

From Feminine Autobiography to Collective Allegory: Arundhati Roy's Sensory Writing in the Perspective of Phenomenology of Perception

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Abstract. This study aims to explore the narrative tension between authenticity and fictionality in *The God of Small Things* and *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* by examining Roy's formative experiences and writing process as described in *Mother Mary Comes to Me*. The theoretical framework employs Maurice Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of perception, supplemented by postmodern developments derived from phenomenological theory, to analyze the sensory experiences of key characters across childhood, youth, and adulthood. By focusing on core plot lines and pivotal events, the study investigates how Roy bridges sensory writing to transition from superficial personal memoir to collective allegory.

Keywords: Autobiography, allegory, phenomenology of perception, Merleau-Ponty.

1. Introduction

Arundhati Roy is one of the most representative contemporary writers in Indian English literature. A striking feature of Roy's writing is her highly developed sensory style. Notably, her sensory writing is not merely an aesthetic exercise but carries three interrelated dimensions: first, it is imbued with a strong autobiographical quality—such as the mother Ammu in *The God of Small Things*, Tilo in *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, and the complex mother-daughter relationship in her memoir *Mother Mary Comes to Me*, where women's life experiences are vividly rendered through sensory details; second, it reflects profound political concerns—issues like caste oppression, colonial remnants, and critiques of globalization are allegorically expressed through sensory descriptions; third, it draws nourishment from Indian classical and folk literature, forming a distinctive poetic realism style.

In his 1986 essay *Third-World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism*, Fredric Jameson proposed that “Third-world texts, even those which are seemingly private and invested with a properly libidinal dynamic, necessarily project a political dimension in the form of national allegory: the story of the private individual destiny is always an allegory of the embattled situation of the public third-world culture and society [1].” Aijaz Ahmad, in his 1992 book *In Theory: Classes, Nations, Literatures*, contends that there is no single third-world literature, but rather various concrete national cultures situated within different modes of production and class struggles. He criticizes Jameson's interpretive approach as bordering on colonialist Orientalist voyeurism, entirely disregarding the narrative techniques, psychological depth, and formal innovations of Eastern literature [2]. The power of Roy's writing lies precisely in her refusal of a unified, abstract Indianness, and her deep immersion into diverse, heterogeneous, and conflicting micro-groups. To read her work merely as national allegory would, on the contrary, dissolve her incisive deconstruction of India's internal hegemonic structures. Therefore, understanding the intrinsic connections between these three dimensions—sensory writing, female autobiography, and allegorical characteristics—is the core question this study seeks to address.

In terms of dominant research, studies on Roy's works mainly focus on three paths: postcolonial criticism, feminist criticism, and stylistics. In addition, there have been papers that focus on a specific sensory aspect in these two novels, exploring their unique significance for readers to understand the characters' situations and contemporary Indian situations in the works. Sarita Rani starts from ecofeminism and studies how the physical and mental feelings of female characters oppressed by patriarchy in *The God of Small Things* indirectly reflect environmental degradation issues, and forms

a parallel reading with two novels by Amitav Ghosh [3]. Researchers led by Muhammad Arfan Lodhi analyzed the female characters in Bapsi Sidhwa's *Ice-Candy Man* and *The God of Small Things*, who were subjected to physical abuse and emotional indifference and violence from men, and uncovered subtle details of male injustice in both novels [4]. From an auditory perspective, Neumann Birgit's research focuses on multilingual phenomena in novels, exploring other possibilities for literary creation in an English centric world [5]. Essa Leila compared *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* with Regina Scheer's *Machandel* (2014) and analyzed how cemeteries, as alternative material spaces, interact with memory, thus outlining the shared vision of marginalized groups in society [6].

Given that this study incorporates the author's autobiographical memoir for investigation, and corresponds to the author's records of childhood, youth, and adulthood in her biographical memoir *Mother Mary Comes to Me*, the article is also planned to be divided into three parts, based on the age stages of the characters in the novel, for discussion. The first chapter will discuss the inherent fundamental issues of traditional Indian society by analyzing the experiences and memories of the protagonist in the sensory level during childhood. The second chapter will focus on the experiences of the two generations of mothers and daughters in the novel's youth period to conduct a dialogic study, analyze the intergenerational transmission of female experiences, and discuss the possibility of breaking through the structural oppression of traditional Indian society. The third chapter will combine existing historical materials to analyze two landmark events in contemporary Indian history, as well as Roy's personal involvement and observations, to analyze Roy's unique position among contemporary English-language writers in India. This study aims to provide an integrated framework for understanding Roy's literary writing, while exploring the interpretive potential of phenomenological criticism in the study of third world literature. In a broader sense, this study attempts to address a core question: how sensory experience becomes a medium connecting individuals with history, private memory, and public criticism in a postcolonial context. Roy's writing practice may provide us with a unique path.

2. The Corporealization of Trauma: Sensory Memories of the Childhood

When facing traditional India, Roy chose the youngest group in society - children. However, the protagonists who narrate their childhood experiences are these children in adulthood. Therefore, Roy adopts a retrospective approach to writing about childhood, looking back at the history that has passed. When the protagonists revisit their hometown, both the appearance of their hometown and their mood have undergone significant changes compared to their childhood. Therefore, this period of narrating childhood can be seen as a replenishment of the history in their memories. In *The God of Small Things*, Estha and Rahel's return to their hometown and pursuit of their childhood itself constitutes the narrative progression of the entire book. In *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, the protagonist Anjum's childhood is loosely connected to the narrative of the entire book, but it carries the author's ultimate questioning about the conflict between patriarchy and matriarchy. In *Mother Mary Comes to Me*, the author reveals her own growth trajectory for the first time, and some landmark events not only explain and enrich her creative motivation but also form an intertext with her novel creation.

