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PLACE IS TEXT: Representing the architecture of landscape, the human and non-human in Arundhati Roy's prose

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Abstract: In a recent interview, writer and activist Arundhati Roy has proposed the definition of ‘Delhi as a novel’ to pinpoint the cultural variety, ramification, and dynamism of the Indian capital city. Rather than being a mere literary embellishment, this type of conceptualization reveals the author’s attitude towards the environment, in its geographical, human, and non-human shapes, as important segments and participants of the wide biosphere. In Roy’s prose, in fact, the linguistic depiction of places as diverse as the teeming streets of Delhi, the flourishing fields of Kerala, and the impervious valleys of Kashmir not only supports the creation of meaning in the narrative, but also permits foreground-loaded questions of identity and belonging, particularly with regard to liminal subjects such as women, hijras (i.e. transgender persons) and migrants. Adopting the perspective of ecostylistics, an interdisciplinary domain that borrows and integrates ideas, frameworks, and methods from stylistics and ecocriticism, this article intends to investigate (1) some of the linguistic features of Roy’s postcolonial narratives, focusing on the strategic ‘architecture’ of the text-worlds that center around the environment, and (2) the power of the language to index social questions of precarity. The analysis considers extracts from Roy’s fictional and non-fictional texts, in particular her novels *The God of Small Things* and *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, and applies various critical tools. The main findings of the investigation exhibit the author’s ecological view and political beliefs that emerge in devices like point of view, figurative language, and defamiliarization, and that trigger a broader view of the environment, one in which the relation between the human and the non-human is complementary rather than competitive.

Keywords: architecture of text; Arundhati Roy; ecostylistics; PLACE IS TEXT spatial metaphor; precarity

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1 Introduction

This article intends to advance scholarly understanding of the ways in which place and by extension the environment, spanning both the human and non-human components, are linguistically rendered in the prose of Indian writer and activist Arundhati Roy, who thanks to her novels and her many collections of essays represents one of the most ground-breaking voices from the postcolonial literary scenario. Her fictional production has been extensively investigated, in particular focusing on the topicality of the questions she deals with (Ciocca 2020; Mustafa and Chaudhry 2019), or on the innovativeness of her ‘weird’, vernacular and multifarious language (Ch’ien 2005; Newman 2021; Saxena 2022), and revealing how her approach to nature and the environment is meaningful and strategic. However, in order to corroborate the appreciation of her texts, and in particular how the author crafts a complex relation to the landscape, the application of frames and tools deriving from ecostylistics, “in which the methodologies of stylistics intersect with the social and political agenda of ecocriticism” (Virdis et al. 2021: 4–5), can turn out to be particularly insightful since it refers to a network of fields and disciplines based on empirical models and practices. Therefore, the article is situated within the thematic scope and research paradigm of this Special Issue of the *Journal of World Languages* (see Virdis 2022), and aims to apply the analytical procedures of ecostylistics to studying some of the environmental aspects in Roy’s literary and non-literary prose.

The analysis of texts pertaining to environmental issues is theoretically inspired by a broad and new reflection on the approach to the landscape whereby the human presence in the world is viewed within a holistic gaze that recognizes other forms of life, animal and vegetable, and the intricate relations and dynamics that emerge from this arena, for example revising the notion that only human beings can assume and assert the role of actors over non-human beings, considered as affected participants (Garrard 2004; Harré et al. 1999; Oppermann and Iovino 2017). The rhetorical structure of such materials frames and spreads certain ideologies of nature and the biosphere, hence the need to scrutinize language as a representational tool for authors who not only describe places, but especially construct them as stories that can produce, index, or hide specific values and meanings (Adami 2020; Stibbe 2015).

In a recent interview with Shohini Ghosh,¹ Arundhati Roy proposed the definition of ‘Delhi as a novel’ to pinpoint the cultural variety, ramifications, and dynamism of the Indian capital city, which is not a mere literary embellishment. In her prose, in fact, the linguistic depiction of places as diverse as the “serpentine lanes

¹ <https://aperture.org/editorial/arundhati-roy-sees-delhi-as-a-novel/> (accessed 12 April 2022).

and by-lanes of Delhi” (Talwar 2020: 261), the flourishing fields of Kerala and the impervious valleys of Kashmir not only supports the creation of meaning in the narrative, but also permits to foreground questions of identity and belonging, particularly with regard to liminal subjects such as women, hijras (i.e. transgender persons) and migrants (Anand 2005; Ch’ien 2005; Mustafa and Chaudhry 2019). Informed by the interdisciplinary perspective of ecostylistics (Douthwaite et al. 2017; Garrard 2004; Virdis et al. 2021), this contribution intends to investigate some of the linguistic features of Arundhati Roy’s postcolonial narratives, in particular focusing on (1) the strategic ‘architecture’ of the text-worlds that center around the environment, and (2) the power of language to index social questions of precarity. The analysis mainly considers extracts from Arundhati Roy’s novels *The God of Small Things* (1997, henceforth *GST*) and *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* (Roy 2017, henceforth *MUH*), but also refers to some of her non-fictional materials. The critical tools here employed are taken from the broad field of contemporary stylistics, in particular cognitive narratology and Text World Theory (TWT), and examine linguistic devices and narrative strategies such as foregrounding, focalization, and metaphor.

