

## **The Politics of Form in Arundhati Roy's *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness***

**Rupam Sindhu Kalita**

Guwahati, India

E-mail : [kalitarupam09@gmail.com](mailto:kalitarupam09@gmail.com)

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### **Abstract**

Most commentaries and reviews of Arundhati Roy's novel *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* (2017) have engaged with its politics by conflating the politics of literature with the politics of its writer. While this can be a valid approach to express the relation between the novel and its politics, this paper argues that the truly political element in the novel is its form, not its content. Drawing from the work of Jacques Ranciere, Walter Benjamin and Gyorgy Lukacs, this paper is an attempt to engage with the novel's formal constitution by focusing on three elements---its allegorical style, Roy's poetics and the idea of form as fulfilment. A close reading of the novel, keeping in mind these three indices, I have argued, offers a paradigm of political emancipation in our historical era.

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**Keywords:** Politics of Literature, Literary Form, Allegory, Poetics, Redemption

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“In form there is no more longing and no more loneliness.”

- Gyorgy Lukacs, *Soul and Form*

“Yea, when the Highest comes to reap the harvest from the graveyard, then I, a death’s head, will be an angel’s countenance.”

- Daniel Casper von Lohenstein, *Redender Todten-Kopff*

The publication of Arundhati Roy’s second novel *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* (2017) prompted numerous commentaries and reviews, most of which have sought to understand its politics by conflating the politics of literature with the politics of its writer. Such correlation looks at what position the litterateur strikes in relation to the important political events of the day, the modes of representation of socio-political struggles, and the terms of such an understanding also extend to the characters and what they say and how they behave in the represented historical situations. Politics, such an approach appears to claim, insinuates into the novel by way of what we might call a ‘semantic’ commitment of the writer, that is, by making visible specific ‘contents’ which take the form of characters and ideas that convey the nature of the writer’s political commitment. In other words, this way of reading literature gives conspicuous textual features a political valence by relating them immediately and even causally to corresponding features of the contemporaneous society. This seems to be a valid approach through which we might express the relationship between literature and politics for if litterateurs and literary scholars have discussed *Ministry* in terms of its content, it is because of the nature of the novel itself, in which a built-in distinction between form and

content is maintained in its very structure. Roy's novel by no means gives the illusion of absolutely disengaged reading, of a self-sufficient work which needs no object or model in the outside world. Instead, *Ministry* is characterized by the manner in which it always holds such a model, such a basic external reality, before our eyes in the very act of reading it.

This approach is right in juxtaposing the novel with some vaster form of social reality which is seen in one way or another as its source or condition of origin. One can read literature by making it an object with which to demonstrate sociological theses, but we can also work towards a criticism in which the social element in literature is analysed to reveal something essential about the narrative's quality and this is precisely the basis of my attempt in this paper to work towards a theory of the relation between *Ministry* and the historical conditions in which it is composed. Theodor Adorno writes that nothing that is heteronomous to the literary work can legitimate a determination of what its substance, that which has entered into its pages, represents in social terms and therefore, social concepts should not be applied to literature from without but rather drawn from an exacting examination of the works themselves (39). This premise therefore should not lead one away from the narrative but more deeply into it even though the narrative at hand is thoroughly saturated with contemporaneous events. My approach in this paper is based on the conviction that a political interpretation of narrative may not focus directly on the so-called social perspective or the social interests of the narrative or its author, but instead demand a descent into the materiality of language and a consent of time itself in the form of the individual sentence. Jacques Ranciere provides an apposite conceptual compass to start thinking towards such criticism when he writes:

“The syntagma ‘politics of literature’ means that literature ‘does’ politics as literature – that there is a specific link between politics as a definite way of doing and literature as a definite practice of writing” (*Dissensus*, 152).

Further on, he states:

“The fundamental axis of the poetic-political relationship is thus not the one where the “truth” of the utterance depends on the “quality” of which is represented. It rests in the method of presentation, in the way in which utterance makes itself present, imposes the recognition of immediate meaning in the sensory”(*Flesh of Words*,14).