Roy uncovers the fundamental issues that have long puzzled India through the grassroots society of India that growing children truly experience. Furthermore, it discusses the self-healing pain that children encounter during their growth in traditional Indian communities, and to what extent does it bear striking similarities to traditional Indian society, which has been plagued by historical trauma. This chapter plans to discuss how historical sensory experiences shape people's impressions of their upbringing, leading the protagonist, who returns to his hometown, to experience a contradictory sentiment of reluctance and fear.

2.1 Ambivalent Nostalgia: The Color and Touch as Shelter and Violence

If the trauma experienced during childhood takes a lifetime to heal, and childhood experiences shape one's life trajectory, then Roy has indeed transcended the personal level through his creative writing activity, using his experience of being molested in childhood to carry a deeper social critique.

In *The God of Small Things*, the incident where the lemonade seller sexually assaults Estha can be seen as the first time in Roy's novel where structural issues such as the caste system, gender oppression, and colonial legacies converge. From the perspective of phenomenological philosophy, this symptomatic episode causes the protagonist's normally reversible tactile sense and the temporally enduring taste to collapse and atrophy into a one-dimensional traumatic experience. This sensory conflict produces a fundamental rupture in tactile reversibility. Tactile reversibility exists because when the touching and the touched intertwine, both bodies can simultaneously feel the other's touch and reflect that perception back into themselves as part of self-awareness.

During the family movie screening, Estha couldn't help but sing loudly along to *The Sound of Music*. Because he was disturbing others, his mother chased him from the screening hall to the quiet ticket lobby. Humming alone in the lobby, Estha woke up a napping vendor. The vendor, under the guise of punishment, demanded that Estha buy a drink as an apology and took the opportunity to molest him (Roy, 100) [7]. In *The Visible and the Invisible*, Merleau-Ponty regarded Proust as irreplaceable. He even believed that no one had gone further than Proust, and that Proust's literary practice meant that the tasks of literature and philosophy were no longer separate (149) [8]. Together, they focused on those pre-reflective experiences, bodily perceptions, and the underlying structures of time that cannot be described by the language of pure reason. Throughout the entire incident, the core and most contradictory sensory impact lies in Estha's simultaneous experience of two extreme tactile sensations: coldness and heat, sweetness and bitterness. The vendor's touch completely deprives the protagonist of this reflexive tactile capacity. The sensory conflict left in his palm no longer signifies a positive experience of interacting with the world through his body, but rather a traumatic imprint that cannot be assimilated or marked by sensory experience. This is precisely the phenomenological root of the uncanny alienation triggered at the physiological level. He cannot integrate the vendor's molestation into his perceptual world through past sensory experiences. His body degrades from an intentional dwelling place of "I can" to a passive container subjected to invasion.

The "Proust effect" suggests that specific scents can trigger and awaken vivid and emotionally rich memories from one's early years [9]. In this incident, lemonade undoubtedly plays a similar role to the Madeleine cake in *À la recherche du temps perdu*. However, as a crucial component of the memory-triggering mechanism, the madeleine cake creates a durational time that allows for memory and inhabitation. In contrast, for Estha, the traumatic experience induced by the lemonade congeals into a stagnant block of time, suspended between his past childhood experiences and his future adult consciousness. As the assault progressed, the taste of the drink underwent a qualitative change, with the lemon flavor transforming into the taste of fear itself, that drink was too pale yellow, too cold, too sweet, as he said. Any sensory experience that is overloaded will shift towards disgust and fear. Estha's reaction after the molestation incident proves this point. Initially, there was "a greenwavy, thick-watery, lumpy, seaweedy, floaty, bottomless-bottomful feeling. (107) [7]" His vomiting that night phenomenologically signifies the flesh's rejection of untransformable time—the body refuses to accept this traumatic experience. Only through the violent physiological reaction of vomiting can he preserve the purity of inner time. The trauma cannot be digested or absorbed, so it must be expelled. Fear, as a taste, will forever be inscribed in the folds of memory.

Through his conversation with Estha, the vendor also turned Estha's hometown, Ayemenem, into an accomplice in his assault on Estha. Initially, the vendor used persuasive language to learn from Estha that his grandmother operated the Paradise Pickles & Preserves. Later, during the assault on Estha, his mind, which was nearly blank due to nervousness and fear, could only conjure up the list of ingredients for making fruit and vegetables. After the assault, the vendor repeatedly warned Estha, through subtle hints, that he knew Estha's home address and threatened him not to disclose his experience of being assaulted. For a future adult, every time he thinks of his hometown and his

grandmother's fruit and vegetable factory, this painful memory will hurt him again. The discursive power of adults casts a colonial gaze into the most private and tender regions of childhood memory. Space is not an objective container but an extension of bodily intentionality. The vendor severs this extension through language, reducing the homeland from a concrete, perceptible place of dwelling to an unreachable heterotopia.