Born to a Malayali Jacobite Syrian Christian women’s rights activist from Kerala and a Bengali Hindu tea plantation manager from Calcutta, the author has lived in various parts of India, such as Kerala and Tamil Nadu, and was educated at the Delhi-based School of Planning and Architecture. Roy represents a peculiar figure in the Indian literary domain, being not only a prolific writer of both fiction and non-fiction, but also a committed activist and radical thinker, whose incendiary words frequently generate heated debates. Her deep-seated criticism against the Narmada dam project, her support for the independence of Kashmir (a region that is part of the Indian Union, but mostly populated by Muslim communities that do not belong to Hindu mainstream culture), and her determined opposition to the nationalist policies adopted by Prime Minister Narendra Modi are only some of the issues that define Roy’s political mindset (see the pieces contained in Roy 2011, 2014, 2020).

It is worth noticing that Roy’s interest in the environment is twofold: on the one hand, it echoes postcolonial preoccupations about the destruction of the landscape, which is a salient issue in present-day India, for example, the Bhopal disaster and its pernicious gas leak (1984), or the ruthless exploitation of mineral resources in Bihar and other states; on the other hand, it opens up to span social questions too, thus demonstrating that the effects on the environment are not severed from the human domain, but rather they interweave various relations. Indeed, for Mukherjee (2010: 83), “Arundhati Roy’s literary style, form and subject [...] are deeply considered artistic responses to the historically specific condition of uneven development in India, a condition that cannot be understood as long as we understand environment as a separate category to those of history and culture”. In

a similar vein, Anand (2005: 95) suggests that Roy's engagement with ecocritical discourse coincides with "the need to reconfigure the ecological, political, social, and cultural matrix of the present world system" since casteism, discrimination and subjugation of marginal subjects like women, hijras, and Dalits (outcastes) participate in an all-embracing system of abuse as well.

Roy's prose illuminates a range of diverse places, from bustling megalopolises like Delhi, to pastoral landscapes in Kashmir, but more importantly, her style maps out the natural and cultural forces that pertain to human and non-human life because she affirms to be "incapable of looking at the world, or even thinking about it, with only humans at its center".² It is in this way that the ideas of text and place metaphorically and symbolically overlap, and Roy openly acknowledges such strategy when, speaking about her years in the Indian capital, she affirms "to me, the city was and is a fascinating, never-ending story. It's a novel with characters who appear and disappear, shaping the physical space around them".³ The author's words seem to stem from the cognitive metaphor PLACE IS TEXT (Janz 2017), by which the domain of PLACE (specifically the CITY) is mapped onto the notion of a narrative TEXT, blending spaces and words to trigger effects of dynamism, organization, and agency. This type of conceptualization applies to other places as well, for example, small villages, fields, and even buildings, and importantly defines the centrality of place in ontological terms: "the village I grew up in, the pickle factory, the landscape, the people, the green river, the coconut trees that bent into it, the broken yellow moon reflected in it, the flash of fish – I am made up of all that".⁴ In other words, the author's perspective feeds from the constitutive power of spatiality, which endorses a holistic approach to human and non-human entities and their environment, and here operates through the technique of lexical accumulation (listing), realized by noun phrases, some of which with pre- or post-modifications. The effect of such accretion is a sense of wholeness harmonizing living entities (humans, animals, and plants), objects, and places, which brings to the fore the interconnectedness of being in, and belonging to the environment.

2 Text-worlds and narratives in Arundhati Roy's architecture of places

As a means to tackle Roy's textual depiction of the environment, I propose to implement an ecostylistic perspective, whose methodologies aim to investigate

2 <https://aperture.org/editorial/arundhati-roy-sees-delhi-as-a-novel/> (accessed 12 April 2022).

3 <https://aperture.org/editorial/arundhati-roy-sees-delhi-as-a-novel/> (accessed 12 April 2022).

4 <https://aperture.org/editorial/arundhati-roy-sees-delhi-as-a-novel/> (accessed 12 April 2022).

how places are constructed as text-worlds and contribute to adding meaning to the narrative. The author appears to be concerned with the ‘architecture’ of both natural places and human-made structures, and, in a meta-reflexive way, the very term ‘architecture’ is paradigmatic: not only does it refer to the “the art or science of building or constructing edifices of any kind for human use” (Oxford English Dictionary [OED] 2022), but it also figuratively encodes the idea of a system, in this case, the organization of text and discourse, thus picking up the relations through which words, phrases, and sentences hang together and produce sense. The term easily lends itself to a critical perspective (Wilson 2015), when analytical techniques and frameworks such as narratology and TWT are utilized to delve into the architecture of a text, identifying characters, actions, and events, and the reader’s immersion into their fictional worlds. It also bespeaks of Roy’s education and ideology: her architectural studies and interests have deeply influenced her understanding of life and the surrounding world, particularly with the idea of cost-effective and energy-efficient building, under the influence of the British-born Indian architect Laurie Baker, and reverberate across her political projects. According to Tickell (2007: 14), “Roy has also used architectural metaphors in theorizing the politics of globalization, and, more literally an awareness of the environmental impact of industrial engineering has been central to her activism against large-scale dam schemes in India”. As a consequence, her prose first of all operates like a process of harmonious construction, suggesting how balanced compositions and proportions govern the environment. Significantly, this reference is taken up by scholars too, for example in Ch’ien’s (2005) investigation of “weird” English, i.e. a hybrid variety elaborated by postcolonial writers, the chapter dedicated to the linguistic features of *GST* is entitled “The politics of design” to problematize the idea of space.

In order to handle the way in which Arundhati Roy conceives of and talks about the environment, viewed in a holistic perspective, and in the light of her political vision and commitment, in what follows I adopt and adapt notions, intuitions and frameworks from various areas of cognitive stylistics, in particular narratology and TWT. This methodological choice is justified by two main considerations, namely: 1) narratives do not simply describe but actually construct and spread ideas, thus morally affecting readers, and 2) TWT can provide a precise account of the development of the conceptual layers inherent in linguistic selections, processed by readers.

