

CHALLENGING LANGUAGE

A Study of ‘Opposition’ in Five Political Essays by Arundhati Roy

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Abstract – This article analyses linguistic opposition – from sounds to single terms to entire passages – as a shaping feature of Arundhati Roy’s non-fiction through the framework of opposition theory (Jeffries 2014). Building on previous studies, Jeffries takes the theory and practice of oppositeness in meaning-creation to innovative conclusions that hypothesise its key-role in human cognition, societies, and the construing work of language itself. I will concentrate on five representative political essays in Arundhati Roy’s collected volume of non-fiction *My Seditious Heart* (2019), with the goal of analysing Roy’s use of ‘opposites’ in her fiery criticism of the Indian government’s development projects and neocolonial policies. I will first relate Roy’s non-fiction to Jeffries’ insights, then focus on some key passages in Roy’s essays where oppositional structures are foregrounded, and finally draw some provisional conclusions in relation to structuralist stylistics.

Keywords: opposition theory; Arundhati Roy; *My Seditious Heart*; structuralist stylistics; political dissent.

*I am, apparently, what is known
in twenty-first-century vernacular
as a ‘writer-activist’. (Like a sofa bed).*
(A. Roy “The Ladies Have Feelings, So ... Shall
We Leave It to the Experts?”, 2019, p. 111)

1. Introduction

This article aims to analyse five political essays by Indian writer Arundhati Roy through the framework of opposition theory (Jeffries 2014). How does a stylistics approach help us read the language of Roy’s fiery opposition to the Indian government’s development projects and neocolonial policies, the target of Roy’s public political dissent since the late 1980s? And how does Roy’s phenomenally combative prose help us evaluate the lens that linguistics is offering us to closely read one of the core linguistic features of post/colonial writing, namely binary opposition, which, from lexical

antonymy through the stereotypical divides of colonial discourse, for nearly half a century has been the object of intense scholarly work?

The epigraph above, reporting Roy's famous reply to the attempt of diminishing her role and identity as political thinker, is an example of the way Jeffries' theory may help us look more closely at the way we construct oppositeness by triggering binary opposites, mutually exclusive terms, whereas in theory a wide gamut of possibilities is available. On the one hand, the Indian intelligentsia has used the epithet 'writer-activist' to diminish or even destroy the effectiveness of Roy's political action; on the other, Roy's has smartly responded to the dismissive appellation by comparing a 'writer-activist' to a 'sofa-bed', ironically pointing out how her thorough political commitment has been reduced to having an occasional secondary function – and even one that hardly serves its purpose – since you would rather sleep in a proper bed, i.e. rely on a proper politician, rather than on a mere 'activist', a term whose radical overtones, whose association with inordinate behaviour, is generally looked at with suspicion by public opinion (Dillet, Puri 2016, pp. 49-50).

What we also see if we read Roy's response a bit more extensively, is that she aptly employs oppositional gradation to depict this intermediate discursive terrain, proving that, as Jeffries claims, writers tend to be more subtle than politicians or ideologues in positioning themselves in sharp antagonistic situations, more able to articulate complexity (Jeffries 2014, pp. 97-109). In explaining why her public political commitment has aroused such direct attacks (because it is perceived as an invasion of the political stage where debate is reserved to professional politicians and media), Roy employs comparative structures (*what's worse, what's even worse*) and so enters the highly adversarial arena as through a stepped walkway:

I've been saddled with this double-barreled appellation, this awful professional label, not because my work is political but because in my essays, which are about very contentious issues, *I take sides. I take a position*. I have a point of view. *What's worse*, I make it clear that I think it's right and moral to take that position, and *what's even worse*, I use everything in my power to flagrantly solicit support for that position. Now, for a writer of the twenty-first century, that's considered a pretty uncool, unsophisticated thing to do. It skates uncomfortably close to the territory occupied by political party ideologues – a breed of people that the world has learnt (quite rightly) to mistrust. I'm aware of this. *I'm all for being circumspect. I'm all for discretion, prudence, tentativeness, subtlety, ambiguity, complexity*. I love the unanswered question, the unresolved story, the unclimbed mountain, the tender shard of an incomplete dream. *Most of the time*. (Roy 2019, p. 112, emphasis added)

While articulating her uncompromising political position, she fully describes the more complex ground that artists and writers usually live in, being keener on observing and depicting the indefinite middle ground between extremes,

made of irreducible and unresolved nuances, but which Roy the activist and human rights defender finally leaves behind decisively to position herself on the right-wrong platform of political opposition to the Indian state that has led to large-scale catastrophes for Indian citizens and the environment. In this complex political scenario, Roy has wittingly decided to join the public protest of many Indian intellectuals and ordinary citizens – if not unanimously appreciated (Ghosh 2015, pp. 163-165) – and therein enlist her powerful imaginative force.

2. Jeffries' opposition theory

Why is it that we are keen on using binary dualities in our daily social discourse and why is it that we are often unable to see that oppositional terms partake in a gamut of variables of which our drastic actualisations are but the choice of strong terms among several intermediate possibilities? These are two key questions at the core of Jeffries' study on opposition in discourse (2014) that Roy's prose indirectly addresses and helps answer.

Often considered as a sort of "catch-all category" (Simpson 1997: 72 quoted in Jones 2002: 2) and sometimes quite arbitrarily "labelled antonyms or binaries" (Jeffries 2014, p. 1), 'opposites' are classified by Jeffries according to four main categories: 1) complementary opposites (like *black* and *white*) in which the opposite pair relates by mutual exclusivity; 2) converses (like *teacher* and *pupil*) in which the 'opposite pair' relates by mutual dependence; 3) gradable opposites (like *easier than before*) in which the 'opposite pair' relates by gradeability; 4) reversive or directional opposites (like *up* and *down*) in which the 'opposite pair' relates by reversibility (Jeffries 2014, pp. 19-25).