This experience can indeed be traced back to the author's own prototype. In her autobiography *Mother Mary Comes to Me*, Roy first revealed that she had experienced molestation during her childhood (Roy 36) [10]. She once stayed with a wealthy family in her village for a short period of time, and the grandfather of this family, who was also the patriarch of the clan, dressed up as Santa Claus for the children's entertainment at a Christmas party. When he found Roy alone, he initiated a molestation. Although Roy was fortunately able to escape, this incident remained a haunting nightmare for her in adulthood. As one of the classic symbols of Western Christian culture, Santa Claus, beneath the appearance of bringing gifts, has a long history of cultural invasion and value indoctrination in the colonial context. What Roy revealed is that Western Christian culture, which is embraced by the local elite as a symbol of civilization, is essentially engaging in the most primitive violence. The so-called "gift of civilization" is, for the land of India, an invasion. Roy achieves thematic sublimation through symbolization: the critique of the hypocrisy of the Santa Claus symbol in her autobiography is metamorphosed in the novel into an indictment of the systemic social violence wrought by the caste system and colonial cultural legacies—Estha's lifelong silence being precisely the indelible scar such violence leaves upon the individual. Through this series of transformations, Roy converts a specific personal encounter into a literary allegory about how innocence is devoured by an indifferent world.

Roy intended to point out that violence is not exclusive to a certain caste; it pervasively and universally exists within the entire social structure. The history and reality that India has encountered for thousands of years are constantly unfolding in vivid detail: Brahmins oppressing the middle castes, the middle castes oppressing the Dalits, and molesters oppressing children. People from different social classes endure violence and oppression from those in higher positions, while the dominant parties actively seek out the vulnerable as targets for their own oppression. Estha and Roy, as high-caste children from a Syrian Christian family, still suffered such harm merely because of their mother's divorce status, which precisely reflects the omnipotence and omnipresence of violence. Sometimes, it can even transcend the unbreakable shackles of the caste system, enabling low castes to oppress high castes in reverse.

2.2 The Fractured Self: Body Sovereignty and Gender Performativity

Arundhati Roy's creative work is consistently rooted in her lived experience as an Indian woman. Growing up in a divorced family placed her, from an early age, outside the "grid" of social norms. It is precisely this marginal position that endows her with a unique perspective on the mechanisms of gender oppression. In *The God of Small Things*, the twinning of Estha and Rahel suggests that, in the deepest recesses of trauma, the boundaries between male and female can dissolve—yet this dissolution is not liberation, but the sole refuge left after being driven to extremity by social violence. In *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, the Hijra is venerated in Hinduism as "the bride of god," yet in reality is treated as an untouchable. This paradox, wherein the sacred coexists with stigma, precisely maps the contradictory attitude Indian society holds toward all "transgressors": simultaneously fearing their subversive power and stigmatizing them to preserve the purity of the dominant order. In *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, the birth and childhood experiences of Anjum further confirm that the family serves as the core memory center of one's hometown, and that parents, as direct relatives, can collude with social structures to inflict profound harm on individuals.

When Jahanara Begum, the mother, first clearly saw Anjum's body structure with dual gender characteristics, her continuous reactions constituted a series of sensory denials of Anjum's existence. Her subconscious actions, such as retreating, severe twitching, and contemplating suicide, reflect her body, and also the body of a mother. That place, which should be the physiological "home" and the

first place for nurturing life, has retreated first. This starting point is inherently a rift for Anjum's growth. When Jahanara Begum, in Urdu, a language with gendered pronouns, asked "was it possible to live outside language (Roy 8) [11]?" she accurately predicted Anjum's lifelong existential direction: from birth, she was placed in a gray zone where language cannot name and direction cannot be determined. Father Mulaqat Ali's reaction was more protracted than retreating. He only learned about Anjum's gender defect years later, which means that during those years, it was her mother alone who bore the pressure and the weight of this secret. The father, who should have shared this misfortune, was absent from the entire initial field of confusion. Therefore, this absence itself was a form of violence for the baby and Jahanara.

In her theory of gendered performativity, Judith Butler argues that gender is not an innate, intrinsic essence, but rather is "performed" through a series of repetitive behaviors, gestures, and discourses that are socially regulated, thereby enabling the emergence of new gender possibilities [12]. Here, Butler incorporates Merleau-Ponty's core idea of the body as the site of expressive action.

The source of Anjum's pain does not stem from her own gender dysphoria. Due to Anjum's biological sex characteristics, traditional social expectations forcefully require her to perform a set of masculine qualities, leading to intense conflict and significant trauma between her self-perception and the forced gender performance. It is evident that gender confusion is not an individual disease, but rather the oppressive consequences imposed by social structures when they compel everyone to adhere to gender norms.

Anjum's life within the Hijra community is not essentially a performance. In the usual sense, one can return to their authentic self after the performance. However, "performance" refers to the act itself as a continuous construction of gender. In every detail of her daily life, Anjum constantly constructs a woman named Anjum through specific behaviors, such as applying exquisite makeup, wearing metal jewelry of different materials, choosing saris of different colors, etc. This process has no end, nor is it about playing someone else; rather, she herself is the act itself. By writing about those humble individuals who are pushed to the corner by the patriarchal state apparatus, Roy has completed a new act of performance: transforming the sensory experiences of marginalized bodies into a collective, broadly connected act of resistance. In this context, the hometown appears as a seemingly protective shelter for the victims, but in reality, it is itself the perpetrator of violence.