The study of narrative voice has permitted to uncover notions such as point of view and focalization (Fludernik 2006; Simpson 1993), through which writers orchestrate their works to represent different forces and entities from the natural world, producing “the stories we live by” as Stibbe (2015: 3–6) holds, paraphrasing Lakoff and Johnson (1980). TWT too is equally important in tracking down the

ramifications of the text that the reader has to navigate to create meaning. This cognitive model distinguishes the idea of discourse-worlds from that of text-worlds. The former refers to the situation and the context around human beings as they communicate with one another, thus also considering their personal and cultural knowledge, whilst the latter indicates how the conceptual work of readers in envisaging meaning generates mental spaces starting from the language utilized by the author (Gavins 2007; Gavins and Lahey 2016). Structurally, text-worlds are characterized by the presence of (1) world-building elements, which translate aspects of time, location, character, and object description through items such as tense and aspect in verb phrases, locative adverbs, proper nouns and pronouns, and (2) function-advancing propositions, which develop and advance events in the text world, and are realized by verb phrases.

To appreciate the benefits of an ecostylistic approach that borrows from both cognitive narratology and TWT, let us see how Roy constantly emphasizes the spatial metaphor *PLACE IS TEXT*, for example in the following piece in which she speaks about the relation between fiction and territory:

The city as a novel – the novel as a city. Truly, I think like that. And I don't just mean the physical landscape of both cities and novels. I mean it more in the manner of how something is designed, and then that design is subverted, ambushed, enveloped, and turned into something else, and then all of that becomes a part of another design, and on it goes. Something like the way the shapes of cities inscribe themselves spatially on the surface of the earth as distinct from the amorphous countryside that surrounds them. They have a form, a logic that is not immediately obvious, except, of course, imperial cities that were created by fiat and decree. But those, too, are subverted. In the novel, too, this happens often to the narrative. And yet, it's only once you begin to live in the novel-city of Utmost Happiness that you understand that the apparent chaos is designed. It, too, has its underground, overground, and diagonal pathways that interconnect. It has its own complicated logic.⁵

Much of the lexis of the passage comes from the semantic fields of geography and geometry ('design', 'surface', 'diagonal pathways'), but there are also terms ('subverted', 'turned into something else', 'chaos') that seem to indicate the malleability of events and relations, with an implicit sense of transformation and dynamism. What emerges from this quotation is a new understanding of place, in which all its components, far from being irrationally scattered together, make up a composite canvas. The verbalization of such vision is reinforced by markers of modality. In particular, the epistemic modal adverb 'truly' and the lexical construction 'I think' express the writer's beliefs and confidence (Gavins 2007: 110), and cumulatively allow readers to access the text-producer's intention. Roy's metaphor *PLACE IS TEXT*, which in the excerpt above is realized through an attention-

5 <https://aperture.org/editorial/arundhati-roy-sees-delhi-as-a-novel/> (accessed 12 April 2022).

grabbing chiasmus, encapsulates and enlarges the very conceptualization of SPACE to accommodate that of WRITING (Janz 2017) by means of a set of mappings operating between locations and texts in terms of layout, shapes, and design. But in a parallel fashion texts too have the power to mentally trigger spaces, and consequently, in reality, we can hypothesize the presence of a dual metaphor, or “double vision” (Gavins 2007: 152) that blends two domains simultaneously resonating in the mind of the reader. Rhetorically, Roy employs places to portray her prose, but concurrently her texts evoke real places and bespeak of ecological and social contexts, entwining a twofold dynamic of meaning construction (PLACE IS TEXT ↔ TEXT IS PLACE). Mapping and unraveling the diegetic planes that authors arrange in their narratives can offer insights into the connections between discourse, language, and imagination. The following sections of this article implement ecostylistic tools to investigate extracts from Roy’s novels.

3 Wor(l)ds of a smaller god? Rivers, gardens, and factories

Awarded with the Man’s Booker Prize, *GST* is a complex novel mainly set in Aye-menem, a small town in Kerala, an Indian southern state known for its backwaters and luxuriant vegetation, as well as its multicultural context with Hindus, Christians, and Muslims, and pivots around a family’s relations, against the backdrop of tense social and political issues such as the rigidity of the caste system, the heritage of Keralite Syrian Christians and communist insurgents (the Naxalites of the 1960s). With its series of analepses (Fludernik 2006: 34) oscillating between 1969 and 1993, the story is populated by a rich stock of characters, and dedicates much space to Ammu Ipe, and her large multi-generational family, in particular her parents, Pappachi and Mammachi, her twin children, Rahel and Estappen (the latter often presented through the nickname Estha), and her aunt Navomi Ipe, known as Baby Kochamma. Constructed as a third person narration, in reality the text cleverly plays with focalization, with perceptual shifts in the story – from an omniscient voice to the interpolation of Rahel and Estha’s consciousness, initially in their childhood and then in their adulthood, by which the rendering of the landscape oscillates between objectivity and subjectivity. Such a strategy allows to juxtapose the perspective of a child and that of an adult, especially in the case of loaded questions such as inter-caste love, e.g. the relationship between Ammu and a Dalit called Velutha, viewed as a ‘scandalous’ affair. But the novel also handles other sensitive themes, for example, social discrimination since characters such as

Pappachi and Baby Kochamma frequently remark about their belonging to the upper class, or political anxieties with the circulation of communist ideas.

