Dominic O'Key

The Sixth Extinction and Postcolonial Literature: Dairy Production, Vulture Extinction, and Arundhati Roy's *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*

ABSTRACT This chapter reflects on the relationship between postcolonial literature and mass extinction. To do so, I begin by situating the current worldwide loss of biodiversity within the context of the wider planetary crisis of climate change. I then explicate the concepts of 'extinction' and 'mass extinction' before juxtaposing them both with the recent scientific development of the 'Sixth Extinction' thesis, which posits that we are living through a human-induced, or as I call it *socially produced*, mass extinction event. From here, the chapter turns to the Indian subcontinent, examining one local example of the Sixth Extinction in process: the rapid decline of India's vulture species across the past three decades. Finally, the chapter ends with a close reading of Arundhati Roy's *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* (2017), a novel which begins with—and is thus framed by—this story of vulture extinction. I argue that Roy's novel, while self-consciously electing to 'notice' the vultures' passing, also casts doubt on the power of literary noticing as such, thus declining to valorize storytelling as a response to mass extinction.

KEYWORDS Arundhati Roy, postcolonial literature, the Sixth Extinction

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Monday 9 August, 2021. Wildfires rush through Southern Europe and Siberia. In America, a red tide sweeps up the Florida coast after a toxic breach at a phosphate plant.

The day I sit down to start writing this chapter turns out to also be the day that the IPCC, the United Nation's Intergovernmental Panel on Climate

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Change, releases its latest major report. Titled *Climate Change 2021: the Physical Science Basis*, the report assesses and synthesizes the most up-to-date findings on the scientific knowledge of climate systems. Researched and written by a working group of over 100 volunteer scientists, the report offers the headline conclusion that it is "unequivocal that human influence has warmed the atmosphere, ocean and land. Widespread and rapid changes in the atmosphere, ocean, cryosphere and biosphere have occurred" (IPCC 2021, 4).

Despite the document's passive syntax and bureaucratic language, it is striking just how directly it confronts both the actually existing and projected impacts of climate change. Published with an eye towards COP 26, the pandemic-delayed UN climate summit in Glasgow, held in Autumn 2021, the report emphasizes that climate change is already transforming life as we know it: it is intensifying the water cycle and warping rainfall patterns, producing flooding in some places and droughts in others; melting the ice caps and permafrost, leading to sea level rises and coastal erosion; its marine heatwaves are starving the seas of oxygen, damaging ocean ecosystems, and creating difficulties for the communities whose livelihoods rely on them. Carbon dioxide levels are today at their highest point for 2 million years. Greenhouse gases, pumped into the air through the burning of fossil fuels, are destabilizing the environmental conditions which have facilitated the rise of human civilizations. In Paris in 2015, at COP 21, governments established the goal of keeping global warming below 1.5°C above pre-industrial levels. Six years on from these much-vaunted accords, the IPCC's 2021 report suggests that it is increasingly likely that global temperatures will breach 2°C during this century.

Since it is a report on earth systems and climate futures, written mostly for policymakers, I am not reading this document expecting to find much on biodiversity. Such work will surely appear later, when the IPCC publishes its more expansive and exhaustive Synthesis Report in 2022. But there is an important moment in this text, almost hidden amongst the full report's 4,000 pages, in which the working group points out that "the rate, scale, and magnitude of anthropogenic changes in the climate system since the mid-twentieth century" will have profound effects on ecological relations. These "anthropogenic changes," the authors write, are triggering "chemical and biological changes in the Earth system such as rapid ocean acidification due to uptake of anthropogenic carbon dioxide, massive destruction of tropical forests, a worldwide loss of biodiversity and the sixth mass extinction of species" (Chen et al. 2021, 161). In a word, then, the climate crisis precipitates a biodiversity crisis.