3. The Dynamism of the Senses: Youth As Love and Politics

Facing contemporary India in development, young people who have gradually entered society see more complex and turbulent social issues. When they immerse themselves in these issues and explore the possibilities of their personal lives, they are, in a sense, also seeking solutions for India's uncertain future. In the three books, when two generations of young people meet through historical spaces, it endows history with a far greater interpretative space than a mere dual meaning. In *The God of Small Things*, the tragic ending of Ammu and Velutha's love story, where both die under the persecution of traditional Indian forces, signals the end of their pursuit of love despite their status differences, but their pursuit has already sounded the death knell for the decaying caste system. When the young Rahel returns to her ancestral home, the settled history, under her reexamination, once again radiates a faint vitality. When Roy recounts his mother's arduous life of establishing a school in *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, and engages in a dialogue with *Mother Mary Comes to Me*, the mother who is both a tempest and a sanctuary, filled with a mix of love and hate towards her daughter, this in fact outlines the epitome of two generations of women struggling to carve out their own careers in Indian society. This chapter also plans to discuss how asthma, which has plagued the three mothers since their youth, can be transformed into a symbol of the living conditions of contemporary Indians through the narrative of illness.

3.1 The Law of Love: Personal Touch and Phenomenology of Body

Roy often places the love experiences of the characters in her works during their youth within the vast historical and social context of India, reflecting the complex relationship between individuals and society through the evolution of their emotional lives.

As Roy points out in her work *Mother Mary Comes to Me*, *The God of Small Things* makes her mother feel like Ammu in this book. The only major difference is that Roy's mother did not experience the thrilling love story like Ammu. In her novel, Roy creates for Ammu a passionate affair with Velutha, a man of lower caste—an act of psychological compensation: through literature, she grants her mother the life experience that was denied her in reality. This is not a replication of the mother's experiences, but an imaginative completion of her "unlived life." By allowing the mother to "live again" and be destroyed by love, Roy directs her critique straight at the root causes of the mother's tragedy—the caste system and patriarchal order.

The last chapter of *The God of Small Things* depicts the scene of Ammu and Velutha's clandestine meeting by the river, with the author using poetic language to construct this moment as incomparably sacred (331-340) [7]. As Merleau-Ponty pointed out in *The Visible and the Invisible*, there exists a primordial intercorporeity between people, meaning that we can directly perceive the intentions and emotions of others through our own bodies, without the mediation of language (143) [8].

Roy depicts this forbidden intermingling through a series of sensory synesthesia: the touch of Velutha's skin is described as like a flat chalk scratching across a blackboard... like a breeze in a rice paddy... like the contrail of a jet in the blue church sky. These images completely break away from the framework of social identity and moral judgment, reducing love to the most primitive, mutual perception between bodies. In this scene, the river is not only a backdrop but also a material carrier of interbodyness. The river water simultaneously touches and envelops the two bodies, becoming a medium for them to overcome social distance and achieve the intermingling of self and other. Roy's sensory writing achieves a true return to the body itself in this sense: returning to the original field of bodily experience, allowing readers to feel that the love denied by social taboos does indeed exist.

Roy's sensory writing provides the ultimate testimony to this resistance. The mutual promises and naming of each part of the body by Ammu and Velutha, although existing in written form, are rooted entirely in bodily perception. This writing resists oblivion and the numerous obstacles posed by caste violence to love. In the sense of bodily phenomenology, Roy allows readers to experience that when institutional violence destroys the body, words can still safeguard the memory of the body, thus completing the ultimate critique of power.

Paul Ricœur, in *Oneself as Another*, argues that the self is not a pre-given entity, but rather a dynamic "narrative identity" formed through the mediation of narrative, by means of employment—integrating life's discrete events, perceptual fragments, and relational imprints into a coherent and intelligible story [13]. Roy's creation of Tilo, a character highly isomorphic with herself, is precisely the ultimate literary embodiment of this theory—she is not copying herself, but producing her own narrative identity through fictional narrative.

In *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty believed that our bodies form bodily habits through repeated experience, which are memories engraved deep within muscles and nerves [14]. From the perspective of bodily phenomenology, love is a profound bodily habit: the scent of the beloved, the texture of their voice, and the touch of their fingertips are all absorbed by the body and internalized as a taken-for-granted way of being. In the experiences of Tilo and Roy, this bodily habit, through its establishment, dissolution, and re-establishment, constitutes the core melody of their emotional life. Whether it's Tilo or Roy herself, their initial love for their lovers is more of a mutual attraction based on physical love. The love between Tilo and Musa in *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* was built upon an extremely unique intercorporeity from the very beginning. Their coexistence in the houseboat established a set of body language that belonged exclusively to them: the rhythm of smoking together, the way he twisted her hair dry, the sensation of her hands stopping at the back of his neck when she kissed him. These bodily memories were so profound that when Musa left, Tilo's body could never erase these sensory memories. When she believed the rumors that

Musa had been killed in the Kashmir Valley, she preserved all the keepsakes left by Musa and cut off her long hair. This change in bodily image became a bodily mourning ritual. Until Tilo later saw Musa, who had narrowly escaped death, the first reaction of their bodies was still to draw closer to each other involuntarily (362) [11].

The same goes for Roy's love with JC. In her memoir, she describes the death-like feeling she experienced when she first met JC: "My brain, my heart, my soul—all parked themselves in my groin (64)." This description itself is an intuitive understanding of body phenomenology: love is not a psychological event, but a physical one. When Roy later left JC, her body carried all the sensory imprints of this relationship, which became an invisible reference for all her subsequent love choices.