This suggests that literature is political not in terms of *what* it conveys, but in terms of *how* it creates meaning which is in turn caught up in the modes of individuation specific to the work. Any apprehension of the work’s political significance therefore requires one to reach down to its formal architecture, whose constitutive logic operates processes of subjectification by proposing new ways of isolating and articulating the world, or rather, affects a disturbance in what Rancière calls “the distribution of the sensible.” According to Rancière, the distribution of the sensible is a system of divisions and boundaries that define, among other things, what is visible and audible within a particular aesthetico-political regime(*The Politics of Aesthetics* 12). Disincorporated and intransitive words, by virtue of not being grounded in the encrusted familiarity of the world, alter the perceptual coordinates of the community and create an interruption in the partition of the sensible. Thus, literature introduces new relationships between words and things by refusing the reader the comfort of adjustment to a warmly recognizable world in all its represented concreteness.

A significant corollary of Rancière’s theory is that the idea of ‘political literature’ is not locked in a utilitarian relationship vis-a-vis a given socio-political end but instead operates as a determinate excess of the means-end duality. In other words, the politics of literature cannot be reduced to a political program, which would make literature a technique of ideology critique, or a technique for properly representing social relations. Rancière defines literature and politics as singular domains of human thought and activity and as forms of dissensus in that both these activities, each in its own way, involves forms of innovation that tear bodies from their assigned places, and frees speech and expression from the reduction to functionality

(*Dissensus*<sup>01</sup>). In other words, they are forms of creation that are irreducible to the spatio-temporal horizons of a given factual community.

In this light, this paper argues that the relationship of Roy's novel to its historical situation need not be posed in terms of its immediate availability to other forms of social and political discourse. Rather, I am more interested in understanding the various techniques used in the narrative whose modes and procedures take upon themselves the stuff provided by immediate history but only as a pretence for an elaboration of the meaning and scope of the various formal devices used in the narrative. Simultaneously, I shall hopefully be able to demonstrate that an exegesis of the formal constitution of *Ministry*, far from lapsing into a fetishistic rendering of the narrative, offers a paradigm rather than a displacement of emancipatory political thought.

### (I)

The problematic of form in literature is taken as an important heuristic category in this paper and is preliminary understood as the index where the vicissitudes of historical life that gives rise to it are encoded and expressed, and which mediates between the authentic impulse of the creator and the social conditions within which the creator works. Literary form therefore cannot be itself without the historical situation from which it emerges and on which it reacts back, and such a historical understanding of form is succinctly captured by Judith Butler when she summarizes the Gyorgy Lukacs of *Soul and Form* thus:

“Forms come into being when a certain requirement to express reality in certain ways exercises a demand on literature, but forms permit or engender a certain kind of expressivity, one that would be impossible without them” (*Introduction* 04).

Therefore, form is not simply a vehicle through which a theme is communicated. Indeed, it would be impossible to separate form from theme precisely because the theme only becomes articulated through and as form itself. A certain transmutation and sublimation of theme takes place as it emerges as form which is not added on to expression, but becomes the

very condition, the sign and possibility of thematic concerns. Literary form is therefore neither subjectively conjured nor objectively imposed; rather, form as practice and as a conceptual operation involves a kind of mediation between what is putatively divorced as the data of individual experience and the vaster forms of institutional society, the language of existence and that of history (Jameson 06).

Lukacs offers some clues regarding the formal constitution of the novel when he writes:

“The inner form of the novel has been understood as the process of the problematic individual’s journeying towards himself, the road from dull captivity within a merely present reality [...] towards clear self-recognition. After such self-recognition has been attained, the ideal thus formed irradiates the individual’s life as its immanent meaning; but the conflict between what is and what should be has not been abolished and cannot be abolished in the sphere wherein these events take place---the life sphere of the novel; only a maximum conciliation---the profound and intensive irradiation of a man by his life’s meaning---is attainable” (*The Theory of the Novel*80).