2

Tuesday 10 August. The conservation website *Mongabay* runs a profile of the buffy-headed marmoset (*Callithrix flaviceps*), a kitten-sized fungus-eating primate of Brazil's Atlantic Forest (Hance 2021). The marmosets are struggling. Reportedly down to just 2,500 individuals, they are now listed as critically endangered by the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN). The reasons for their decline? Climate change, deforestation, and the ravages of yellow fever; but also, and crucially, the exotic pet trade. Not that the buffy-headed marmosets are themselves prized species for trading and pet-keeping. Rather, it is the other marmoset species—like the common and black-tufted-ear marmoset—that are frequently captured, sedated with alcohol, taken to markets, and sold to unsuspecting customers who only later realize that these are distressed and displaced wild beings, not docile, domesticated pets. Shocked, people release the angry marmosets into nearby forests. As the freed marmosets mingle with their buffy-headed cousins, their contact intensified by the forest's shrinking land-mass, they set in motion processes of genetic hybridization that breed out the distinctive features of both species. Conservationists warn that, without the intervention of captive-breeding programs, the buffy-headed marmoset will vanish in just a few generations. This is why Vanda Felbab-Brown describes wildlife trafficking as an "extinction market" (2017, 8)—not only are the exotic pet trade's systems of value predicated on extinction and endangerment as forms of scarcity, but its everyday reproduction as an informal supply chain also accelerates extinctions elsewhere, down the line and out of clear sight.

The buffy-headed marmoset's decline is symptomatic of what the IPCC describes above as "a worldwide loss of biodiversity and the sixth mass extinction of species." This is the theory that our planet is currently experiencing a staggering drop-off in biological diversity—of fungal, plant, and animal wildlife—in relation to the Earth's geological time (O'Key 2023, 169). To wrap our heads around this idea, though, we must first understand the two primary ways in which extinction concomitantly animates and deanimates life. First, undergirding all biotic processes on Earth is a 'natural' rate of species loss. This endemic 'background' rate is thought to be integral for new speciations, the unmaking and re-making of lifeways (Jablonski 1986, 129; Wang 2003, 455). Second, the Earth has experienced five major spikes in extinction over the past half a billion years, five mass extinction events in which planetary processes transformed quicker than species could adapt. What unites these five great die-offs is that they are all fundamentally natural or incidental. Predating *Homo sapiens*, they were

caused by intrinsic Earth processes (rises in oxygen levels, toxic algae blooms) and exogenous shocks, like the asteroid that cascaded into the Earth's surface 66 million years ago (Alvarez et al. 1980). The age of complex evolutionary life on Earth is also the age of extinction.

But since the 1980s, more and more scientists have sounded the alarm over a new global crisis in biodiversity (Sepkoski 2020, 3). In the 1990s, E. O. Wilson and then Richard Leakey and Roger Lewin first started describing this as the "Sixth Extinction" (Wilson 1992, 32; Leakey and Lewin 1995, 232), a term that has since been popularized by Elizabeth Kolbert's Pulitzer Prize-winning 2014 book of the same name. The term suggests a continuation of the Earth's previous catastrophic events, but at the same time it denotes a distortion, perhaps even a breaking, of the idea of 'extinction' itself. That's because the reasons for this mass extinction event are not, as before, incidental but, rather, systematized social decisions and actions that, by reorganizing the wild directly and indirectly, culminate in atmospheric and ecological upheavals. The Intergovernmental Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services writes that, due to what it euphemistically calls "human-induced changes" such as habitat reduction, climate change, monocropping, and over-fishing, biodiversity is now "declining faster than at any time in human history" (IPBES 2019, 10). Our World in Data puts it that, if the current estimates on biodiversity loss are accurate, then "we're not only losing species at a much faster rate than we'd expect, we're losing them tens to thousands of times faster than the rare mass extinction events in Earth's history" (Ritchie and Roser 2021). Such distress signals pertain only to what is currently known and measurable to science. A mid-to-low estimate suggests that there are around 8 million species on earth; yet only 2 million of these are officially recorded. Today's conservation red lists, classificatory adjustments, and extinction announcements are thus no more than the tip of the extinction iceberg (Purvis n.d.). What is known about the Sixth Extinction, then, is that it concerns the loss of what remains unknown. It names the loss not just of charismatic species like the buffy-headed marmoset but also the continents of unrecorded and unrecognized critters who each play their role in shaping planetary life.

3

Wednesday 11 August. For decades, Sierra Nevada's red foxes have suffered from the combined impacts of poisoning, trapping, and habitat loss due to logging and livestock grazing. Yet now, after years of campaigning by conservation and environmental activists, the red fox has been formally

recognized as endangered by the US Fish and Wildlife Service. In another part of the world, a new study explains that, if the Antarctic sea ice continues to melt, emperor penguin colonies will become quasi-extinct by the end of the century (Jenouvrier et al. 2021).