In Jeffries' framework, the textual realisations of these 'opposites' is variously triggered by four types of syntactic structures: 1) negation and related negative structures, such as *x (not y)*; *x rather than y*; 2) repetitions or parallel structures that build a relation of similarity or contrast; 3) coordination, especially contrastive conjunctions such as *but* and *yet*; 4) comparatives that typically trigger the sense of a "paradoxical co-existence of opposites" (Jeffries 2014, pp. 33-55). Thus conceived, these types of 'opposites' are defined as 'unconventional', i.e., textual realisations which we understand as opposite because we instinctively associate them to related 'conventional opposites', which are better known because more commonly used. For instance, the *warm/chilly* opposition makes sense because we automatically relate it to the *hot/cold* conventional 'opposite pair' of which *warm/chilly* is a non-conventional variation.

Jeffries had already fully conceptualised her framework about ‘opposites’ in *Meaning in English* (1998), where she discussed ‘opposites’ and ‘antonyms’ as follows:

The word ‘antonymy’ is often used as the opposite of synonymy but we should be aware that [...] ‘real’ opposites would have nothing in common at all. This would not be a very close or useful relationship as a few examples can show. If we try to choose words that are as different as possible from words such as *cat*, *sing*, *palpitation*, *ringworm*, *gelatine*, we find ourselves thinking of words like *porcupine*, for *sing*, or *meditate* for *gelatine*. The answers are disparate – we do not agree on this kind of opposition – it is not culturally important and is therefore not enshrined in our vocabulary. What, then is opposition as found in vocabularies? Opposition is essentially a special kind of partial synonymy. Two words are partial synonyms when they share many of their components of meaning. For example, *pour* and *spill* share features like **movement of liquid + change of location + from solid container**, but they differ in one important cultural respect: *pour* is an intentional action whereas *spill* is unintentional. (Jeffries 1998, pp. 102-103)¹

In Jeffries’ theorisation, however, there seems to be an unresolved contradiction stemming from previous studies of ‘opposites’, especially D.A. Cruse’s *Lexical Semantics* (1986) and John Lyon’s *Semantics* (1977), which hypothesise a cognitive and physiological reason why humans readily use mutually exclusive complementary opposites rather than their intermediate near synonyms (Jeffries 2014, pp. 14-19). While recurrently pointing out that ‘opposites’ constructs are context-based, i.e. reflective of a community’s or an individual’s mindset, the contrary hypothesis is as recurrently made that ‘opposites’ in language may reflect both the binary structure of language in general as well as that of human cognition, so that the study of opposition could well lead to the discovery of universal laws.

It may well be – Jeffries proposes – that we innately rely on conventional antonymic pairs that are fixed in our ‘knowledge of the language’ and that activate the meaning of ‘on-off opposites’ whenever we use or need to decode them. Key to this hypothesis is a structuralist view of language that sees conventional opposite pairs as belonging to the stable core of the language, the *langue*, and the created non-conventional opposites as pertaining to usage, the *parole*. Oppositeness – Jeffries hypothesises – could

¹ According to Steven Jones, on the other hand, antonyms are “effectively a special kind of co-hyponyms. For example, *female* and *male* are both adjectives (or nouns), which define gender; *bad* and *good* are both quality-measuring attributes of a given concept, and so on. The word which has a maximum opposition with *happy* is not *unhappy* or *sad* (for they are both adjectives and they both describe one’s feelings); rather, it would be a word such as *cutlery*, which shares nothing in common with *happy*. By definition, antonyms have lots in common” (Jones 2002, p. 7).

be one more core process by which we construe the world through language besides those already theorised (see, for instance, Halliday, Matthiessen 2006), based on our supposed tendency to read reality through universal pairs of opposites.

Moreover, Jeffries adds the important observation that teachers and teaching materials typically emphasise polar extremes even though they could do otherwise and teach 'opposites' as partaking in a gamut of gradations:

At a fairly young age, children in English-speaking societies are introduced to opposites, usually via picture books or early books with barely more than one sentence on a page. [...] The first conclusion we can draw from this explicit teaching of opposites is that they are clearly conventional, rather than absolute relationships, if they need to be taught so explicitly. But perhaps a more interesting aspect of this introduction of young people to opposites is that although most of the opposites taught to children are the gradable kind (*hot-cold, tall-short, etc.*), the emphasis from the adults teaching them is on the extremes, as though they were *really* complementaries. It is only later, when the important lesson of oppositeness has been learned that children discover that *hot* and *cold* are connected through a range of intermediate temperatures and their terminology (*warm, cool, tepid, etc.*), and that *tall* and *short* are only relative terms. By this time the 'norm' for opposites, that is that the stereotypical opposite is a complementary, has been established in the young person's worldview. [...] this notion of the stereotypical opposite as a complementary is deeply entrenched in many aspects of Western society and it has very serious repercussions for us all. (Jeffries 2014, p. 27)