There are several reasons for such a writing choice in the perspective of narrative identity [13]. First, Tilo in *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* as a "protective disguise" exemplifies what Ricœur calls the distancing function of narrative. Ricœur emphasizes that "emplotment" in narrative necessarily involves selection, deletion, and transformation, allowing the narrator to safely store her most vulnerable experiences in the interstices of fiction, so that narrative identity may flourish in the tension of being like someone yet not someone. Second, Tilo's ending is precisely the most creative aspect of Ricœur's "narrative identity"—narrative not only integrates the past but also points toward future possibilities. However, this is not purely fanciful compensation, but what Ricœur terms the practice of ipseity—through fictional narrative, Roy re-employs the emotional ruptures, identity anxieties, and class predicaments that remained unfulfilled in reality, thereby completing, on the narrative level, a rehearsal and claiming of a "possible self". Finally, the ultimate choice of Tilo answers precisely to the social dimension of Ricœur's theory of narrative identity. Ricœur points out that narrative identity is never a closed, individual possession; it is always interwoven with larger cultural and historical narratives, and individual stories are intertwined with the stories of others. Thus, Tilo's narrative identity has long overflowed the boundaries of Roy's individual selfhood, becoming a metaphorical vehicle for collective predicaments.

3.2 The Voice of Asthma: Auditory Stimuli as Allegory of Breath

In the three books, the most central disease imagery is asthma and coughing. In all three books, the character suffering from asthma is the mother, which permeates the mother-daughter relationships in Roy's three books. Whether it is the description of the deep shadow near Ammu's collarbone in *The God of Small Things* or the venous collapse and skin cyanosis caused by severe hypoxia in Tilo's mother in *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, they all stem from the experiences of young Roy caring for his mother. In the biography, she repeatedly records her mother's illnesses and trance-like state, such as "She was almost comatose" and "her rage was uncontrollable". Testimonial literature places greater stress on the ethical responsibility and cognitive authority behind the act of autobiographical transplantation [15]. Roy must transplant rather than invent because she needs the very presence of her own body to guarantee the authenticity of the illness in her fiction. This transplantation is not undertaken for the sake of formal novelty, but to fulfill the testimonial mission of sustaining resistance through writing, so that the novel's critical force derives directly from a body that has been pierced by reality.

Firstly, the political metaphor of asthma lies in the lack of freedom to breathe, which means that the most basic rights to survival and development cannot be guaranteed. Asthma is not merely a recurring pathological image but a metaphor for the disorder of the perceptual field. Breathing is one of the most primordial intentional arcs of human existence. Inhalation lets the world enter the self; exhalation lets the self merge into the world. The rhythm of breathing constitutes a reversible symbiosis between the body and its environment. Yet asthma destroys this reversibility—air becomes an embodied oppression. The mother's body is no longer an active dwelling place that freely exercises its right to existence, but a passive receptacle for external tensions. Under the caste system, Dalits must cover their mouths to prevent polluting others: their very breath is taboo, let alone falling in love across classes. Under gender oppression, women's voices are suppressed, and their breathing space being encroached upon is actually a result of the loss of discourse power. Under military violence,

for Kashmiris, no matter what people are doing, they are in the soldiers' sights. Under globalization developmentism, tribes inundated by dams and communities polluted by industry face threats to their breathing space from the poisoning of water and air. Asthma, this condition of being unable to breathe freely: thus becomes a true portrayal of the living conditions of India's lower-class people: in a society that systematically deprives people of breathing space, everyone can potentially become an asthmatic patient.

Secondly, the intergenerational transmission of trauma caused by illness corresponds to the collective trauma inheritance of India's colonial history. Whether it is Roy herself in the biography or Tilo in *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* acknowledging that her mother's asthma always echoes in her ears, or Estha and Rahel in *The God of Small Things* who have been haunted for years by Ammu's death from asthma, as academic research points out, Roy reveals through the depiction of twins unable to overcome childhood trauma how traumatic experiences have unfortunately become a cultural heritage of Indian society, continuously tormenting generation after generation of Indian people. What is passed down from mother to daughter is not a virus, but a compressed survival dilemma: Mary is ostracized by her family due to divorce, and her breathing difficulties are a symptom created by the combined effects of gender politics and caste politics; what Roy inherits is not the disease itself, but the ability to perceive and the responsibility to speak about this dilemma. As Roy writes in *Mother Mary Comes to Me*, "I had to make every effort to keep her alive. Breathe for her" (37) [10].

Ultimately, the writing of illness rises from the bodily level to the level of collective allegory: the multiple crises faced by contemporary India can be understood as a sub-healthy state of a civilized body. If poverty is the root cause of illness, then the root cause of poverty in the lower strata of Indian society lies in the religious conflicts, military occupations, and caste oppression that have persisted since India's independence. These unstable factors have shaped the tense and polluted political atmosphere in India, which, reflected in specific individuals, manifests as a series of respiratory diseases. In *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, Saddam, as a survivor of violent incidents, finds it difficult to let go for the rest of his life. Saddam's father was lynched to death by a group of high-caste Indian thugs for transporting dead cows (a job assigned to Dalits in India). Saddam, who was present at the scene, could only watch his father being beaten to death. He was powerless to stop it from happening, let alone rescue his father. In extreme confusion and fear, as he said to Anjum, he became one of the people who killed his father (Roy 88-89) [11]. When Tilo is interrogated by the military organization controlling Kashmir in *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, she felt the air in the room is exhausted, and breathing becomes impossible. It is necessary to simulate breathing. This implies that breathing itself becomes a crime, and simulating breathing also becomes a cruel metaphor for the living conditions of Kashmiris: a nation driven out of its own land and forced to live at the mercy of others. Ultimately, Roy's narrative of illness boils down to the fact that breathing is never a basic physiological activity for individuals. Where to breathe, how to breathe, for whom to breathe, and whether to be allowed to breathe freely all stem from the manifestation of politics acting on individuals. Therefore, the mother's fight against illness actually reflects the process of how the traumatized younger generation in Indian society seeks hope amidst the dark social reality, as well as their efforts to break through the backward social structure with personal fighting.