The formal properties of the novel manifest the fragmentation and dissonance of the world that it reflects. The novelistic hero, untouched by grace, at odds with her world, driven by an ethical imperative that transcends her existence, is necessarily impelled on a quest for immanent meaning, but one that is doomed to frustration. Her journey towards self-discovery remains unfulfilled. She discovers through experience that her innermost yearnings cannot be exhausted by the existing socio-historical categories since the conflict between the ideal and the empirical cannot be abolished within the world created by the novel. A mere glimpse of essential meaning is the highest that life has to offer and such a glimpse, although momentary and a poor stand-in for the vanished immanence of life is all that a lifelong of adventure and search could yield. Such moments in which the chasm

between the individual and the community seems to be bypassed constitute the immanent meaning of life, and even though incapable of soldering the individual's deepest yearnings with the social forms in which she exists, they nonetheless appear as the only things worth the commitment of an entire life, the only thing by which the struggle will have been justified (*The Theory of the Novel* 64). In *Ministry*, such moments illuminate the individual's life which unfolds amid all the fissures inherent in the historical situation in which the novel is composed. Let the following extracts from the novel therefore stand as instantiations of a kind of stylistic principle through which the novelistic consciousness comes to its truth:

"*Concentrate*, the kidnapper told herself as she stroked the baby's damp, sweaty forehead. *Otherwise things could get completely out of hand*. She had no idea why she of all people, who never wanted children, had picked up the baby and run. But now it was done (Roy 259)."

The kidnapper's act belies her own understanding. She is a conscientious wanderer who has left the comforts of family-life and moved into the wide plain of her own vision in one moment, and the next moment, she is the baby-lifter who hugs and caresses the baby she steals. She runs away from the pandemonium created by the seekers of justice whose bigoted opinions and acts ensure that they lapse into mirror-images of those they claim to oppose, and rescues the sliver of life. She takes the first step, and then the next, until it is done, without her having wanted it, without, perhaps, her realising what was happening. We are told that Tilo had never wanted children and her act therefore constitutes a violation of her general disposition but she comes to life in and through that deed and it irrevocably determines her destiny and nothing can be done about it. This point in the narrative in which Tilo becomes foreign to herself is the axis on which the plot turns. The baby brings joys of a new beginning in a life hardpressed by the void between Tilo's longings and the social forms which act upon her like constraints, sapping her of vitality as her inner being remains homeless in a forsaken

world. Tilo's life would be different from this moment onwards and it would also influence the other sub-plots in the narrative and ensure that the paths of a motley group of characters separated by birth and calling cross and overlap.

(II)

And when a pervasive sense of loss had replaced the rage and bitterness of the first moments, and the narrative turns around in a cycle of hopelessness, we come upon the following lines:

“The baby was the beginning of something. This much the kidnapper knew. Her bones had whispered this to her that night (the *said* night, the concerned night, the aforementioned night, the night hereinafter referred to as ‘the night’) when she made her move on the pavement. And her bones were nothing if not reliable informants. The baby was Miss Jebeen returned. Returned, that is, not to her (Miss Jebeen the First was never hers), but to the world. Miss Jebeen the Second, when she was grown to be a lady, would settle accounts and square the books. Miss Jebeen would turn the tide.

There was hope yet, for the Evil Weevil World.

True, the Happy Meadow had fallen. But Miss Jeben was come” (Roy 215).

The baby in its bed of litter is perceived as another being in a different time and place, the coming-into-being yet again of that speck of life that was extinguished by war but which is now posited as the bearer of hope. But such a glorious moment from which hope and redemption spring is enveloped in a night of darkness. The baby is found amid debris, at an abandoned hour when the leadensky closes in upon the city but through whose hazy mist there is visible bud and bloom:

“Still the Amaltas bloomed, abriiliant, defiant yellow. Each blazing summer it reached up and whispered to the hot brown sky, *Fuck You*.

She appeared quite suddenly, a little after midnight. No angels sang, no wise men brought gifts. But a million stars rose in the east to herald her arrival. One moment she wasn't there,



and the next – there she was on the concrete pavement, in a crib of litter: silver cigarette foil, a few plastic bags and empty packets of Uncle Chipps. She lay in a pool of light, under a column of swarming neon-lit mosquitoes, naked. Her skin was blue-black, sleek as a baby seal's. She was wide awake, but perfectly quite, unusual for someone so tiny. perhaps, in those first short months of her life, she had already learned that tears, *her* tears at least, were futile" (Roy 96).