That this has serious consequences, Jeffries explains by way of an anecdote she uses as an example of the way 'opposites' work (Jeffries 1998, p. 105) and as the reason why she has focused more extensively on 'opposition in discourse' (Jeffries 2014, pp. 2-4). In the 1983 British election campaign, the Conservative Party chose a political advertisement showing a picture of a business-looking young man with the caption "Labour says he is black. Tory says he is British". The slogan made Jeffries realise how the syntactical frame emphasising the opposition of the two political parties triggered the false opposition between being British and being dark-skinned. On the one hand, this obliged the Tories to withdraw the advertisement even though, according to Jeffries, the slogan per se had no intention of being prejudiced. On the other hand, she points out, it induced British novelist Caryl Phillips to read the message from the perspective of a "black man on the left of the political spectrum" (Jeffries 2014, p. 4) and to consider it as racist. For Jeffries, such opposites are an "example of what Grice (1975) calls a conventional implicature and Simpson (1993) [...] calls pragmatic presupposition" (Jeffries 2014, p. 3). However, I believe that if one read *British* and *black* as partial synonyms, it would be much easier to avoid prejudice and injustice,

and that it is not enough to point at a problem, notice that it originates in an objective error, study it thoroughly to the extreme consequences, without finally correcting it. In this respect, it is indeed quite disappointing to see that in the pages of the book devoted to a survey of ‘opposition in the history of ideas’, from philosophy to science to language (Jeffries 2014, pp. 7-19), there is no mention of the research on ‘colonial discourse’ in applied linguistics (Pennycook 1998) or the racist turn of binaries that has historically shaped British societies.

Building on these theoretical premises, I will try to assess whether Arundhati Roy challenges the idea of an oppositional language based on binaries by remodulating it through semantic nuances that ultimately contribute to a shift in language use. To this aim, I will analyse five political essays taken from *My Seditious Heart* (2019). I first chose “The Greater Common Good” because the real story of Indian people’s heroic resistance to the Indian state has been foundational for Roy’s political thinking and writing; I then chose the other four texts because they introduce new themes while developing aspects of the first one; as importantly, the five texts together compose a kind of creative-factual narrative, which fits one of the author’s main purposes for writing political essays: to test her linguistic ability to make political and technical issues as effectively involving as those she deals with in her fiction.

3. Five essays in action

Arundhati Roy’s *My Seditious Heart* is a huge volume collecting the political essays that Roy either singly published or delivered as public speeches in India and the United States between 1998 and 2018. Using her own definition for both her literary and non-fiction work, the volume’s overall topic is “the dialectic between power and powerlessness and the endless circular conflict they’re engaged in” (Roy 2019, p. 187). More specifically, it is about Roy’s struggle against the nationalistic politics and propaganda that the Indian government has adopted since at least the early 1990s, when it initiated an uncontrolled neoliberal economy along with massive development projects. These mainly consisted in a network of thousands dams of several sizes which upset the environment and dispossessed millions of people, the majority of whom the poorest minorities of the country, but suited India’s new image of world superpower and complied with neocolonial requests, particularly the US corporate market policies with their extended interests in India. This situation, Roy recurrently declares, is responsible for altering the *meaning* of life through a propagandistic language that persuades a democratic country to support a ‘fascist’ government and its ineffective left-wing opposition. In this respect, the agenda at core of these essays is: 1) to

lay bare the ruling propaganda, “to reclaim language [...] words being deployed to mean the opposite of what they really meant” (Roy 2019, p. xix); 2) to articulate a veritable and more complex view of facts; 3) to change people’s mindset and redirect political consent.

To try and closely follow Roy’s enterprise, I chose five representative essays, on the whole covering about 150 pages, whose energetic dissent is indicated in their very titles, where homophony produces a double meaning that either opposes the primary sense or complicates it, and a triggering dynamic that sets words in a motion toward a goal, as if the essays were on a march. The “Foreword”, with its near homophone *forward*, suggests that action animates this book from the very outset. The pun on *end* in the essay “The End of Imagination” reverses the negative meaning of *end* as *death* to rather indicate an aim, a purpose. The comparative *greater* in the title of the third essay “The Greater Common Good” triggers a double meaning at the moment when we come to understand that *greater* refers to both the lie that the state tells its citizens to persuade them that it works in people’s interests, and that it negatively compares to the real common good that is being pursued by Roy and the dissenting party she has joined, which is, in many respects, *greater* than that declared by the state. In a similar way, it is while we are reading the fourth essay “Come September” that we realise the meaning of *come* as the defiant challenge to the binary rhetoric that after the 9/11 terrorist attack has halved the world between ‘good and evil’, a division that has tragically exasperated the historic Hindu-Muslim divide in India. Action continues in the last title, “My Seditious Heart”, where *seditious* refers to India’s official condemnation of Roy for ‘sedition’ but is made also to indicate Roy’s combatively beating art and, through the etymological meaning of ‘sedition’, *going apart*, its progress *at variance* with that of the state. The kinetic language of these titles contains and manifests dissent. It creates a diffused ambivalence that destabilises the dominant binary-opposition narrative of the nation while voicing Roy’s uncompromising antagonism. This dynamic also reproduces the author’s physical participation in people’s unease and protests, which is now encoded into writing, from single words to sets of paragraphs and so gets re-played each time we read and respond to their appellation to understand, to be moved, to act, giving way to a sense of justice that is therefore firstly exercised and reclaimed through language.

In what follows, I will use Jeffries’ theory of opposites to examine some passages from the five articles I chose, where created opposition is foregrounded, either through single lexemes, phrases, or extended passages.