Are these two events truly part of the same story of planetary de-wilding? Do they really constitute a mass extinction event in the technical sense of the term? Some scientists think not. David Jablonski, for instance, cautions that just because we are witnessing an intensification of the estimated natural background rate of species loss, this does not necessarily mean that we are entering an entirely distinct "macroevolutionary regime" in geological history (Jablonski 1986, 129; see also Raup and Sepkoski 1982). Elsewhere, David Sepkoski (2020) observes that the current calculations of global species decline may ultimately depend on and extrapolate from an estimated background rate that has itself been called into question for its small sample size (222, 269). If the natural background rate is unrepresentative, then how are we to assess the severity of the current spike?

Plus, there is no easy way to date the beginning of the Sixth Extinction. Just like the continuing debates on the Anthropocene and the Capitalocene, it remains an open question as to when the processes of global deforestation and defaunation really began: some would argue that it began with the invention of tool use, which catapulted *Homo sapiens* proper to the apex of the food chain; or with the new agricultures and sedentary food production methods of pre-industrial settled societies; or with the European conquest of the Americas and the inception of colonialism; or with the Industrial Revolution, the formal development of a modern capitalist political economy, and the widespread transition from 'formal' to 'real' subsumption, as new technologies made possible a thoroughgoing mastery of what was once wild (Vettese 2020).

Just like the concept of the Anthropocene, then, the Sixth Extinction has two lives, "a scientific life involving measurements and debates among qualified scientists, and a more popular life as a moral-political issue" (Chakrabarty 2021, 158). Where critics ultimately draw the line and declare the tipping point depends as much, if not more, on their strategic ideological disposition than on any scientific findings themselves. But wherever we end up dating the inception of the Sixth Extinction—two, five, or ten centuries ago—the fact remains that the global biodiversity crisis has worsened significantly since the Second World War, in the aftermath of the period known as the 'great acceleration.' The great acceleration saw an exponential increase in primary energy and fertilizer usage, urban populations and consumer goods, real GDP, international transportation and logistics networks, and far-reaching land-use changes that have become

the leading cause of habitat loss (Steffen, Crutzen, and McNeill 2007). According to the World Wide Fund for Nature and the Zoological Society of London, there has been "an average 68 % decrease in population sizes of mammals, birds, amphibians, reptiles and fish between 1970 and 2016" (WWF 2020, 6). There is little argument among researchers that something profound is happening. "What most observers seem to agree on," Sepkoski writes, "is that we have, in fact, crossed a threshold in which species loss and climate change have reached irreversible proportions" (2020, 232).

The Sixth Extinction thus remains useful as a concept because it names a *historical* extinction event or, better, a *natural–historical extinction*: an unnatural rendering of a previously natural event, a social and economic articulation of an organic process, in which some people's decisions about how to live in the world have required a significant reorganization of nature and depletion of the wild. Rather than simply indicating a continuation with the Earth's prior extinction events, then, the Sixth Extinction designates the first socially produced global unravelling of ecologies. It stands as a comparative term, one that helps make sense of modernity's impacts on the planet through an analogy to the five previous natural disasters that once strangled the Earth. The scientific literature suggests to us that modernity has been like an asteroid smashing into the planet's surface.

4

Thursday 19 August. India is home to numerous vulture species: the slender-billed, the white-rumped, the long-billed, and more. Or at least it *was*. The Bombay Natural History Society estimates that, in the 1990s, during India's economic liberalization under the premiership of the neoliberal reformist P. V. Narasimha Rao, the country's Gyps vulture populations plummeted by up to 97 percent (Swan et al. 2006). When biologists closely observed the ailing birds, asking why it was that the vultures' heads were bowed and their postures slumped, their early hypotheses pointed to a novel infectious disease or the ingestion of environmental pollutants—pesticides, herbicides, and toxic metals. But the breakthrough came when researchers identified that an industrial veterinary painkiller used on livestock, the non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drug diclofenac, had links to visceral gout and kidney failure in bird populations.

Across the Indian subcontinent, hundreds of millions of cows and buffaloes are bred for their dairy, meat, and hides and trained to pull ploughs and carts (Narayanan 2023, 15–16). Annually, India raises more livestock

than any other country except China (McGrath 2007). But because cows are sacred animals, traditional practices meant that typically cows were not slaughtered but instead allowed to die 'naturally,' their lifeless bodies eventually taken to huge dump sites or the edges of villages and towns. There, the carcasses became the principal food source of vulture flocks. In just half an hour, a wake of 100 vultures can crowd round a cow carcass and strip it clean (McGrath 2007). It is widely understood that vultures occupy an important ecological role in Southeast Asia: in their feasting they produce clean bones for fertilizer, limit feral dog and rat populations, and act as buffers for the possible spread of pathogens from cow to dog to human.