4. The Allegory of Contemporary India: A National Panorama Under Private Sensory Testimony

When Roy stood under the world's spotlight as the first Asian winner of the Booker Prize in 1997, her perspective and scope of thinking underwent a transformation. She brought the true face of India to the world, and her concern for humanity extended from India to the global stage. Roy's two primary concerns are war and ecology, which correspond to the fundamental concern of whether and how humanity can survive better. When she delved into the Kashmir region, she extensively collected materials from various sources to reveal to the world the tragic suffering of the local people caught

in the crossfire. When she visited the Narmada Valley, she stood firmly with the local people who were about to lose their homes, based on her inner conscience, and opposed the government's violent policies. When she truly participated in political and social activities as a practitioner, she increasingly felt that writing was her means of resistance. Life-writing theory emphasizes that the autobiographical subject is not an isolated inner entity, but a positional existence formed within specific historical and social coordinates. Roy's distinctiveness lies in her use of bodily presence as a guarantee, endowing her narrative with an irreplaceable cognitive authority [16].

4.1 The Shadow of War: Visual Politics and the Allegory of Violence

In Roy's novels, war is endowed with a strong sense of immediacy and presence by her, as if it were a constant companion in people's lives. When reading her narratives of war, as long as readers engage their senses, they can sense the subtle signs of war either happening or having happened. By depicting the most overlooked details of conflict in India's domestic wars, her writing possesses a profound ability to evoke empathy from readers worldwide.

In *The God of Small Things*, Murlidharan, a madman, wanders around almost naked, lingering near the railway crossing. Although this war-torn figure appears only a few times in the novel, it carries profound symbolic meaning and is of great significance for understanding the theme of the entire book. He joined the Indian National Army in Singapore in 1942 to resist British colonial rule. His arms were amputated due to being blown off by artillery fire, which directly led to his mental disorder. What is most impressive about Murlidharan's appearance is that he carries a plastic bag on his head, which is a subtle metaphor for a group forgotten by history. Originally a member of the local community, he was excluded from the daily lives of normal people, as if a transparent and invisible barrier separated him from the world of normalcy. (Roy 63) [7]. His perceptual structure is reconfigured by the foreign object of the plastic bag; the world presents itself to him in fragments. He is forced to live within a reduced, reified flesh. People see only his grotesque appearance, unable to empathize with his trauma. He can perceive his environment, but because his perception is constantly distorted, he cannot emit social gestures comprehensible to others. This double aphasia renders him, phenomenologically, an extreme stranger. By placing this silenced body at the narrative center, Roy accomplishes a crucial step in life writing: granting biographical existence, through the sensory observation of others, to those who cannot write their own autobiographies. This is precisely the political ethics of life writing: individual bodily memory is always a microcosm of national destiny.

When Roy was sentenced to detention by the court for engaging in social activities, the Gujarat massacre, which Roy described as "our present was indeed running toward our past (Roy 257) [10]", was intensifying. Although Roy herself did not experience this catastrophe, she presented the cruelty and absurdity of this massacre to readers through the perspective of those who lived through it in *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*. In India, a land with a diverse ethnic mix, the wrath of contemporary warfare has not spared ordinary people who have suffered from historical trauma. The details of the Kashmir War, which are not easily detected and recorded, are presented in astonishing detail in *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, thanks entirely to Roy's special experience of being on the front lines of war (Roy 190) [11].

If Roy in *Mother Mary Comes to Me* is a human rights investigator who delves into a society that is highly militarized, filled with daily atrocities, and riddled with institutional lies, to uncover the truth obscured by the mainstream Indian nationalist narrative, then Tilo in *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* embarks on a solo journey to Kashmir, driven by the call of her former lover Musa. This is more of a personal adventure. According to Sugata Bose and Ayesha Jalal, the conflicts in Kashmir has led to severe outcomes in history: "nearly a million people died, and some seventeen million refugees stumbled fearfully across the hastily drawn borders between India and Pakistan [17]".

In *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, when Bipulab visits Tilo's room, the most visually striking images are two photographs: one shows the body of Musa's daughter lying in the snow on a shroud that has already congealed with blood; the other shows a young man of Kashmir, Gul-kak, holding a

kitten and wearing a bright smile (190). According to the perspective of phenomenology of perception, vision itself is a tactile extension of the body. By presenting photographs through writing, Roy allows the reader to “caress” the represented objects with their eyes.

In the working notes of *The Visible and the Invisible*, Merleau-Ponty uses “punctum caecum” as an embodied metaphor of invisibility, to refer to a fundamental lack within the structure of vision (248) [8]. For Merleau-Ponty, it is not merely a physiological phenomenon but also a philosophical metaphor: it signifies a dimension within the visible that is forever invisible. The “punctum caecum” shows that even the most self-evident perceptual experience always contains a certain absence — the structure of the visible is itself constituted by invisibility. This insight forms the core of Merleau-Ponty’s ontology: the intertwining of the visible and the invisible is not an accidental phenomenon but a fundamental feature of being itself. Thus, when we examine Barthes’ related theories, it is not difficult to see that his use of the term “punctum” is by no means a mere linguistic coincidence. In 1980, Roland Barthes proposed in *Camera Lucida* that there are always two heterogeneous elements present in photographs: one is the studium, which refers to the universal interpretation based on cultural and social consensus in photographs; the other is the punctum, which refers to the details in photographs that can unexpectedly touch the viewer’s emotions like sharp pricks, capable of leading the reader to a spiritual dimension beyond the image [18]. The punctum of the first photograph is the shoe and the blood rose: they remind the viewer of the public nature and brutal poetry of the deceased being surrounded by onlookers; the punctum of the second photograph is the smile and the future death - they transform joy into mourning in the near future. The juxtaposition of the two photographs creates a higher-level punctum: life and death coexist on the same wall in the same space, but they do not meet in time. The deceased in the first photograph is already stiff and cold, but the person in the second photograph was not dead at that time; and as readers, we already know that he will eventually die. The reason why this smile is more heartbreaking than the snow in the first photograph is precisely because it is disguised as life. In Barthes’ view, the cruelty of photographs lies in their function as a kind of warning: the living will eventually become the dead. In the second photograph, joy becomes the pre-punctum of death in the unpredictable next moment, while death is the post-punctum that emerges only in the future of that photograph. This also constitutes the core theme of Roy’s war narrative: in India, the joy of life and the shadow of death always appear simultaneously.