3.1. Foreword / forward

The volume's "Foreword" presents an overview of the spatiotemporal and ideological terrain upon which these essays move, at whose centre is the Narmada Valley and its people's fight and tragic defeat against the state to defend the territory from the construction of the Sardar Sarovar mega dam across the Narmada River that flows westward across the states of Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, and Gujarat. Roy has defined this as "the bedrock on which much of my thinking rests" (Roy 2019, p. xiv). These people's defeat despite having officially proved right and despite their protests having thoroughly been respectful of the law, brings into the picture the two ideas of homeland that have been contending for the meaning of India, which the "Foreword" presents before us asking to take one of the two sides: the 'fascist' state with its fanatic 'Hinduism', and the million non-Hindus it has dispossessed over the last decades. The "Foreword" overviews the origins of the problem in the early 1960s, its later 'developments' in the 1980s and 1990s in conjunction with the liberalisation of the Indian economy and stops on the verge of the uncertain future ahead. Upon these grounds the essays move a straightforward opposition to the falsification of facts that the Indian government and the media have been putting in place for a long time, to cheat, colonise, and eliminate a huge number of its own people.

However, the "Foreword" reverses the idea of these people's defeat via the repetition of the word *teach* that foregrounds their moral superiority, thus converting their 'defeat' into an instructive lesson to be learned and followed. The reversal is made visually evident, since their victory is counterposed to their *going down*, and it is overall triggered by the parallel structure "*Even as [...] even when*":

Even as they went down fighting [...] they taught me that we must make ourselves visible, even when we lose [...] they also taught me the limitation of constitutional methods of resistance [...] [and yet this hasn't been] lesson enough. (Roy 2019, p. xiv, emphasis added)

In a similar way, by the iterated reference to 'home' and a series of hyponyms, such as "the tribespeople of Kothie", "ancestral lands", "Kevadiya Colony", and hypernyms, such as the nation's two egomaniac monuments – one a huge statue symbolising Hindutva, the other the massive house of India's richest billionaire – symbolising liberalised economy, the "Foreword" draws a visible opposition between the state's and these people's sense of belonging:

a 182-metre-tall bronze statue likeness of Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel [...] The whole of the village of Kothie, had it still existed, could have been accommodated in its big toe [...] in the city of Bombay, home to the largest slums in Asia, is modern India's other great monument, Antilla, the most

expensive private home ever built. [...] home to Mukesh Ambani, India's richest man. (Roy 2019, p. xv)

Roy's essays clearly inhabit the India of the Narmada Valley's people and, to remark it, they are defined as "pieces of laundry – poor people's washing – strung out across the landscape between these two monuments, interrupting the good news bulletins and spoiling the view [...] news was certainly not all good" (Roy 2019, p. xvi). The essays are also twice defined as "broken promises to myself" (Roy 2019, pp. xviii, xxiv), tangible proofs of the many times it would have been more convenient to not express public dissent, and so concrete ways by which Roy established her deep lasting bonds with India, her sense of home:

They *opened doors* to me to secret places where few are trusted, led me into the very heart of insurrection, into places of pain, rage, and ferocious irreverence. On these journeys, I found my dearest friends, my truest loves [...] unfaltering partners. (Roy 2019, p. xviii, emphasis added).

This 'home' clashes with the nation-state which opened the *doors* to fundamentalism and neocolonial policies, the fatal partnership now running the country,

unlocked the protected market [...] *opened another lock* [...] the Babri Masjid [...] to allow Hindus to warship at the site [...] *lovers* performing an elaborate ritual of seduction and coquetry that could sometimes be misread as hostility. (Roy 2019, pp. xvi-xvii, emphasis added)

Roy also explains how, as celebrated Booker Prize winner, she could have stood on the limelight as a symbol of the new India but did not, and on the contrary, thought of how best to write about these disturbing times, "what did it mean to be a writer in times such as these? [...] I saw that what I needed to do would challenge my abilities as a writer [...] Could I turn these topics into literature? *I tried*" (Roy 2019, pp. xvii, xix).

The "Foreword" enigmatically leaves us with hints at the way by which we could help create a better future for us and the planet than that toward which we are moving, suggesting that "we will need algorithms" (Roy 2019, p. xxv) to find a way out of present ignorance about the world we have concurred to destroy, "we do not seem to have *understood* much [...] have *sentenced* ourselves to an era of sudden catastrophes" (Roy 2019, p. xxv, emphasis added). And the essays are intended to be exercises to learn what happened in the last two decades and thereby to redress a lying language of opposites that has severely hindered human progress.

3.2. *The end [and the aim] of imagination*

In the title of the second text, “The End of Imagination”, the ambivalent word *end*, meaning *death* and its antonymic *aim*, encapsulates the essay’s twofold topic: the development of Roy’s imaginative-political thought after winning the Booker Prize and India’s destructive transformation after the atomic bomb test. This transformation structures the entire essay, whose introductory part reports the devastating effects of the 1998 nuclear bomb test in India and Pakistan, and whose second part consists in a two-sequence story titled “THE BOMB AND I”, recounting Roy’s journey out of and back to India. While reading the story, we come to understand that the conjunction *and* in the story title can be seen as a third dimension between the two meanings of ‘end’ in the essay’s title, where death and life coexist until the choice is made between them and, as we finally discover, even after it is made. Overall, the dual text, therefore, mirrors India’s and Roy’s parallel stories about how differently they faced a huge threat to their identity as posed by the intrusion of the West and especially as posed by the response to its political expectations.