This socio-ecological network of human—cow production and vulture—cow consumption was intensified during the so-called 'livestock revolution' of the 1980s and 90s. This was a period of rapid worldwide increase in the mass consumption and production of livestock, a feature of the great acceleration, in which cattle farming in historically low-income societies like India became more extensive, more centralized, and more technologized. The term 'livestock revolution' was coined by the UN's International Food Policy Research Institute to explain the links between the increasing urbanization, population growth, and rising per capita incomes of developing nations like Brazil, China, and India on the one side, and the apparent demand-driven growth in livestock production on the other (Delgado et al. 2001). The livestock revolution was underpinned by structural transformations in global food supply chains, including the conglomeration of companies, the global integration of markets, increased subsidies by national governments, logistics coordination, and export-led industrialization. Part of what Mike Davis has called the "larger world conquest of agriculture by large-scale agro-capitalism" (Davis 2005, 155), the livestock revolution has, as might be expected, numerous adverse consequences for global agriculture, public health, individual livelihoods, and the wider environment.

In India in the 1990s, not only were more cows now being bred but their lives were being micro-managed to increase the efficiency and volume of production. One such measure was the application of diclofenac, a painkiller used up and down the country to medicate dairy cows against the everyday discomforts of being farmed. The result? That between the early 1980s and late 1990s, per-capita total milk consumption in India almost doubled (Khan and Bidabadi 2004, 108). India's booming dairy sector became increasingly predicated, Yamini Narayanan argues, "on the cyclical slaughter of 'surplus' cows, bulls, buffaloes, and calves" (2023, 46), so much so that, today, India stands as the world's leading exporter of cow meat, despite boasting that it rears no cows specifically for beef. Cows

are legally protected by constitutional articles and strict federal laws; cow slaughter is formally penalized by imprisonment and informally punished by politicized cow vigilantes. Across the country, thousands of shelters, or *gaushala*, purport to usher older and abandoned dairy cows towards a 'natural' death; yet there is also a system of small-scale abattoirs that ignores the country's official cow devotion, recycling the discards of the dairy industry to produce beef for the global meat market.

There is, though, an environmental catch. Dairy carcasses thrown to the vultures were laced with high-levels of diclofenac. When the vultures came to scavenge on the piles of dairy cow bodies, therefore, they were eating contaminated meat (van Dooren 2014, 46). Their numbers plummeted. The near-extinction of vultures is thus a cost of the livestock revolution, the result of industrialized cow slaughter, dairy production, and food poisoning. Since this discovery, a coalition of scientific and advocacy groups have sought to prevent the vultures' extinction. They have argued that, because vultures help to prevent zoonotic spillover, their sudden decline—one of the fastest collapses of bird populations ever recorded—is a concern for public health as much as it is biodiversity conservation. In 2006, campaigners won a hard-fought victory in the Indian courts, securing a nationwide ban on the veterinary sale of diclofenac. Yet, 15 years later, researchers would discover that diclofenac remains not just in use but prevalent throughout India, accounting for up to 46 percent of all livestock anti-inflammatories in circulation (Galligan et al. 2021). Scientists continue to petition for diclofenac's complete prohibition, as well as the banning of other drugs, such as aceclofenac, ketoprofen, and nimesulide, that are still free to use on livestock and have also been proven to harm vultures (Nambirajan et al. 2021). And they continue to run managed captive breeding programmes for vultures across the country, which are slowly reintroducing vultures back into the semi-wild protected areas of nature reserves. Today, after two decades of work, conservationists in West Bengal are releasing eight more captive-bred white-rumped vultures into the wild (Ayyar 2021).

