to ease her pain. (Roy 2017, 7)

Michel Foucault, in *The History of Sexuality,* writes of
how discourses of power that were instrumental in his-
torically undermining the homosexual community was
appropriated in order to transform the derogatory rhet-
oric into a language of power and resistance. Consider
for instance, the etymology of the terms "queer" and
"negritude" (deriving from nègre, the French equivalent
of negro). Foucault argues that "we must make allow-
ance for the complex and unstable process whereby
discourse can be both an instrument and an effect of
power, but also a hindrance, a stumbling-block, a point
of resistance and a starting point for an opposing strat-
egy (Foucault 1978, 101). This opposing strategy he
terms a "reverse" discourse (Foucault 1978, 101). An-
jum ultimately resorts to this strategy in appropriating
the dehumanizing terminology ascribed to the likes of
her by the neoliberal economic framework to envision
imaginative political subjecthoods that render the glo-
balized conceptualisation of the same as delimiting and
ineffective in protecting the human, leave alone their
rights. She retorts, "Who says my name is Anjum[4]? I'm

not Anjum, I'm Anjuman. I'm a *mehfil*, I'm a gathering. Of everybody and nobody, of everything and nothing" (Roy 2017, 8). It is hence Anjum's sense of empathetic obligation to the Other, her ability to appropriate the dehumanizing neoliberal development discourse in liberatory forms, and her defiance to humanitarian narratives of victimhood that enables Jannat to emerge as a new political community that redefines notions of ethics, justice and morality.

Works Cited

Ashcroft, Bill. 2007. "Critical Utopias." *Textual Practice* 21 (3): 411-431.

---. 2009. "The Ambiguous Necessity of Utopia: Post-colonial Literatures and the Persistence of Hope". *Social Alternatives* 28 (3): 8-14.

---.2012. "Introduction: Spaces of Utopia". *Spaces of Utopia: An Electronic Journal* 2 (1): 1-17. http://ler. letras.up.pt.

Bhardan. Pranab. 1984. T*he Political Economy of Development in India*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.

Bloch, Ernst. 1988. *The Utopian Funcion of Art and Literature: Selected Essays*. Studies in contemporary German social thought. Trans. Jack Zipes and Frank Mecklengurg. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press.

Brown, Wendy. 2003. "Neo-liberalism and the End of Democracy." *Theory and Event* 7 (1): 37-59.

Douzinas, Costas. 2013. "Seven Theses on Human Rights: (3) Neoliberal Capitalism and Voluntary Imperialism." *A Critical Legal Thinking*. Accessed September 19, 2019. http:// criticallegalthinking.com/2013/05/23/seven-the-

ses-on-human-rights-3-neoliberal-capitalism-voluntary-imperialism/.

Escobar, Arturo. 1995. *Encountering Development*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press.

Foucault, Michel. 1978. *The History of Sexuality*. Volume 1: An Introduction. New York: Random House.

Geidel, Molly. 2015. *Peace Corps Fantasies*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Jameson, Fredric. 1971. *Marxism and Form: Twentieth Century Dialectical Theories of Literature*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press.

Kaul, Nitasha. 2019. "The Political Project of Postcolonial Neoliberal Nationalism." *Indian Politics and Policy* 2 (1): 3-30. doi: 10.18278/inpp.2.1.2.

Kelegama, Saman. 2000. "Development in Independent Sri Lanka: What Went Wrong?" *Economic and Political Weekly* 35 (17): 1477-1490.

Legg, Stephen, and Srila Roy. "Neoliberalism, Postcolonialism and Hetero-Sovereignties: Emergent Sexual Formations in Contemporary India." *Interventions* 15 (4): 461-473. doi: 10.1080/1369801X.2013.849416.

Mukherji, Rahul. 2009. "The State, Economic Growth, and Development in India." *India Review* 8 (1): 81-106. doi: 10.1080/14736480802665238.

Parikh, Crystal. 2017. *Writing Human Rights*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Roy, Arundhati. 2017. *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf.

Sargent, Lyman Tower. 2000. "Utopian Traditions: Themes and Variations." In *Utopia: The Search for the Ideal Society in the Western World*, edited by Roland Schaer et al, 8-17. New York: Oxford University Press.

Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. 2004. "Writing Wrongs." *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 103 (2/3): 523-581.

United Nations. 1948. "The Universal Declaration of Human Rights." UN.org. Accessed August 3, 2019. https://www.un.org/en/universal-declaration-human-rights/.