India’s atomic bomb test is depicted as a world turned upside-down – “[w]hat do you do if you are trapped in an asylum and the doctors are all dangerously deranged?” (Roy 2019, p. 3). And, as a writer, Roy feels like having to resort to an already written script, a play worth being re-enacted since at stake is the loss of her true self and of India’s identity:

Let’s pick our parts, put on these discarded costumes, and speak our secondhand lines in this secondhand play. [...] But let us pause to give credit where it’s due. [...] The Men who made it happen. The Masters of the Universe. Ladies and gentlemen, the Unites States of America! [...] Thank you for showing us the way. Thank you for altering the very meaning of life. [...] Nuclear weapons pervade our thinking. Control our behaviour. Administer our societies. Inform our dreams. [...] They are the ultimate colonizer. Whiter than any white man that ever lived. The very heart of whiteness. (Roy 2019, pp. 2-6)

She urges everybody to do their part, to “take it personally” (Roy 2019, pp. 6, 7). So did Roy, as the title of the story indicates, in which the bomb is the glamour that invested Roy after the Booker Prize which, like the nuclear test, may have boosted her ego and shattered her identity, subjecting it to the neocolonial force of the book market (Chowdhury 2018). The story unfolds in three stages which the use of ‘opposites’ enables us to read also symbolically: 1) Roy’s stay at an American friend’s place in New York, an *architect* (like Roy) with whom she has a relationship of sameness and of contrast; 2) the confrontation of her *friend*’s fear that after stellar success death, i.e. a downfall into anonymity, will follow; 3) the return to India after ‘the bomb test’. To make her *friend* fully comprehend her view, Roy writes her a message on a “kitchen napkin”, where she lists her life principles as if

they were her ten commandments, making an extensive use of opposites:

To *never forget* your own *insignificance*. To never get used to the unspeakable violence and the vulgar disparity of life around you. To seek joy in the *saddest* places. To pursue beauty to its lair. To never simplify what is complicated or complicate what is simple. To respect strength, never power. Above all to *watch*. To try and *understand*. To never *look away*. And never, never to forget. (Roy 2019, p. 9, emphases added)

The ten infinitives are non-negotiable complementary 'opposites'; the recurring use of *never* produces parallel sentences each one composed of further binary terms; the repetition of *never* increases the pathos and creates an ascending parable at whose top the uppermost principle stands out: always watch and remember.

Finally, strengthened by her victory over herself, Roy returns to India to find the country lying dead under the bomb's day-after effect, "a world that has been ailing for a while [...] breathed its last [...] cremated now [...] My world has died. And I write to mourn its passage. [...] The bomb is India, India is the bomb" (Roy 2019, pp. 9-12). Unlike Roy, who resisted the after-Prize impact, India has fallen under the neocolonial effect of the bomb, "a stench of fascism on the breeze" (Roy 2019, p. 9), since "nuclear tests are nationalism tests" (Roy 2019, p. 9), a conclusion that triggers Roy's wish to belong to a wider sense of India and a wider sense of citizenship:

I'm going to step out from under the twinkling lights [...] I hereby declare myself an independent mobile republic. I am a citizen of the earth. I own no territory. I have no flag. I'm female but have nothing against eunuchs. [...] Immigrants are welcome. You can help me design our flag. (Roy 2019, p. 12)

India, however, can still come to life, reincarnate, if only one knew how to bring about that change: "There is *beauty* yet in this brutal damaged world of ours [...] uniquely *ours* [...] received with grace from *others* [...] made *our own*. We have to seek it out, nurture it, love it." (Roy 2019, p. 21, emphasis added) The essay ends with an explosive challenge to the wrongly posed syllogism "Everybody loves the bomb. Therefore the bomb is good" (Roy 2019, p. 22), which Roy turns on its head, claiming that public opinion was manipulated, people deprived of "the right to make an informed choice" (Roy 2019, p. 22). This claim is then worked up through the repetition of the phrase "Who the hell", which addresses the way consent was extorted, and leads straight to the inflexible last sentence: the bomb is "anti-democratic, a-national, a-human, outright evil" (Roy 2019, p. 23).

3.3. [Greater than] the greater common good

The essay opens with Roy's arrival in the Narmada Valley in March 1999. She is standing on a hill looking over poor villages that would most likely be swept away by the next monsoon, despite the people's victory over the state which should have stopped the construction of the Sardar Sarovar Dam and avoided the inundation. Works were suspended in 1995, when protests were officially declared legitimate, but had just resumed and Roy had journeyed to the Valley to witness the further stage of the longstanding war between India and its own people. Over the last decades, the systematic dispossession of over forty million lower-caste non-Hindus, had passed unnoticed since the government muddied the water with its language of fake opposites that divide and confuse public opinion. So, first thing, the essay gives us a clear view of the situation, revealing the mined socio-political place Roy is standing on. Then, her sudden burst into a laughter reverses her rage, signals the beginning of the essay's battle against the state, and calls for reinforcement to resume the fight:

I stood on a hill and laughed out loud.

I had crossed the Narmada by boat from Jalsindhi and climbed the headland on the opposite bank, from where *I could see* [...] the Adivasi hamlets [...] *I could see* their airy, fragile homes. *I could see* their fields and the forests behind them. *I could see* little children with littler goats scuttling across the landscape [...] *I knew* I was looking at a civilization older than Hinduism, slated - *sanctioned* (by the highest court in the land) to be drowned this monsoon [1999], when the waters of the Sardar Sarovar reservoir will rise to submerge it.

Why did I laugh?