5

Thus far in this contribution, I have focused my analysis primarily on the scientific understanding of extinction. In Part 1, I situated the current worldwide loss of biodiversity within the context of the planetary crisis of climate change. Then, in Part 2, I explained the concepts of 'extinction' and 'mass extinction' before juxtaposing them with the recent development of

the 'Sixth Extinction' thesis. Part 3 problematized this very idea, explaining how the scientific bases for calculating the Sixth Extinction—such as the natural background rate, the current spike in rates, and its date of inception—remain heavily debated. But with a keen awareness of the cultural circulation of 'extinction' as a concept, I then suggested that the idea of the 'Sixth Extinction' is ultimately as much an ethical and political question as it is a technical–scientific one. What matters is not, in the final analysis, whether we truly are living through a totally new macroevolutionary regime of species loss, but whether there is a clear, evidenced global decline in biodiversity. Because this is the case, it becomes both morally and strategically advantageous to make use of the 'Sixth Extinction.' Part 3 therefore emphasized the need to scrutinize, yet also hold onto, the idea of the Sixth Extinction as an explanatory tool and politically strategic phrase.

In Part 4, I turned to the Indian subcontinent, examining the rapid decline of vulture species across the past two decades, suggesting that this event can be understood as an ongoing example of the Sixth Extinction. The story of India's critically endangered Gyps vultures makes for a compelling and complicated test case when thinking, as this book does, about the relationship between science, culture, and the postcolonial. For one of the crucial things that this story highlights is how the postcolonial state's nation-building and developmentalism—its modernization through uneven development—goes hand-in-hand with socio-ecological upheavals that dramatically alter and impoverish long-standing ecosystems. Here, the administration of painkilling drugs to cows in the name of greater efficiency and higher volumes in dairy production—a national staple for modernization but also part of a wider trend in global animal agriculture in late capitalism—can be understood as the undoing of an interspecies settlement.

But what I haven't yet done is connect these thoughts on science, culture, and postcoloniality to the role, or problem, of narrative. Or at least, I haven't done so directly. Throughout this essay, I have been writing in a deliberate style and tone, one which seeks to mediate scientific knowledge while also placing something of myself—my own experiences while crafting this chapter—into the construction and argumentation of the text. With each preceding section, beginning as they do with dispatches from the frontlines of extinction, I have wanted to stay true to the conjuncture in which I write, to construct an essay on extinction in light of the continual stream of information that shapes my perspective on global biodiversity loss. What I have been attempting to do in these pages, therefore, is to express something of my own personal relationship to extinction at the very moment in which I am writing about it professionally. And if

this experiment has been at all successful, if the reader is still here now, following this sentence, then perhaps this is a testament to the uniquely compelling work of narration itself.

This essay's attempt to narrate extinction has been informed by extinction studies, a growing field of environmental humanities research that, in its commitment to interrogating "the plural phenomena and entangled significance of extinction" (Chrulew and De Vos 2019, 24), argues that the endangerment of one species marks a process of collective loss, an undoing of co-evolutionary networks and intergenerational lineages. Extinction studies essays are often written in a meditative first-person style that combines analysis and affect, science and culture, the objective and the subjective. Balancing the introspective anecdote with academic citations, essays in extinction studies aspire above all to a form of storytelling that can, in their words, "bear witness" to the Sixth Extinction (van Dooren and Rose 2016, 89). Scholars like Thom van Dooren and Deborah Bird Rose have argued that it is through storytelling—thought of as a kind of ecological witnessing and articulated attentiveness—that readers can be drawn into new connections with and responsibilities to the world.

Yet this essay also emerges out of a methodological and literary-critical frustration with extinction studies' conception of storytelling: first, because it risks uncritically privileging storytelling as a site of individual ethical development, measuring the adequacy of our response to mass extinction in terms of our personal feeling for it; and second, because it leaves undertheorized the question of narrative itself as a fundamentally *literary* act. This is why, in the final part of this chapter, I will turn towards fiction itself. By exploring the work of literary narrative, and doing so *through* the work of interpretation—that is, the analytical re-narration of literary narration itself—I will ultimately focus on how fiction can critically engage with the Sixth Extinction. Yet the text I have chosen to focus on here does not valorize storytelling as a commensurate response to extinction, as extinction studies does. It instead thematizes its own inadequacies, declining to privilege the story as an ethical answer to biodiversity loss.

6

So how might one articulate, within literature, the plight of India's vultures? Which modes of description, which forms and styles, can be harnessed in order to express the social processes behind biodiversity loss? To reformulate this in more general terms: how might writers write the Sixth Extinction? And in what ways do postcolonial literary works in particular

grapple with the rapid, sociogenic extinction of our fellow creatures? I wish to approach this problem by homing in on just one text, one recent postcolonial novel that, through its specific articulation of the Sixth Extinction, offers a complex example of the combination of science and postcolonial narratives. I am speaking here of Arundhati Roy's much-anticipated second novel, *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* (2017).