All round the baby, there stretches miles of ruins---of the petrified remains of history, and also of the idea of social democracy and progress. But Tilo is enchanted by this embryonic human in the Golgotha of destruction. Her experience of what lies around her is not fixed and encumbered by its bleakness. She apprehends the surrounding darkness as no longer permanent, in a sense of its transitoriness, as passing out of being, that, this is not the end. Tilo's experience of this world as momentary and fugacious takes a fragmentary and enigmatic form; in it, the world ceases to be purely physical and becomes an aggregation of signs. The baby is drained of all immanent meaning after which it lies as a pure facticity under the manipulative hand of the novelist, awaiting such meaning as she may imbue it with. A line of demarcation is drawn between the object and meaning and the writing happens at the sliding hinge between signifier and signified and the baby is therefore not what it seems to be and instead gestures towards another being from a different time and place. Roy's technique, fed on decay and loss, is therefore an allegorical technique. And this is not the only moment in the narrative which is rendered allegorically, but allegory is a structuring principle in the entire narrative, a focal point from which to look on things and the novel is a demonstration of allegory as the privileged mode of our own time, a clumsy deciphering of meaning from moment to moment, the attempt to restore a continuity to heterogeneous, disconnected instants, at a time when language, leashed to immediate history, has been dolefully tainted by meaning. Whenever destiny spites the endearing bunch of characters in *Ministry*, and the given world seems to be irredeemably lost, a ray of heavenly light alights in the midst of the creaturely estate that brings news of certain redemption. Its starry firmament suddenly shines

in the dark night of destruction and also lights their path, and the inner light affords evidence of security, or its illusion, to Tilo, Saddam and Anjum's next step, tempts them to dream of new unities---unities which contradict the world's new essence and are therefore always threatened by antithetical forces.

Roy's novel is a ruin by virtue of its allegorical substructure, and it accomplishes in and of itself the destruction of the beautiful illusion, the pretension to totality characteristic of symbolic works of art. The leitmotif of redemption represents the truth-content of the novel; yet not a disembodied truth that would be separable in some way from the material content in which it is cloaked, but one which is thoroughly mediated by that material content and only attainable by way of such mediation. The solution to the riddle of the novel is to be found in the fact that not in spite of but because of the utter squalor and despair of its material content, it is simultaneously transformed into a novel of redemption. The allegorical intention does not rest in the contemplation of the destruction wrecked on the city and its inhabitants, but leaps forward to the idea of resurrection, much in the spirit of Walter Benjamin's thesis in *Trauerspiel*:

"It is to misunderstand the allegorical entirely if we make a distinction between the store of images in which this about-turn into salvation and redemption takes place, and that grim store which signifies death and damnation. For it is precisely visions of the frenzy of destruction, in which all earthly things collapse into a heap of ruins, which reveal the limit set upon allegorical contemplation, rather than its ideal quality" (232).

He further states:

"The allegorical intention clears away the phantasmagoria of the objective and, left entirely to its own devices, re-discovers itself, not playfully in the earthly world of things, but seriously under the eyes of heaven" (*Trauerspiel* 232).

In much the same style is the following exposition when Tilo trembles at the prospect of receiving news of Musa's death in her new home surrounded by graves abutting a mortuary:

“Not because she loved him any less, but because the battered angels in the graveyard that kept watch over their battered charges held open the doors between worlds (illegally, just a crack), so that the souls of the present and the departed could mingle, like guests at the same party. It made life less determinate and death less conclusive. Somehow everything became a little easier to bear” (Roy 399).

Richard Wolin calls Benjamin's theory of allegory a demonstration of “redemptive criticism” in which the realm of redemption stands in an antithetical relation to the historical world. There is a “negative relation” between the Messianic and the historical age, which is to say that glimpses of the Messianic realm are indicated negatively by the most thoroughly profane and forsaken aspects of the latter. There exists a type of negative semiology whereby the profane order, if reversed, can be shown to hold the key to the sacred (60). And it is in this sense that the method of redemptive criticism searches against the flow of historical progress for those moments of “Messianic cessation of happening,” of a qualitative leap beyond history, the rare instances of now-time, into which images of reconciled life are compressed. The ‘negative’ system of references is ensured by the technique of allegory, through which the morbid imagery becomes valueless in and of itself and acquires significance only by way of pointing to an external, transcendent referent. For the allegorical form in which the themes of *Ministry* find expression is the form adequate from a historico-philosophical standpoint to those ages in which humans' relation to the absolute has become problematical, that is, in which that relation has ceased to be immanent to life (Wolin 66). Consequently, allegory devalues everything tainted by this-worldliness---the material content of its personages, emblems and situations---turning them instead into signposts of an enigmatic path to the absolute in which the social forms would no longer constrain the individual's innermost being, but instead would be the becoming conscious of that which is already latent in her mind. The