Because I remembered the tender concern with which the Supreme Court judges in Delhi [...] had inquired whether Adivasi children in the resettlement colonies would have children's parks to play in. [...] *I looked up* at the endless sky and *down* at the river rushing past, and for a brief, brief moment the absurdity of it all *reversed my rage and I laughed*, I meant no disrespect. (Roy 2019, pp. 25-26, emphasis added)

There is no shadow of doubt that this is a hidden civil war, and from the beginning Roy's strategy is to portray it as an epic conflict (Comfort 2008) in which there is no shadow of doubt either as to who the winning heroes are, "the battle lines were clearly drawn, the warring armies amassed along them" (Roy 2019, p. 26). The evil forces are the false debates set up by politics to cancel the real facts, treacherously making the state win, "specific facts about specific issues in this specific valley – have been blunted by the debate on the big issues. The basic premise of the argument has been inflated, until it has burst into bits that have, over time, bobbed away" (Roy 2019, p. 27). False oppositions have animated, exhausted, and dissolved "public perception [...] into two categories" (Roy 2019, p. 27), progress versus development, which,

Roy claims, should now be replaced by the true fight: false political debate between government and its opposition versus the people's defence of their rights to live in their lands. First, the fake debate is revealed by presenting the two false antagonists, and then, by merging them through the repetition of 'both':

On the one hand, it is seen as a war between modern, rational, progressive forces of 'Development' *versus* neo-Luddite impulse - an irrational, emotional, anti-development resistance fueled by an arcadian pre-industrial dream. *On the other*, as a Nehru v. Gandhi contest. This lifts the whole sorry business out of the bog of deceit, lies, false promises, and increasingly successful propaganda (which is what it's really about) and confers on it a false legitimacy. It makes out that *both sides have the Greater Good of the nation in mind* - but merely disagree about the means by which to achieve it. *Both* interpretations put a tired spin on the dispute. *Both* stir up emotions that cloud the particular facts of this particular story. *Both* are indications of how urgently we need new heroes - new kinds of heroes - and how we've overused our old ones. (Roy 2019, pp. 27-28, emphasis added)

Indian politics has become a trivial game unworthy of its past, a nation run out of heroes and ideals. The new century, therefore, is one that needs to rely on small things, or, I argue, the way things look like from far above, like the vantage point Roy has gained through the lesson learned from the Narmada Valley's people, as described in the "Foreword", and of which she has become the emblem. The essay explicitly refers to Roy as a vulture-writer attracted here by the grand story to be told and ready now to swoop down and get hold of the not yet completely buried truth:

The dismantling of the Big. Big bombs, big dams, big ideologies, big contradictions, big countries, big wars, big heroes, big mistakes. Perhaps it will be the Century of the Small. Perhaps right now, this very minute, there's a small god up in heaven readying herself for us. Could it be? Could it *possibly* be? It sounds finger-licking good to me. [...] Writers are drawn to stories the way vultures are drawn to kills. [...] sheer greed. I was right. I found a story there. And what a story. (Roy 2019, pp. 28-29, emphasis added)

The text, therefore, displays new sets of 'oppositions' to bring the truth to light: facts vs false antagonisms created by the propaganda; facing the truth vs looking away. And those who cowardly do not want to see are equated with the citizens of North America, French Canada, Nazi Germany who did nothing to prevent the genocide of innocent citizens:

I feel like somebody who's just stumbled on a mass grave [...] A huge percentage of the displaced are Adivasis [...]. The ethnic 'otherness' of their victims takes some of the pressure off the nation-builders. [...] India's poorest people are subsidizing the lifestyle of the richest. [...] The millions of

displaced people don't exist anymore [...] their accommodation is worse than in any concentration camp of the Third Reich [...] they redefine the meaning of liberty. [...] And we, like the citizens of white America and French Canada and Hitler's Germany, are condemning it by *looking away*. *Why? Because we're being told that it's being done for the sake of the Greater Common Good.*" (Roy 2019, pp. 33-34, emphasis added)

An increasing use of 'opposites' insists that we as rapaciously grasp the facts – "It's time to spill a few state secrets. To puncture the myth about the inefficient [...] but ultimately genial, essentially democratic Indian state" (Roy 2019, p. 35). Iterated negations turn our attention toward the story that the essay is about to start telling us: "don't ignore it, don't look away"; "it isn't an easy tale to tell"; "Not anymore. Not since I began to follow the direction in which they point" (Roy 2019, p. 35). The repetition of the phrase "it's true that", followed by the adversative *yet* and *but* that introduce the opposite term, creates a balanced effect whose aim is to avoid radical claims that deny India's progress altogether and which would cancel out the credibility of what is being contested: "*It's true that* India has progressed. *It's true that* in 1947, ... *It's true that* in 1995 ... *It's true that* ... *Yet* ... *Certainly* India has progressed, *but* most of the people haven't" (Roy 2019, p. 35). The same purpose has a complex oppositional structure in which a simple opposition is contradicted by a following one that lays bare its false logic and whose formula is: x is not y (the state has not failed) *versus* x is y (the state has succeeded) *however* y is not Y (success is not real success):

The Indian state is not a state that has failed. It is a state that has succeeded impressively in what it set out to do [...] But its finest feat of all is the way it achieves all this and emerges swelling sweet. The way it manages to keep its secrets, to contain information. [...] We take care not to dig too deep. We don't really want to know the grisly details. (Roy 2019, p. 35, emphasis added)

Finally, after fixing the new perspective, the text fuels our motivation to join in by means of further repetitive oppositional frames. Some are based on temporal prepositions like *until* or *as long as* which indicate what needs to be left behind in order to firmly move ahead into the new direction: "*Until* this process is recognized for what it is, *until* it is addressed and attacked, elections [...] will continue to mock battles [...] but *as long as* we have faith, we have no hope" (Roy 2019, p. 37). Another oppositional frame is based on antonyms whose contrary term (*general/ineffective*) is obvious: "We have to fight *specific* wars in *specific* ways, and we have to fight to *win*" (Roy 2019, p. 37). At this point, the ground has been created to absorb the urgent call contained in the story that is about to be told, and to take sides accordingly: "Listen, then, to the story of the Narmada Valley. Understand it. And, if you wish, enlist. Who knows, it may lead to magic" (Roy 2019, p. 37).