In what follows, I will perform a close reading that concentrates especially on *The Ministry*'s opening page, arguing that this is a novel that is fundamentally *framed by* the Sixth Extinction. I will reveal how the text's plotted action takes place, and its wider thematics are situated, in a world typified by and cast in the shadow of the sudden socially produced decline of India's vultures. *The Ministry* is located, to put this in Roy's own words, in a place "where old birds go to die" (Roy 2017, 3). Throughout my analysis, I will suggest that the novel bears witness to species extinctions as a symptom of India's contemporary political situation. Roy's novel dramatizes the new political alliance between neoliberalism and Hindu nationalism, challenging both from a decidedly environmental perspective.

Let me begin by noting that, looked at on the surface, *The Ministry* is by no means a novel that appears preoccupied with mass extinction. Addressed at the outset to "the Unconsoled," *The Ministry* is principally concerned with the "price for Progress" (Roy 2017, 99) in an India that, since the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)'s electoral victory in 2014, has been under the thumb of right-wing strongman Narendra Modi. The BJP's authoritarian nationalism sees India as what Banu Subramanian calls an "archaic modernity": "rather than characterize Hinduism as ancient, nonmodern, or traditional, the Hindu nationalists have embraced capitalism, Western science, and technology as elements of a modern, Hindu nation" (Subramanian 2019, 7). Modi's majoritarian state is built out of the amalgamation of "national pride and long-held aspirations of the global recognition of India as a world power" (Chatterji et al. 2019, 11). *The Ministry* responds, through the resources of fiction, to this conjuncture of Indian politics; its major plot points revolve around the marginalized and outcast subjectivities of contemporary India, the state's authoritarian turn, the ongoing military occupation of Kashmir, and the widespread political embrace of capitalist–industrial modernity.

But the novel also has an inarguable environmental consciousness, as one might expect from Roy, who has spent the almost two decades since the publication of *The God of Small Things* writing about the interrelation between social movements and environmental issues and advocating on behalf of those communities dispossessed by dam-building projects. Roy portrays India, and Delhi in particular, as undergoing a rapid

American-style industrialization in which landscapes and ecosystems are dramatically remade and commodified. All that is solid melts into air as factories replace forests and spring water is packaged up for sale:

> Skyscrapers and steel factories sprang up where forests used to be, rivers were bottled and sold in supermarkets, fish were tinned, mountains mined and turned into shining missiles. Massive dams lit up the cities like Christmas trees. Everyone was happy.
> 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, 98)

By addressing her novel to the "Unconsoled," then, Roy nods—as I have written elsewhere (O'Key 2022, 167)—to the losers of neoliberal globalization: to the capital city's poorest, whose homes are flattened by bulldozers imported from Australia, and to the environment itself, now leaden with the "smog and mechanical hum of the city" (101).

Roy's writing has frequently been read in line with the theories of an 'environmentalism of the poor.' As Pablo Mukherjee points out in *Postcolonial Environments* (Mukherjee 2010, 82), Roy cultivates a kind of humanism from below, which, by focusing on the contemporary displacements and dispossessions of tribal, peasant, and proletarianized peoples, suggests a deep continuity between the postcolonial present and the imperial past. The quotation above certainly appears to endorse such a reading. When Roy writes that "millions of people were being moved, but nobody knew where to" (2017, 98), she trains her attention on both a new population of internally displaced refugees and the naïve citizens of the polis who remain unaware, a 'nobody' who are also the country's politically recognized somebodies.

Yet in *The Ministry,* Roy's humanism also extends, in concrete and meaningful ways, to other species. When Tilo, one of the novel's two main characters, tours the smog-hazed city, she is struck by a spectacle of horrors at the busy zoo. Visitors throw litter into enclosures. A Bornean gibbon clings on to a tree "as though his life depended on it." A hippo swims in a "scummy pond" full of plastic bottles, empty cigarette packets, and razor blades flicked by a "knot of noisy young men." The zoo claims to house a number of exotic snakes, sambar deer, and a Siberian tiger, but these animals are nowhere to be seen. "Most of the birds in the aviary were ones you could see on the trees anyway. Bird scam," Tilo thinks, the word "scam" hinting at a link between the corruption of India's political classes and its wildlife industries (234–35). Within this India, Tilo intimates, nature is

being enclosed and then sold back to the citizen in bottles, tin cans, and zoo cages.