The writer is particularly concerned with the depiction of Kerala, spanning the environmental features, the man-made structures, and the cultural conditions of the region, in a clear attempt to record, or at least evoke a series of Roy's autobiographical references. In processing the text, readers will activate their knowledge of the world, in particular concerning the discourse-worlds of nature and civilization, which in the text might represent separate, or even oppositional references, endowed with a possible range of connotations. Such vision is mirrored in the narrative too: for Tickell (2007: 12), for instance, "the idyllic natural environment of South India is also tempered, in Roy's fiction and prose, by memories of vulnerability and social stigma". The beautiful fields and forests of Kerala become the palimpsest onto which human tensions and clashes are constantly staged, and affected by political, religious, and social conditions. But in the novel, natural sights acquire salience in relation not only to human subjects but to non-human entities such as plants, animals, and insects as well, thus demonstrating how the author appropriates and reverses the cognitive textual attractor of largeness, namely what is bigger is expected to draw more attention in the reader (Stockwell 2009: 25), to refer to small items. For Ch'ien (2005: 156), "Roy champions weird English as the antidote to the dominance of bigness", and in this way, she engages with the idea of natural wholeness, by which the human and non-human co-exist and interact within a broad system.

A typology of place that merits attention in the novel is the river, a natural element that in Hindu culture is central, being the representation of a female deity, for example, the Ganges (celebrated as Mother Ganga) or the Yamuna (venerated as the daughter of the sun god, Surya), although Roy's literary project realigns symbols and meanings in a new light. Let us consider the double vision of the river that runs in the town, here described through the eyes of the twins:

They dreamed of their river.

Of the coconut trees that bent into it and watched, with coconut eyes, the boats slide. Upstream in the mornings. Downstreaming in the evenings. And the dull, sullen sound of the boatmen's bamboo poles as they thudded against the dark, oiled boatwood.

It was warm, the water. Greengreen. Like rippled silk.

With fish and trees in it.

And at night, the broken yellow moon in it.

(Roy 1997: 122–123)

This is an example of how Roy's heterodiegetic narration at times overlaps the children's focalization (in particular Estha's), with the effect of revealing his perspective to the reader. From a TWT angle, the passage contains various world-

building items and expressions referring to time ('in the morning', 'at night') and location ('the river', 'the boats'), as well as enactors (Gavins and Lahey 2016: 4), namely characters ('the boatmen', 'fish and trees') and objects ('bamboo poles'). Interestingly, the effect generated by the enactors here is that of depicting a context in which the human and non-human are coterminous, and fittingly combined in the children's vision, which is foregrounded thanks to sensory language to create empathetic bonds. Since the body and the mind operate together in the production of sense and language, according to the cognitive principle of embodiment (Gavins 2007: 5), the narrative displays visual, auditory and tactile references via numerous literary and metaphorical combinations ('coconut trees', 'dull', 'sullen sound', 'thudded', 'warm', 'rippled silk'). As to function-advancing propositions, it is worth noticing that the extract includes verbless sentences, although there are some action verbs ('bent into', 'slide by'). The children's consciousness also emerges through other details, in particular the chromatic echoes ('dark', 'grey-green', 'yellow moon') that produce a general atmosphere of reverie, triggered from the very beginning via the phrase 'they dreamed', i.e. a verb denoting a mental process. This phrase and the use of the possessive pronoun 'their' mark the description and work as a departing point for the creation of a specific sub-world, that of the twin's fantasy and attachment to the river.

However, for the children the conceptualization of the river in the novel is not static given the diegetic anachronies put forward by the writer, and it abruptly changes when they reunite many years after the previous episode: "Some days he walked along the banks of the river that smelled of shit, and pesticides bought with World Bank loans. Most of the fish had died. The ones that survived suffered from fin-rot and had broken out in boils" (Roy 1997: 13). The excerpt is focalized through Estha and records his disillusionment and sadness for the devastation of the landscape. Symbolically and materially here, the balance between the natural and the human is turned upside down, and linguistically realized through homophone-based puns ('bank', 'Bank'), negatively-connoted nouns and verbs ('smelled of shit', 'pesticides', 'suffered', 'broken'), and tense-changes denoting a before and after outcome ('had died'). The image is highly emblematic and allegorical in representing the twins' adverse life experiences to the point that, as Anand (2005: 102) suggests, "the clinical violation of the river coincides with the desecration of their childhood innocence".

In Roy's prose, places are central and functional, and not a mere geographical description. Along with natural places, also places affected or cared for by humans are important, for example gardens, which encapsulate elements of the environment such as plants, flowers, and trees, and imply the human action. Baby Kochamma's garden is paradigmatic in this respect because, for Mukherjee (2010: 101), "her labour in the garden is an attempt to control space and other forms of life

just as she herself has been controlled”: not only does she take pride in gardening, but she even considers it as a tool of power, through which she can govern what is denied to her in life. The woman in fact had to suppress her love for an Irish Catholic priest, becoming deeply embittered with all the other characters. Her beautiful garden, thus, becomes a form of sublimation for a wish that can never come true for her, a sort of speculative replacement in which she can tame nature completely. Let us observe the following excerpt, which for the sake of analysis I have divided into three parts:

- (1) To keep her from brooding, her father gave Baby Kochamma charge of the front garden of the Ayemenem House, where she raised a fierce, bitter garden that people came all the way from Kottayam to see.
- (2) It was a circular, sloping patch of ground, with a steep gravel driveway looping around it. Baby Kochamma turned it into a lush maze of dwarf hedges, rocks and gargoyles. The flower she loved the most was the anthurium. *Anthurium andraeanum*. She had a collection of them, the ‘*Rubrum*’, the ‘*Honeymoon*’ and a host of Japanese varieties. Their single succulent spathes ranged from shades of mottled black to blood red and glistening orange. Their prominent, stippled spadices always yellow. In the center of Baby Kochamma’s garden, surrounded by beds of canna and phlox, a marble cherub peed an endless silver arc into a shadow pool in which a single blue lotus bloomed. At each corner of the pool lolled a pink plaster-of-Paris gnome with rosy cheeks and a peaked red cap.
- (3) Baby Kochamma spent her afternoons in her garden. In sari and gumboots. She wielded an enormous pair of hedge shears in her bright orange gardening gloves. Like a lion-tamer she tamed vines and nurtured bristling cacti. She limited bonsai plants and pampered rare orchids. She waged war on the weather. She tried to grow edelweiss and chinese guava [sic.]. (Roy 1997: 26–27)