The two war stories satirize the Indian government’s failure to learn from the disastrous consequences of past conflicts, as well as its neglect of individual historical trauma, leading to the repetition of similar tragedies. Therefore, as in the dialogue between Chacko and the twins in *The God of Small Things*, “our minds have been invaded by a war. A war that we have won and lost. The very worst sort of war. A war that captures dreams and re-dreams them. A war that has made us adore our conquerors and despise ourselves” (Roy 53) [7]. This philosophical statement can be said to summarize the fundamental reason for all wars in human history: the evil deep within human nature, and the most common manifestation of this evil is greed. The human penchant for aggression and the blind pursuit of so-called “victory”, finding pleasure in becoming a “conqueror”. Here, Roy’s argument about war carries warning significance for the future of humanity as a whole in the context of world history, as well as bears the characteristics of a world allegory. If humans cannot fundamentally reverse their attitude towards war and their understanding of the serious consequences it causes, then the outbreak of war will always be inevitable.

4.2 The Flooded Village: Ecological Interaction and the Allegory of Connection

According to Roy’s autobiography, we learn that after Roy decided to pursue a writing career, her first thought was of her hometown. Among all the sights and sounds of her hometown, the Meenachil River was the first to emerge in her mind, bringing inspiration for literary creation. As she herself said, she felt as if this river had never left her. Therefore, this also explains why rivers and water bodies frequently appear in her creations, because she herself is the daughter of the river.

Merleau-Ponty points out that the human body is not a closed container but is intertwined with the world through perception and the flesh of the world. Natural elements such as rivers, land, and air are

inherently extensions of the body schema (132) [8]. In Roy's novel, the water body should be a natural horizon within the perceptual field of local inhabitants, carrying prereflective concordances linked to the senses. Pollution alters not only the inhabitants' living environment but also their cognitive structure of perceiving the world. Their bodies can no longer smoothly project intentional arcs, because the river no longer responds with familiar scenes but constantly emits signals of decay and contamination.

In Chapter 5 of *The God of Small Things*, Roy paints a shocking picture of the severe degradation of the river and its coastal ecosystem. This is precisely what Rahel, now an adult, witnessed upon her return to her long-lost hometown [7]. Through this ecological degradation, Roy expresses her critical stance towards the deteriorating political ecology and the encroaching Western commercial forces. In this passage, the floating objects in the river, such as dead fish and plastic flowers, appear vibrant but are actually decaying, decorating the extremely deteriorated ecological environment like a skeleton of Ayemenem's mother river. The towering walls above the river are a concrete manifestation of the insurmountable class barriers. As the scene changes with every step, Roy allows readers to breathe in the fecal odor that shrouds the entire area like a hat, making them acutely aware that this heartbreaking ecological degradation has reached its satirical peak. Because unlike vision and touch, which can select perceptual foci, olfaction cannot avoid its objects. This passive response is a meaning-constitution that precedes judgment, laying the fundamental impression of the world upon us. By forcibly implanting an anomalous signal into the perceptual bedrock of the inhabitants, each breath compels the perceiving subject to acknowledge a continually deteriorating and collapsing ecosystem, depriving the subject of the right to filter perceptual objects. The unpleasant odor becomes an inescapable sensory burden. The newly built dam is the real culprit, not only submerging the wanderer's memories of his hometown but also appearing in a deceptive guise: temporary economic gains come at the cost of the comprehensive degradation of everything perceivable.

As the text states that the dam drowned the protagonist's memories of her homeland. In phenomenological terms, this can be precisely located as the violent overlay of geometric objective space upon sensible lived space. Merleau-Ponty distinguishes between abstract spatial coordinates and embodied places (115-116) [13]. The dam's construction transforms a living, rhythmic, warm watercourse into calculable hydraulic resources, while simultaneously submerging the riparian memories (such as childhood, intimate relationships) under water. This flooding is not a metaphor but a disappearance of horizon within the perceptual field—when Rahel returns, the sensory markers she once used for orientation (such as a certain riverbank, a certain tree) are utterly absent; her body can no longer project the familiar essence of homeland. Memory is no longer a psychological content but a coupling of body and place. When the place is erased by objective engineering, memory loses its perceptual anchor and becomes a hovering residue.