Later, Tilo considers how farmed animals are becoming genetically modified and turned into living factories. Pigs given growth hormones can no longer bear their own weight, "so heavy that [they] cannot stand up" (299). Gigantic trout require more feed than ever before. Tilo scoffs: "But perhaps this is the path to genuine modernity?" (299). Roy maintains this ironic tone as Tilo reflects on the poultry industry's attempts "to excise the mothering instinct in hens [...] Their goal, apparently, is to stop chickens wasting time on unnecessary things and thereby to increase the efficiency of egg production." Tilo wonders whether this efficiency-saving business model will be applied to the grief-stricken Maaji, "The Mothers of the Disappeared in Kashmir," who live—in the eyes of the prevailing ideology—as "inefficient, unproductive units, living on a mandatory diet of hopeless hope" (299–300). Here, Roy thematically joins together the battery-farming of India's hens with the anguish of Kashmiri mothers. The upshot is that the novel suggests that the work of care—performed by human and animal alike—is not cared for as work, that it sits in contradiction to the machinations of commodification and military occupation.

Upon its publication in 2017, *The Ministry* was met with lukewarm reviews. Roy's critics were, in the main, left unconvinced by her novel's length, polyphony, non-synchronism, episodic emplotment, authorial digressions, and diverse cast of minor characters (see Massie 2017 for an exemplary reaction). However, as Lorna Burns and Romy Rajan have each separately pointed out (2019, 134; 2021, 93), the novel's sheer scale is a deliberate choice, an attempt to gather together a variety of stories, characters, and literary techniques whose sheer multiplicity would register at once the heterogeneity of the Indian nation itself *and* its historically specific disintegration "as the saffron tide of Hindu Nationalism rises in our country like the swastika once did in another" (Roy 2017, 165). One might read *The Ministry's* self-consciously fragmentary style and polyphonic social panorama, then, as formal challenges to the ideologies of unity and authenticity circulated under the aegis of authoritarian Hindu nationalism. Or we might even say that, because Hindutva's fascistic promise of an undivided India is, in fact, premised on a further fragmentation of extant inequalities and grievances—the restriction of Muslim citizenship, the extension of police powers, deepening economic deprivation, worsening political disenfranchisement, and the incitement of communal violence—Roy's novel strives for a form of counter-fragmentation.

Yet this picture is complicated by the many ways in which Roy's novel also casts doubt on its own abilities, even emphasizing its failure, as

literature, to face up to the very crises it portrays. "I would like to write one of those sophisticated stories in which even though nothing much happens there's lots to write about," Tilo writes in a notebook. However: "That can't be done in Kashmir. It's not sophisticated, what happens here. There's too much blood for good literature" (283). In response to this passage, Filippo Menozzi has stressed that Roy, who published *The Ministry* after two decades of committed journalism and activism, is here directly concerned with fiction's "inability to represent a reality of suffering in full, and to right the wrongs being done in the real world" (2019, 201). This does not mean that Roy is rejecting literary narration as such. As Graham Huggan reminds us, even Roy's journalism and nonfictional essays often undermine their own "best arguments by drawing attention to [the prose] itself as a playful piece of highly literary investigative writing" (2004, 709). Just as Roy's nonfiction is informed by the literary, so too are her fictional works informed by a critical register. *The Ministry*, therefore, does not relinquish fictional modes of representation. Rather, it is a work that folds its suspicions of fictional writing—of aestheticizing violence into the digestibility and marketability of 'good literature'—into its very formal composition.

What Roy seems to be asking, then, is "How to tell a shattered story?" as she writes in the novel's final act; that is, how might a novel narrate Hindutva's shattering of an already shattered society? Roy has Tilo offer this answer: "By slowly becoming everybody. No. By slowly becoming everything" (436). We can read this as a meta-textual theorization of the novel's own formal style, in which "becoming everything" signals a narrative formalization of a panoramic and vertiginous standpoint, a systemic angle that maps space, surveys time, and follows the money. Roy's search for an 'everything' perspective begins from the novel's very first page. Here, she offers a short, scene-setting opening paragraph, typeset in italics, which functions as a preface for the novel that is due to unfold:

> At magic hour, when the sun has gone but the light has not, armies of flying foxes unhinge themselves from the Banyan trees in the old graveyard and drift across the city like smoke. When the bats leave, the crows come home. Not all the din of their homecoming fills the silence left by the sparrows that have gone missing, and the old white-backed vultures, custodians of the dead for more than a hundred million years, that have been wiped out. (Roy 2017, 1)