Overall, the passage delineates a macro context, or text-world (devoted to Baby Kochamma and the garden), which develops its world-switches back and forth, and works via three main articulations, roughly corresponding to the three numbered paragraphs above. Specifically, section (1) operates as a sort of preamble to introduce the protagonist’s story-world, section (2) focuses on the description of the garden, and section (3) defines the active role of the woman, centralizing her gardening activity, which stands as a metaphor of control and subjugation. The text packages ideas and echoes into linguistic expressions by insisting on nominalization, as well as lexemes taken from the specialized discourse of botany, emphasized by evaluative terms (‘lush’) and several figurative constructions (‘fierce’, ‘bitter’, ‘pampered’), including zoological similes (‘like a lion-tamer’) and hyperboles (‘endless’). Unlike the depiction of the river through

the twins' eyes, in section (3) nature is materially rendered as a malleable object, manipulated by Baby Kochamma: linguistic evidence of this lies in action verbs like 'tamed', 'limited' and the figurative expression 'waged war', which cumulatively define the character's sense of self. Even the noun 'bonsai' is in line with such stance because it refers to a type of plant that is artificially grown and kept in micro-size, thus completely altering its natural development by means of human intervention. Incidentally, the word 'bonsai' may also be utilized with the figurative meaning of "something carefully shaped or controlled" (OED 2022), and in this sense it is sometimes attested in the domain of agile architecture, an umbrella term for the principles and practices sustaining the evolutionary design and architecture of a system, whose construction requires minimal actions, similar to the 'synthetic' cultivation of bonsai trees, which requires a reduced quantity of soil and water.

Baby Kochamma's proud, authoritative vision is somehow mitigated by eccentricities, for example with the attention-grabbing enactors that illustrate her bizarre and tacky garden decorations such as gargoyles, the marble Cherub and the pink plaster-of-Paris gnome. The narrator adopts an external focalization, but the second paragraph of the extract is revelatory of Baby Kochamma's ideology, one entrenched in authoritarianism, also thanks to the syntactic structure, being essentially composed of function-advancing propositions based on the repetitive pattern subject + verb (she + verb). This illuminates her power of action, thus creating a narrative frame in which the woman exercises her total command over nature, including her botanical experiments, i.e. the fact that she wants to grow rare plants such as edelweiss and chinese guava [sic.] in the Indian landscape, irrespective of the climate conditions. Furthermore, such a point conceptually rewrites the notion of domestic and exotic, encouraging the reader to recategorize the plants being described, and suggesting a sense of alterity in Baby Kochamma's imperious attitude.

Interestingly, in Roy's writing, places are often seen with their objects and items too, and such a 'material' consideration permeates the description of Paradise Pickles, the food factory owned by the Ipse family. The discourse-world of experienced readers approaching the novel will identify the factory as a sort of intertextual homage to the chutney metaphor in Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* (1981), in which the tasty Indian relish serves as a figurative stratagem to preserve the past (Tickell 2007: 47). Moreover, according to Mukherjee (2010: 87), the pickle factory has the power to "make concrete the continuous histories of colonialism, globalization, class and caste conflicts" in a fictional context that attributes symbolic importance to the materiality of places. Obviously, this is not a natural site, but a human-made establishment, which nonetheless weaves in some

significant references, for instance in the following description perspectivized through Estha:

Past glass casks of vinegar with corks.
 Past shelves of pectin and preservatives.
 Past trays of bitter gourd, with knives and coloured finger-guards.
 Past gunny bags bulging with garlic and small onions.
 Past mounds of banana peels on the floor (preserved for the pigs' dinner).
 Past the label cupboard full of labels.
 Past the glue.
 Past the glue-brush.
 Past an iron tub of empty bottles floating in soapbubbled water.
 Past the lemon squash.
 The grape-brush.
 And back.

It was dark inside, lit by the light that filtered through the clotted gauze doors, and a beam of dusty sunlight (that Ousa didn't use) from the skylight. The smell of vinegar and asafoetida stung his nostrils, but Estha was used to it, loved it. The place that he found to Think [sic.] in was between the wall and the black iron cauldron in which a batch of freshly boiled (illegal) banana jam was slowly cooling. [...]

Having thought these thoughts, Estha Alone [sic.] was happy with his bit of wisdom. As the hot magenta jam went around, Estha became a Stirring Wizard with a spoiled puff and uneven teeth, and then the Witches of Macbeth. Fire burn, banana bubble.