meanings of allegorical images are by no means self-evident and therefore they stand in need of completion for according to the historico-philosophical framework of the allegorical worldview, all meaning has ceased to be self-evident. In this chaotic cosmos of indiscriminate, miscellaneous fragments, the allegorist alone is sovereign. She is responsible for bestowing meaning in an inverted world in which any “person, any object, any relationship can mean absolutely anything else. With this possibility, a destructive but just verdict is passed on the profane world: it is characterized as a world in which the detail is of no great significance” (*Trauerspiel*, Benjamin 212). Although all objects in the profane world are devalued and they cease to be beings-for-self and now exist only as beings-for-others (that is, for the allegorist), nevertheless, in so far, as they are read as an allegorical cryptogram of redeemed life, they are simultaneously exalted.

### (III)

In her youth, Anjum walks in the world like a stranger. Her innermost and most particular essential nature appears to her only as a never-ceasing demand written upon the imaginary sky of that which ‘should be.’ This innermost nature lies buried within an unfathomable chasm within Anjum herself, and no one can ever sound or even glimpse the bottom of those depths which are visible on the other side of the chasm as indistinct shadows only to her hopeful, discerning eyes, and she turns restless. Anjum longs for a change and a new arrangement of the world in which she would hold sway in the middle and no longer put on a habit that while allowing her to survive the moment would destroy her from within. She wishes for a home and company in which her self, unfettered at last, would find expression and fulfil its precious longing.

“Longing,” wrote Lukacs, “is always sentimental---but is there such a thing as a sentimental form? Form means getting the better of sentimentality; in form there is no more longing and no more loneliness; to achieve form is to achieve the greatest possible fulfilment.

Yet the forms of poetry are temporal so that the fulfilment must have a “before” and an “after”; it is not being but becoming” (*Soul and Form*<sup>123</sup>). The act of becoming fulfilled in literature therefore presupposes dissonance. If fulfilment is attainable, it has to be attained---it can never be there as something natural and stable. The modest colours of the house that Anjum builds on the derelict graves give succour to the heartless vagrant and its terrace brings the pleasant wintry sun to the ageing Anjum as the cemetery is gradually hollowed out through the transforming power of the author’s allegorical subjectivity, through a successively progressing, dramatically mobile, dynamic representation of ideas which acquires the very fluidity of time. The dour graves are enclosed and converted into a lodge which Anjum and her friends name *Jannat*---Paradise---and a garden bears flowers that slowly cover up the dilapidated yard. The world created by Anjum and her friends upon the graveyard is a homogenous world, and even the separation between ‘I’ and ‘you’ cannot disturb its homogeneity. The ‘I’ draws sharp, sure lines, but it separates only relatively, only in relation to and for the purpose of a homogenous system of adequate balances. The relations forged among the motley group of dwellers and visitors to *Jannat* are but the coming to the surface of everything that had been lying dormant as a vague longing in the innermost depths of each individual. There is no chasm between cognition and action, between soul and created structure, between self and world and thus each individual action becomes complete in meaning and rounded because the individual rests within herself even while she acts and her deeds are adequate to the mind’s inner demand for unfolding and for wholeness.

But the insulated world of *Jannat* does not constitute a totality because it is only a stone’s throw away from the outside world that has betrayed its inhabitants. It is only a specious insularity that is constantly threatened by historical forces, and the immanence of meaning achieved in *Jannat* is merely the immanence of a surface that covers up the cracks but is incapable of retaining this immanence. Yet it is a refuge for those who, tossed around in the clutter and contingency of life, seek to rest their aching feet and try to forge armours of steel

out of their own streaming blood that would put them in good stead henceforth in their shrivelled lives. The wizened Ustad Hameed plays his dulcet notes on his harmonium and sings to Miss Jebeen:

*“Ae risakhi mora piyagharaaye*

*Bagh lagaissaangan ko*

O my companions, my love has come home

This bare yard has blossomed into a garden” (Roy 304).