It is noteworthy that, in Roy's perspective, the construction of dams, an act of human conquest and utilization of nature, carries broader political and cultural implications of oppression. In Chapter 3 of *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, an unemployed security guard named Gulabiya Vechania sleeps under a billboard of a public toilet and dreams of his village, which was inundated due to the construction of a dam. The sweet dreamland contrasts starkly with the bitter reality. In the memoir *Mother Mary Comes to Me*, we can discover the inspiration for Roy's creation of this character in *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*. She once visited the Narmada region, which shocked India with its resistance to dam construction (236) [11]. At that time, the government reactivated the bill to build a dam there, which not only meant inundating a large area of local forests but also leading to the displacement of hundreds of thousands of indigenous people living in them. This is not an unfounded worry but a cruel reality, because villages near the dam have already been inundated. So, based on this analysis, the prototype of Gulabiya's character is relatively clear. He is likely to be an indigenous person from an inundated village imagined by Roy (113) [10]. Through this character, Roy reveals a profound proposition of life writing: when one's symbiotic bond with one's homeland is severed, his ipseity loses its frame of reference.

Gulabiya uses sensory experiences in his dreams to fully reckon with the destruction caused by political violence in reality. Tactilely, in his dreams, he experiences the coolness of river water, while in reality, the roof of his metal shack is so hot that it can fry onions. The temperature extremes, from the coolness of water to the burning heat of metal, record the pain of uprooting and leaving one's hometown experienced by dam immigrants from the ecological system of the river basin. Auditorily, in Gulabiya's dreams, imagery such as flute sounds and drumbeats functions as a collective and rhythmic co-presence. In reality, however, the restriction on wearing earrings constitutes not only a form of violence at the perceptual level for Gulabiya, but this violence also carries with it the deprivation of cultural identity and the deprivation of the intercorporeality that enables one to resonate with others through hearing. Consequently, under the repression of reality, the perceptual field is forced to retreat into dreams to carry out internal compensatory generation. Visually, in his dreams, he repeatedly confirms that "Fish didn't swim through his windows. Crocodiles didn't knife through the high branches of the Silk Cotton trees. Tourists didn't go boating over his fields, leaving rainbow clouds of diesel in the sky. (Roy 113) [11]" These negative statements negate precisely the tragic situation of villages being flooded after dam impoundment in reality. The phrase "in his dreams, his village still exists" is the lightest sentence in the entire paragraph, but it also delivers the heaviest blow. In reality, he can still find his way back to his village, but it has been completely erased from the map by government actions.

In his late work *The Visible and the Invisible*, Merleau-Ponty introduced the concept of "the flesh of the world", reimagining the ontological relationship between the world and the physical body. He believed that the perceiving subject and the perceived world are not two separate entities, and thus opposed the binary opposition between subject and object. "The flesh of the world" is not a material entity, but rather a wild being that gives rise to the identities of the sensible and the perceiving (248) [8]. Its core lies in reversibility, such as when the right hand touches the left, the identities of the perceiving and the perceived can be reversed. Therefore, the relationship between humans and the world is not simply one of the subject conquering the object, but rather an original symbiotic connection. The human body is neither a spectator of the world nor a master over nature. The intertwining of humans and the world determines that the world is an extension of human senses, and humans are thus a tangible part of the world. Arundhati Roy's novels reveal that human actions of forcibly conquering nature, such as building dams, essentially destroy the original reversible perception between humans and the world, severing the deep intertwining of humans with the environment, culture, and history. This negative interaction between politics and ecology leads to an irreversible chain reaction: political violence leads to ecological degradation, which in turn destroys the material foundation of local culture, and the disappearance of culture further disrupts the ability of communities to resist political violence. The illusion of "economic ascent" violently obscures this essence: behind the ecological metaphor lies the invasion of a dominant civilization upon a weaker one, achieving its own expansion by disrupting the symbiotic relationship between the weaker civilization and nature.

Roy refuses to offer utopian solutions, and this carries special significance in the ethics of life writing. This honest incompleteness, paradoxically, endows her life writing with a greater interventionary force—because it offers no cheap consolation, but instead transfers a direct perception of social predicaments intact to the reader, compelling them to "co-feel" with their own bodies the pains erased by the national development narrative. Roy's practice of life writing demonstrates that truly effective social critique must start from the writer's own body, pierced by reality. Her writing is not the elegant exposition of an observer, but an extension, in words, of the resistance of a body that has been summoned by the court, that has walked amid gunfire and dry riverbeds. This mode of writing, which fully injects private perception into public events, offers contemporary life writing its most action-oriented theoretical model: the self is never an isolated story, but is intimately bound up with every upheaval of its time.

5. Conclusion

From India to the world, Arundhati Roy integrates women's private narratives into the historical memory of the country and the future progress of the nation through the most honest bodily reflection of the senses. Facing the remnants of India's colonial history, she starts from the perspective of the parties involved, analyzing the unspoken secrets deep within the hearts of the entire nation. Although the caste system and patriarchal hegemony remain deeply entrenched, her mother Mary's life demonstrates how to forge one's own path forward in the cracks of society with dignity and humility. And she never backs down, using her pen as a weapon to explore how individuals can live with dignity in a society full of prejudice and injustice. As a world-renowned Indian female writer, Roy truly deserves the title of the conscience of contemporary India.

However, in addition to her identity as a writer, Roy is also widely known as a social activist. Over the years, she has actively engaged in social movements and published a large number of non fiction works, actively intervening in complex historical and social issues in India. Her representative works include *The End of Imagination*, *Walking with the Comrades*, *Capitalism: A Ghost Story*, etc. These works that truly reflect a specific aspect of contemporary Indian society also include many fragments related to sensory writing, but due to length limitations, they cannot be elaborated thoroughly in this study, and there are few specialized discussions in the domestic research community focusing on these works. In fact, if these works are effectively studied, they will provide unique and abundant perspectives for understanding Arundhati Roy's creative practice and adventurous experience.

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