(Roy 1997: 194–195)

The structure of the passage is threefold: the first part constitutes a main text-world dominated by a large number of enactors, particularly in the form of items pertaining to ingredients (e.g. fruits, vegetables and spices), but also featuring tools and other objects, whilst the second and third parts progressively display Estha's mind and feelings, branching off from the suggestive explanation of the place, which picks up some details to produce literary allusions such as the 'black iron cauldron', used for cooking the ingredients that conjures a Shakespearean echo of sorcery. Estha's fervid fantasy transmutes the environmental clues into playful objects as the paragraphs after the list also exhibit indicators of modality, in particular boulomaic, i.e. related to the expression of desire with the verb phrases 'loved' and 'was happy', and epistemic, i.e. related to knowledge and belief, thanks to Estha's focalization as expressed by 'having thought these thoughts', which seems to index the child's intrusive thoughts as well as his fantasies. As Gavins (2007: 94) affirms, "the use of a modal item has the effect of constructing a modal-world which is separate from its originating text-world". Therefore, the description of the factory gradually leaves way to an eccentric scenario in which the boy replaces the natural ingredients used for the preparation of the sauces and jams with literary allusions, a diegetic and psychological operation that also

includes graphological defamiliarization and that aims at reshaping the boy's reality, namely to reject dire issues and problems. As a whole, "with its non-standard spellings, reversed words, neologisms, repetitions and emphatic capitalizations, Roy's novel often tests the limits of prose" (Tickell 2007: 7), but apart from testifying to the writer's creative verve, such techniques are linguistic means to articulate meaning. With regard to forms of atypical capitalization, for instance, 'Think' and 'Alone' specifically sketch out the boy's mental and intimate dimension, allowing readers to share Estha's feelings.

4 Beyond the border: Cities, graves, and other places

In this part, I continue the exploration of Roy's fictional ecological and human spatialities by looking at *MUH* (2017), an intricate novel that draws from various dramatic moments of contemporary Indian history such as the 2002 Godhra train burning and the armed insurrection in Kashmir. Once again, the plot concatenates a range of characters, who often embody discourses of marginality, suppression, and resistance, as they traverse different kinds of borders, such as gender, religion, and society, for example with the hijra Anjum, who finds a shelter in a desolate Muslim graveyard, or Tilottama (sometimes nicknamed Tilo), a young semi-Dalit architect, estranged from her own Christian Syrian community and engaged with activism (Goh 2021). The space (and time) coordinates of the story are varied, and such a plethora of geographies acquire multiple meanings within a holistic (and committed) view, since "the key argument Roy makes here concerns not merely the various elusive apparatuses of capital but also its manipulation of space to create or expand pre-existing spaces of precarity" (Rajan 2021: 22).

As an illustration, the portrayal of Delhi can be observed, especially in its mishmash of ritzy areas close to dilapidated districts, two polarities of the territory that are the fruit of unwise human actions, in particular considering the processes of expropriation, expulsion, and exploitation of local communities that often take place in Indian cities, and that recently were worsened by Covid pandemic and lockdown policies. In the story, Roy sometimes compares the city to the mythological figure of Medusa to stress its tentacular menaces, and when Tilo and other characters reach the Indian capital, they witness its multiple shapes and forms of life:

They glided through dense forests of apartment buildings, past gigantic concrete amusement parks, bizarrely designed wedding halls and towering cement statues as high as skyscrapers, of Shiva in a cement leopard-skin loincloth with a cement cobra around his neck and a colossal Hanuman looming over a metro track. They drove over an impossible-to-pee-on

flyover as wide as a wheat field, with twenty lanes of cars whizzing over it and towers of steel and glass growing on either side of it. But when they took an exit road off it, they saw that the world underneath the flyover was an entirely different one – an unpaved, unlaned, unlit, unregulated, wild and dangerous one, in which buses, trucks, bullocks, rickshaws, cycles, handcarts and pedestrians jostled for survival. One kind of world flew over another kind of world without troubling to stop and ask the time of the day. (Roy 2017: 409)

Whereas in other parts of the novel, some districts of Delhi are seen as “the Garden City with lush, landscaped roundabouts” (Roy 2017: 303), here, the marked presence of adjectives and phrases operating as world-builders delineates a human context increasingly occupying the territory through its technological apparatuses (‘apartment buildings’, ‘metro track’, ‘flyover’) as signaled by the frequent repetition of the word ‘cement’. The cognitive design of such a world benefits from some items taken from the domain of nature (‘dense forest’, ‘wheat field’) but is also affected by the idea of negation, which is introduced by the adversative adverb ‘but’ to create contrastive images, and which underpins an alternative sub-world, for instance through morphologically negative elements such as ‘unpaved’, ‘unlaned’, and ‘unregulated’ as well as the atypical collocation ‘wild’ for a motorway. In order to fully access this type of scenario, readers draw on their schematic knowledge of pavement, lanes, and highways and then proceed to negate these very features, thus producing two binary mental spaces and a type of lacuna effect (Stockwell 2009: 31–35), i.e. a conceptual gap that the novelist utilizes to foreground the derelict conditions of Delhi’s periphery and its multiple inhabitants. Although the extract does not essentially present human characters, some enactors suggest human agency, for example with regard to movement (‘rickshaws’, ‘cycles’, ‘pedestrians’) as well as animal force (‘bullocks’). It is a maneuver that synthesizes the social and environmental contradictions of the Indian megalopolis and that ascribes a sense of marginality because “the people and the spaces that Roy includes in the literary and the narrative space of her novel are mostly those that the construct of a hegemonic nation state will often exclude” (Talwar 2020: 261). Rather than a glimpse of ‘shining’ India, Roy displays a counter-narrative of dissidence and suggests the coterminous existence of precarious worlds, which are populated by liminal subjects.