Two events complement each other---the homecoming of the baby Miss Jeben, and the transformation of the graveyard, over a period of time, into an ordered flower-garden with the fuchsia and pistachio green house in the middle of it, beyond which stretches the boundless, chaotic waste-lands of life. Despite the dangers waiting in the wings, it seems, *Jannat*, for the time being, in its simple, empirical existence absorbs all longing within itself---all longing is completely dissolved in the event of the homecoming. The garden of *Jannat* turns into an idyll fortified against the decrepit city by its occupants’ mutual love and fellow-feeling, and therefore, in it, all longing is unequivocally cancelled. The rigor of the idyllic form in *Ministry* rests in the fact that even as the idyllic becomes graphically vivid in the contours of *Jannat*, the form remains epic as the inner and the outer are kept apart and then brought together with equal dexterity, and the reality of life remains intact and undissolved. Anjum’s longing, Saddam’s craving for vengeance and the Imam’s anxiety and considerateness do not dissolve into moods; their uncertain and innermost longing, fearful of the world outside, does not disappear into the bottomless and empty abyss of interiority but the ideal is realised, even if fleetingly, within the sombre walls of the house-upon-the graveyard. Their longing wanders through the wilderness of a harshly indifferently reality---as strangers, fugitives, outcastes---and for brief moments in and around *Jannat*, their essential beings, otherwise completely divorced from material life, find an adequate form to express themselves. The shelter-upon-

the-graveyard contains the fragments they have managed to shore up against their ruins. The redeemed world, although incomprehensible and seemingly unavailable forever, is in this way brought nearer and given visible form.

But the redeemed world is not *expressed* in the couplet. Insofar as Roy the poet injects her feelings into the couplet, the words take hold of them and metamorphose them but they do not merely signify them. Emotion has become thing; it now has the opacity of things; it is compounded by the material properties of the vocables in which it has been enclosed. The words, the phrase-things overflow the feelings which have produced them. This couplet is therefore an invitation to consider a language that has been turned inside out from the outside. Roy the poet is outside of language. Instead of first knowing things by their name, it seems that first she has a silent contact with them, since turning towards that other species of thing which for her is the word, touching them testing them, palpating them, she discovers in them a material quality. Roy takes away the instrumental aspect of words from them, and considers words as things and not as signs and it is this spirit that Jean-Paul Sartre attributes to the poet a certain inversion:

“Not knowing how to use them as a sign of an aspect of the world, he (sic) sees in the word the image of one of these aspects (14).”

The verbal image that Roy chooses for its resemblance to the flowers and shrubs growing in the yard is not necessarily the word which we use to designate these objects in the instrumental sense. As she is already on the outside, she considers words as a trap to catch a fleeting reality rather than as indicators of objective phenomena which would again throw her into the midst of things. In short, language for Roy is the mirror of the world. As a result, important changes take place in the internal economy of the word. Its sonority, length and visual aspect compose for her a face of flesh which *represents* rather than expresses signification. The yard sits athwart the graves. Blossom is flower, growth and joy. It is flower-growth, flower-joy and joyous-flower all at the same time. This outlandish object rises like a

monolith in the middle of the sentence, has a soft, tawny ardency, and by the elongation of the s, invites the reader to dwell on its mossy abundance and prolongs its happy tidings. One might think that Roy is composing a sentence, but this is only what it appears to be. She is creating an object. The word-things are grouped by associations of fitness and incongruity, like colours and sounds. They attract, repel and cancel each other and their association composes the veritable poetic unity; the ensemble of the words chosen functions as an image of the declarative nuance.

And at the same time, Roy constructs her story with rigor and sober matter-of-factness and she keeps out every lachrymose banality so that her lyricism is completely absorbed into the clear lines of her sketches. In her novel, the characters, smitten by destiny and abandoned by their loved ones, do not lapse into endless complaint: they look life straight in the eyes, calmly, with resignation perhaps, yet always courageously, always with head held high. Roy's method does not court the undisciplined pantheism of feeling which dissolves all form into a vague and formless lyricism of longing. Her sure-fingered draughtsmanship ensures that her story and her characters do not dissolve in the immateriality of transient moods, the incorporeality of contourlessness in a chaotic infinitude of totally unrestrained prose. Most people will regard Roy as a disciple of realism, a poet of poor folk, like many others. And this is right and proper, for it proves that Roy's longing has truly dissolved itself into form.

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**BIO-NOTE**

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Rupam Sindhu Kalita finished his M.Phil from the English Department, Delhi University. He is an independent scholar currently based in Guwahati.