The story at the core of the text, chronicles the Valley's people's fight

against India's 'development plan', their victory also against the World Bank, which in 1993 withdrew their investment in acknowledgment that building the mega dam would cause massive environmental and human damages, and their unfair political defeat. Roy thoroughly calls them "the brave ragged army" (Roy 2019, pp. 47, 48, 51, 75) to qualify their memorable achievement but especially to trigger our sympathy for the David-and-Goliath struggle and urge us to reinforce the lines, in the belief that small is big, poor is rich, down below means on top of all:

There has been *no army quite like this one* anywhere else in the world [...] Sacking the Bank was and is *a huge moral victory* for the people of the valley [...] No one had ever managed to make the World Bank step back from a project before. *Least of all a ragtag army of the poorest people in one of the world's poorest countries.* (Roy 2019, pp. 47-53)

The final part of the story takes us back to Kavadya Colony, fresh recruits, the essay hopes, in the ongoing war that may still be won if people understand that "[h]ad I not known its history nothing would have made sense. [...] Nobody knows this, but Kevadia Colony is the key to the world. Go there and secrets will be revealed to you" (Roy 2019, p. 60). We are made to meet an old member of the ragged army whose dejection does not invalidate the worthiness of the past and the present fight – "the last person I met in the valley was Bhaiji Bhai [...] a pauper overnight [...] forced to smile for photographs [...] denied the grace of rage. [...] but his story hadn't aged. It was still young and full of passion" (Roy 2019, pp. 72-73). And the essay ends by lucidly defining the power structure that regulates the unequal relation between defeated citizens and triumphant state:

Power is fortified not just *by what it destroys* but also *by what it creates*. Not just *by what it takes* but also *by what it gives*. And **powerlessness** is reaffirmed not just *by the helplessness of those who have lost* but also *by the gratitude of those who have (or think they have) gained*. (Roy 2019, p. 73, emphasis added)

The power-powerlessness opposition is maintained by the destructive balance that informs both terms with loss and apparent gain, in which the apparent gain makes the overall power-powerlessness structure seem acceptable. So, the text dislodges the monstrous trick from its linguistic lair and brings it into the open:

This cold contemporary cast of power is couched between the lines of noble-sounding clauses in democratic-sounding constitutions. It's wielded by the elected representatives of an ostensibly free people. Yet, no monarch, no despot, no dictator, has had access to weapons like these. (Roy 2019, p. 74)

Power unleashes its evil work by creating nonsense or by reverting the way things are, by interrupting meaningfulness, by breaking the connections between humans and the life around and beyond us:

Almost without our knowing it – we are being broken [...] a civilization turning upon itself. They represent the severance of the link – *the understanding* – between human beings and the planet they live on. *They scramble* the intelligence that connects eggs to hens, [...] earth to human existence. *Can we unscramble it?* (Roy 2019, p. 74)

The essay closes with a final appeal to not turn our gaze away, but rather to realize and to take at heart the price that the Valley's people are still paying while the state's betrayal is being erased: "It is in the fitness of things that you understand the price that's being paid for it. That you have the courage to watch while the dues are cleared, and the books are squared. Our dues. Our books. Not theirs. Be there" (Roy 2019, p. 75).

3.4. Come September [if you dare]

This text, delivered as a speech for the first 9/11 anniversary in 2002, is a meditation on the difference between stories that are imposed upon us and require a right-wrong response to their worldview, and stories that, informed by a broader reading of reality, accordingly offer us a vast gamut of possible responses. In this respect, this essay can be also seen as a meta-reflection on the Narmada Valley's core story as told by Roy or by the state. If, on the one hand, a story calls a writer to be told, on the other, the writer, or anyone, may respond in two ways, i.e. thinkingly or obeying the reaction the call expects from us:

[W]riters imagine that they cull stories from the world. I'm beginning to believe that [...] it's actually the other way round. Stories cull writers from the world. Stories reveal themselves to us. [...] they colonize us. They commission us. They insist on being told. Fiction and nonfiction are only different technique of storytelling. [...] the theme of much of what I write, fiction as well as nonfiction, is the relationship between power and powerlessness and the endless circular conflict they're engaged in. [...] There can never be a single story. There are only ways of seeing. So, when I tell a story, I tell it not as an ideologue who wants to pit an absolute ideology against another but as a storyteller who wants to share her way of seeing. (Roy 2019, p. 187)

Unlike a reflective writer's story, nationalistic narratives divide our response into right and wrong and name us accordingly, good or evil, patriots or anti-national, as it happened for the US so-called 'war on terror' and India's war on non-Hindus, whereas the free thinker questions binary terms:

What does the term anti-American mean? [...] a deliberately and extremely effective strategy [...] that simplifies reality, as America is not its political rule of the moment. [...] Similarly, in India those who dissent from political rule are 'anti-Indian.' [...] It is a failure of the imagination. An inability to see the world in terms other than those that the establishment has set out for you. (Roy 2019, pp. 189-190)

Along these lines, Roy asks her audience to leave this simplistic narrative and the easy response it requires, to see its real aim behind the call for justice: "post-11 September rhetoric [...] a cunning recruitment drive for a misconceived, dangerous war [...] a vulgar display of the business of grief, the commerce of grief, to drain it of meaning. [...] corporate globalization [...], the American way of life" (Roy 2019, pp. 190, 191, 203, 204). Instead, we should consider the many 9/11 anniversaries around the world that the US neocolonial expansionism caused. Could not all the people with a broader view join forces out of respect of everybody's losses that no anniversary will ever make up for?