Put differently, spatial representation is not a mere panoramic act but is of paramount importance in problematizing and politicizing questions of identity, belonging, and being, and in order to unpack such a strategy, I investigate the depiction of a particular type of place, namely the graveyard. In her essays, Roy (2014, 2020) herself has pointed out the symbolic, social, and environmental role of graveyards: although in India death practices frequently turn around cremation (e.g. in Hinduist mourning rites), graveyards are used by some specific religious communities such as Muslims and Christians. Along with their natural

components (plants and animals), cemeteries also suggest social aspects of ghettoization since they serve as shelters for the destitute and the homeless, therefore standing out as heterotopian spaces, from a Foucauldian perspective (Essa 2021). In fact, graveyards are not simply sites of burial, but with their loaded meaning, in balance between locality and temporality, they become indicators of Otherness, a dimension typically stigmatized by mainstream society. Not only this: the author explicitly associates graveyards, which in cognitive terms function as schemas for SADNESS and DEATH, with the natural attractiveness of Kashmiri valleys and fields, through a disorientating and somehow even disturbing form of antithesis: “Kashmir, the land of the living dead and the talking graves – city graves, village graveyards, mass graves, unmarked graves, double-decker graves. Kashmir, whose truth can only be told in fiction – because only fiction can tell about air that is so thick with fear and loss, with pride and mad courage, and with unimaginable cruelty” (Roy 2020: 188). The quotation projects common images borrowed from fantasy and horror films onto the landscape (‘land of the living dead’), but also adds the unconventional expression ‘talking graves’ to map out the link between life and non-life, one in which agency is attributed to objects as a reminder of human violence. The connection between the human and the non-human is also rendered with the reference to ‘air’, which appears to be saturated with negative feelings, thus marking the pervasiveness of danger and anxiety.

The same type of characterization of the graveyard, and space in general, appears almost *verbatim* in the sections of the novel that follow the fighting between the Indian army and the insurgents in Kashmir: “graveyards became as common as the multi-storey parking lots that were springing up in the burgeoning cities in the plains. When they ran out of space, some graves became double-deckered, like the buses in Srinagar that once ferried tourists between Lal Chowk and the Boulevard” (Roy 2017: 319). The first text-world here at play sets the scene and highlights the results of war, namely the proliferation of dead bodies, as Kashmir’s beautiful nature (‘plains’) is replaced by urban references (‘parking lots’). However, the time adverb ‘when’ endorses a new text-world, in which the very idea of the environment is rewritten and gives way to a postmodern, almost apocalyptic devastation. Along with many other types of places, the graveyard acquires conceptual prominence for Roy, because it designates “an in-between space where the being undergoes a transition, a space that symbolizes the overlapping of two worlds” (Talwar 2020: 260). Engrained in the text, it essentially operates as a sort of extended metaphor (Gavins 2007: 149–152), which constantly brings to the fore the contrast between life and non-life, and also alludes to precarity and crisis. The role of focus of consciousness attributed to cemeteries is underlined even graphologically and semiotically since “the front cover of *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* for Penguin Random House is a black and white

(perhaps marble) tombstone – setting the stage for the novel’s scenes in graveyards – on which lies a single, tiny red (perhaps slightly desiccated) flower” (Lau and Mendes 2022: 107).

Designed as thematizing tropes, in the narrative burial sites enact various figurative devices: “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). From an ecostylistic angle, this passage is noteworthy because it relies on the vocabulary of nature through a number of nouns (e.g. ‘streams and rivers’), which drastically clash with the defamiliarizing simile (‘like children’s teeth’) employed to speak about the rising number of tombs. Prototypically, the mental schema of the graveyard activates images of sufferance and gloom, but in reality, it constitutes a pattern with multiple layers of meaning, referring to memory, identity, and belonging. On closer inspection, the very sense of the cemetery can also allude to a process of alteration of biological matter as life and death cohabit and interact in the same space: going beyond the general perception by which graveyards are associated with the end of existence, it can be argued that they can also be viewed as dynamic sites of interface with various forms of life, animals, and plants (Faizah 2021; Ferguson 2021). The author’s rhetorical treatment of such spaces is intended to favor the readers’ refresh of such schemas and evidence can be found at the very beginning of the novel:

She lived in the graveyard like a tree. At dawn she saw the crows off and welcomed the bats home. At dusk she did the opposite. Between shifts she conferred with the ghosts of vulture that loomed in her high branches. She felt the gentle grip of their talons like an ache in an amputated limb. She gathered they weren’t altogether unhappy at having excused themselves and existed from the story.

When she first moved in, she endured months of casual cruelty like a tree would – without flinching. She didn’t turn to see which small boy had thrown a stone at her, didn’t crane 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)

For Roy, picturing the cemetery involves reflecting on the very idea of places, observed as sites and texts, and their inhabitants as well, therefore sanctioning a holistic view of the biosphere. In introducing one of the main characters of the fiction, the hijra Anjum, initially simply evoked thanks to the cataphoric pronoun ‘she’, thus with an *in medias res* narration, the writer provides an embodied metaphorical vision of the main text-world, which is clued by the key simile presented in the first sentence (‘like a tree’), and reinforced in the second paragraph. Superficially, such conceptualization seems to convey the inability to move that characterizes a plant, unlike other forms of life, but in reality, it endorses an extension of sub-worlds. To access the unfolding of these sub-levels, readers have

to process three main aspects. Firstly, there is a human entity endowed with agency ('she' + verb in all sentences) mapped onto a non-mobile biological entity ('tree'). Secondly, the passage is enriched by various natural references through nouns, mainly the animals ('crows', 'bats', 'the ghosts of vulture') that populate the cemetery area, but also the vegetal world and the parts of the tree ('high branches', 'bark'). Thirdly, the senses in their tangible and intangible dimensions are foregrounded via reference to bodies and parts of bodies ('an amputated limb', 'neck'), as well as other perception items such as visual ('saw'), tactile ('felt the gentle grip') and auditory ('the music of her rustling leaves').