Roy tracks an ecological–industrial chain reaction, turning what begins as a sunset ceremony of urban wildlife (flying foxes, Banyan trees, bats,

crows) into a kind of witness statement to the extinction of vultures. The "custodians of the dead" are themselves being "wiped out." The paragraph continues:

> The vultures died of diclofenac poisoning. Diclofenac, cow-aspirin, given to cattle as a muscle relaxant, to ease pain and increase the production of milk, works—worked—like nerve gas on white-backed vultures. Each chemically relaxed, milk-producing cow or buffalo that died became poisoned vulture-bait. As cattle turned into better dairy machines, as the city ate more ice cream, butterscotch-crunch, nutty-buddy and chocolate chip, as it drank more mango milkshake, vultures' necks began to droop as though they were tired and simply couldn't stay awake. Silver beards of saliva dripped from their beaks, and one by one they tumbled off their branches, dead. Not many noticed the passing of the friendly old birds. There was so much else to look forward to. (Roy 2017, 1)

We move, then, from the artificially stimulated production of milk to the chemical poisoning of white-backed vultures. Through the paratactic repetition of the conjunction "as," Roy suggests that the forces of mass production and mass consumption are temporally and causally paralleled with extinction: the city functions, *en masse*, as an anthropomorphized "it" that acts on a scale far larger than the individual consumer. Roy thus begins *The Ministry* by mapping the ways in which the livestock revolution, as part of India's economic liberalization, hastens the Sixth Extinction. The novel's narrative form, of "becoming everything," thus glimpses the totality of sociogenic extinction. Through the present-to-past narrative temporality of the verbs "works—worked," Roy moves from life to death. Cows and white-backed vultures are dying so that the city's consumers can munch their way through dairy products.

The Ministry's opening fragment ends by stating that "not many noticed the passing of the friendly old birds. There was so much else to look forward to." How are we to read this? As further evidence of how the consumerist promises of a modernizing India ("more ice cream, butterscotch-crunch, nutty-buddy and chocolate chip") distract from its material destruction of ecological relations? Or perhaps this is Roy teasing her readers who, hungry for the first work of fiction in two decades by the Booker Prize-winning novelist, may be eager for this vulture vignette to end so that the novel proper can begin? Is it important, then, that the vultures' ending stands as the novel's beginning? That Roy situates her text in the liminal "magic hour" between a world of vultures and no vultures? The novel we read is framed by this "passing" of endangered life, and as the reader moves through the book they are invited to make an association between

the vultures and Roy's protagonist, Anjum, a transgender woman, or *Hijra*, an outcast who also lives in the graveyard, who struggles and persists in a society that consistently rejects her. Anjum and the vultures, then: old birds out of time and out of place, marginal and late figures living on the peripheries of a society that barely notices them.

Many people may have ignored the vultures' passing, Roy says. So she elects to be the one who notices, calling on her readers to notice with her. In doing so, she hints at vultures' important cultural and symbolic roles. They are "custodians of the dead" in the web of life, not just because they perch on trees above the graves but because, when they feast on carcasses, they convert lifeless bodies into new liveliness. By eating dead flesh they safeguard the souls of fallen animals. Who else will be able to turn death into life, Roy's opening fragment asks, when these creatures are gone? And who will shoulder the memory of the white-backed vultures now that they are caught in the extinction vortex?

Writing the Sixth Extinction thus means, in the first instance, *noticing it*. This is precisely what Roy does in *The Ministry*, a novel which, in its very noticing, articulates the structural links between society and environment, between humans and cows and vultures, and, thus, between mass consumption and mass extinction. At the same time, though, Roy refuses to romanticize the act of noticing. The end result is a work of postcolonial literature that ironically casts doubt on its own abilities to bear witness, that claims little more than a weak, or limited, narrative intervention. This formalized weakness becomes part of the novel's realism, meant in that doubled sense of a literary mode and a knowing, even cynical, pragmatism. Roy's return to fiction is thus full of ambivalence, complications, and messiness. And it is in this sense of an internal dissonance—a refusal to privilege storytelling as an ethical response, yet a commitment to storytelling nevertheless—that *The Ministry* fashions its own specific postcolonial negotiation of the Sixth Extinction: as custodian of the dead and dying.

ORCID®
Dominic O'Key https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2833-4999

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