3.5. My seditious heart [and diverging art]

The final text, which also concludes the collection, is a meditation on what it means to be trapped within the government's binary worldview in which Roy has been labelled 'anti-national', "my name was still on the A-list of 'anti-nationals' [...] I wondered whether I should rethink some of my opinions" (Roy 2019, pp. 795, 796). The text is composed of an unfolding reasoning that broadens into a reminiscence of national political crises and tensions that still involve her, and which finally provides reassuring self-awareness, as well as a clear explanation of the constrained condition Roy finds herself in. Typically, this is brought into focus by an oppositional frame:

Now it's true that my view on these matters is at variance with those of the ruling establishment. [BUT] In better days, that used to be known as a critical perspective or an alternative worldview. These days in India, it's called sedition. (Roy 2019, p.796, emphasis added)

The realisation follows that at present there is no real political opposition, no actual institutional alternative, "like having to choose between Tide and Ivory Snow, two brands of washing powder both actually owned by the same company" (Roy 2019, p. 796).

For a second time, fully aware now of her unnerving situation, her train of thoughts leads her into a detailed chronological account of the rise to power of Hindutva and of its fake political opposition (Roy 2019, pp. 801-811). It explains why joining the spontaneous party of normal free-thinking people, university students, intellectuals who complicate the picture, "the tidy

delineation of the state” (Roy 2019, p. 826), was the only choice available to her. These people’s opposition takes place in a territory that predates the nation’s, its partition, its divisions, its latest catastrophic progress (Roy 2019, p. 834). It is a territory that the state’s simplistic requests reduce, just as they diminish democracy’s complex nature and its exercise: “*Worship* a flag? My soul is either too modern or too ancient for that. I’m not sure which. Maybe both” (Roy 2019, p. 834).

4. Conclusion

Analysing Arundhati Roy’s texts through Jeffries’ theoretical framework has brought into focus a larger question about the oppositional structure of language as originally conceived by structuralist linguists. Even in its most oppositional mood and most drastic use of ‘opposites’, Roy’s prose is pervaded by a tendency to articulate a more complex cognitive condition of gradation, of coexistence of contradictory terms, of self-doubt, of chaos, of illogic attitude. In this respect, Roy’s language very much seems to employ ‘opposites’ in their grammatically realistic relation of proximity, of partial synonymity. If we follow the idea that antonymy is particularly appealing to humans because they may reflect the overall language system, then, accordingly, we should look for a structure of the language in which antonymy or partial synonymy is reflected. It was theorised as an alternative to mainstream structuralism mainly by Louis Hjelmslev, and it conceives of language as composed of relations of participatory opposition among its parts, including its paradigmatic and syntagmatic axes, so that each part and the system itself are composed of irreconcilable paradox and logical order. It is the very principle that also governs antonymy as partial synonymity.

It is only when paradigmatic possibilities are articulated onto the syntagmatic axis that possible paradoxical relations resolve into oppositional ones. However, as we saw in Roy’s use of antonymic titles, the paradox may well enter logical discourse and make it ultra-logical. This signals more than the upsurge of paradoxical terms onto the syntagmatic axis of the language through the intermediate space between *langue* and *parole*, “the gaps in the binaristic model [in which] external factors from the environment [...] affect the final expression” (Lacková 2022, p. 287). It marks the entrance into language of an expansive movement that stems from Roy’s participation in long-lasting protest, which shapes all language levels. It is a language that is shaped also by bodily experience, which inscribes modalities of communication it partakes in, and spatiotemporal contexts that cannot be contained within a structuralist conception and use of the language and its internalised cognitive space (Canagarajah 2018). This functional role that contingency is given in the texts is made explicit in the “Foreword”. Here

Roy explains that she and the editor decided to keep the repetitions that would result from collecting essays that originally had been speeches and immediate responses to specific events, to convey the sense of the circumstances in which the texts too occurred as direct participants in those events. Spatiotemporal contingency is the ground where Roy's creative language use is at work to expand its presence into past events and future scenarios where the essays want us to stand too and do our part.

However, even more important when it comes to trying to inspire and bring such an effective social change through language, is the way in which these extremely combative and determined texts are woven by a sense of unpredictability, of unexpectedness, a principle that post-structuralist linguists have long explored (see, for instance, Pennycook 2012, pp. 17-37). In Roy's case, it seems to rely on science, language's historical partner in all turning-point moments of cultural re-conceptualisations, since the texts leave us with post-human considerations of the way we should learn connectiveness and cooperation from the smallest creatures who, like us and perhaps better than we, work for survival and collective wellbeing. Could humans take example from them, the way algorithms have? This seems to be the sense of the recurrent reference to Roy's poetics of 'small things' emerging in her political texts: "Perhaps things will go worse and then better. Perhaps there is a *small god* up in heaven readying herself for us [...] she is on her way [...] if I listen very carefully, I can hear her breathing" (Roy 2019, pp. 28-29, 304). More than hope for a better future, this looks like an ecological, nature-inspired employment of "the concrete sounds of the material environment" (Lobnick 2016, p. 116). It reads like unfathomable and yet articulated belief that we can find directions from forces outside and beyond us but which most likely we also own and can put to good use, starting, perhaps, with a language change.

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