The use of trees in figurative language is consolidated and rather productive since such conceptual domain is at the base of a vast range of metaphors, devices, and proverbs. To discuss this type of configuration, Kövecses (2010: 126) brings in the conceptual pattern COMPLEX ABSTRACT SYSTEMS ARE PLANTS, which underpins many mappings related to social "organizations (such as companies), scientific disciplines, people, economic and political systems, human relationships, sets of ideas, and others", and whose linguistic realizations draw on the lexical fields of nature (e.g. with nouns such as 'seeds' and 'fruit', or verbs like 'prune' and 'germinate'). However, this image can be extended to life as well in order to represent various sides of human existence, thus blending the material (and environmental) with the abstract (and human).

For Roy, 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. Anjum's life is textually framed as a tree, an element that actually is endowed with sensory and corporeal power, as the function-advancers of the passage indicate perception ('saw', 'felt'), mental processes ('endured') and actions ('moved in', 'didn't crane'). With its self-supporting trunk, a tree is often viewed as a passive entity, but here it is metaphorically reimagined as a dynamic form of life, which is not only able to resist but also to act within a social landscape of intolerance and persecution, for example with the verb phrases in the last sentence ('let the hurt blow', 'used the music'). The tree simile in fact allows Roy to amplify the notion of diversity because, as an exponent of Otherness by virtue of her gendered identity, Anjum is marginalized and detested. The social discrimination against her is embodied in an environmental perspective since it takes the form of abusive writing carved by people on her 'bark' (her skin), and thus the violence against the tree materially and symbolically alludes to the violence inflicted to the human, in an unbalanced relation between the various segments of the biosphere. Remarkably, the poetics of trees is relevant for postcolonial authors (Concilio and Fargione 2021), in particular those from India, for example in the case of Sumana Roy's *How I Became a Tree*

(2017), a peculiar non-fictional text that speaks about women as trees, tree diagrams, tree installations and many other conceptual and linguistic realizations. Recently, Ghosh (2022) too, whose commitment to the environment emerges in his essays *The Great Derangement* (2016) and *The Nutmeg's Curse* (2021), has adopted the reference to trees to further the question of the relation between the human and the non-human, in particular with regard to the issue of communication and voice, and has encouraged a rethinking of ontological concepts and terminological labels.

5 Conclusion

It should be clear that in this article, given the thematic and stylistic complexity of Arundhati Roy's discourse on society and the environment, I have only scratched the surface of the linguistic resources that characterize the fabric of her prose. By incorporating into her works places as diverse as rivers, gardens, and graveyards, the writer manages to broaden the idea of the environment to situate all forms of life and their complex and constant dynamics of interaction. Accordingly, the very notion of anthropocentrism (Garrard 2004: 20–23) has to be reinterpreted and revised since humans are not the only, or primary, figures of moral standing and nature is not simply ancillary to human societies, and clearly this has repercussions on language as well, especially in its capacity to forge meaning, construct text-worlds and spread messages. As Saxena (2022: 147) affirms, for a writer like Roy, “English carries the sound of traumatized landscape and offers mediations of a counter-history”: the way in which she constructs the textual architecture of places, in fact, is a means to reclaiming a new configuration of the environment, in which all ecosystems are recognized, in particular considering their interrelatedness.

The various extracts from Roy's literary and non-literary prose that I have looked at in this contribution are revelatory of the author's ecological attitude, political beliefs, and committed activism, thanks to devices like point of view, figurative language, and defamiliarization. The sequences from *GST* flesh out various places and their identities, values, and meanings: they convey the perspective of young characters, such as Rahel and Estha, and their complex relationship with the environment as a benign site to exorcise fears and uncertainties, but they can also signpost an authoritative trait of the human upon the non-human, as in the case of Baby Kochamma and her patronizing behavior towards plants and flowers. Instead, *MUH* seems to offer a more complex depiction of the environment because Roy challenges the reader to review their vision of elements such as graveyards, which are natural sites of life and death, sometimes with an additional sociopolitical value, and trees, which in spite of their apparent immobility are living entities, exactly as the hijra Anjum, and as such bring to the

fore the question of identity. The findings of the investigation disclose a broader view of the environment, one in which the relation between the human and the non-human is complementary rather than competitive, in an articulated system of correspondences. In this light, human societies, spanning questions of precarity and marginality too, are only one possible segment of the conceptual shape of ecology, and therefore, it is imperative to advocate a fresh rethinking of life on the planet.

The ecostylistic investigation I have proposed here aids in delving into Roy's discourses and texts, and their power to exhibit "the contemporary sensitive and critical socio-political cosmos of India" (Mustafa and Chaudhry 2019: 505), which specifically allude to her concern for the environment and span both the human and the non-human. An important dual metaphor seems to emerge from the author's writing, condensing various meanings and references. The figurative pattern PLACE IS TEXT in fact is also indebted to the domains of architecture and narrative, provides a range of inputs that sustain the articulation of multiple text-worlds, and draws attention to the various forms of life, even in chaotic spaces, in which "whole other cities and city-stories will make themselves known" because it is possible to encounter "crow conferences, street-dogs conclaves, horse confabulations, monkey madness".⁶ In reality, the metaphor may lend itself to a reversed structure whereby not only places are mapped as palimpsests onto which one can write narratives and build discourses, but also texts can evoke and illustrate places and the environment. The final result pinpoints the complexity of the conceptual figuration of the environment and its many actors. For Stibbe (2015: 8), "language, culture, human cognition, stories and texts play a role in human ecology to the extent that they influence human behavior, and hence the ways that humans interact with each other and the larger natural world", and consequently it becomes vital to consider the narratives that deal with the various components of the environment. The places that emerge from Roy's prose, from the watery landscape of Kerala and Medusa-like Delhi to the funeral sites of Kashmir, cumulatively convey a conative force, in the hope of challenging readers to act for a better world, in which all ecosystems are fully considered and vertical hierarchies give way to rhizomatic relations of equivalence and respect.

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