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Transformative hope towards subversive resilience: The ethical roles of newspaper articles by Indian writers during the Covid-19 outbreak

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ABSTRACT

This article studies Indian writing in the English language published in English newspapers (Indian, Bangladeshi, British, US) during the first wave of the Covid-19 outbreak in India (March 22–May 25, 2020). The selected authors include Arundhati Roy, Tishani Doshi, Anuradha Roy, and Prayaag Akbar, to illustrate the transnational consequences of the Covid-19 outbreak in different areas of India and analyse the narratology of resilience to articulate ethical knowledge against regional, national, and international stereotypes.

I propose the concept *transformative hope* as an oppositional complaint (Bargués et al., 2024; Braithwaite, 2004; Giroux, 2004) against political and representational systems of domain articulated against the capitalist politics of who can afford to survive. This study shows a possible subversive resilience (Bracke, 2016; Darías-Beautell, 2020; Fraile-Marcos, 2020a; O'Brien, 2015) that, together with writing and reading, can implement alliance, rather than affiliation, and praises an ethical and transformative hope that dissents against the resilient appropriation of neoliberalism to benefit from tragedies like Covid-19.

KEYWORDS: Indian writing in English, Covid-19, transformative hope, subversive resilience

1. 'A TRANSNATIONAL EPIDEMIC': COVID-19 NARRATIVES IN INDIA

Narratives of resilience and survival varied during the outbreak of Covid-19 in February and March of 2020, from celebratory possibilities for global change, to critiques against survival becoming an individual commodity. Deaths, scientific treatments, religious superstitions, and world divisions (based on gender, ethnicity, or economy) articulated narrative possibilities

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around safety. Media, essays, films, music albums, or novels currently dwell on those stories in a Covid-19 literary genre that negotiates fear and uncertainty as narrative constructs of resilience, care, healing, and the consideration of interconnection and interdependence.

This chapter focuses on Indian writing in English published online in different newspapers (from India, Bangladesh, the UK and the US) describing the Covid-19 outbreak in India (from March 22 to May 20, 2020). The choice of this literary platform is key because the consumption of printed newspapers in the country was feared and reduced during those months (Dodum, 2020), and they were also made available transnationally. The corpus includes three articles by Arundhati Roy (2020a, 2020b, 2021), describing the pandemic as portal and then as illustrator of the cruel political nationalisms of India, the US and the UK; three poems by Tishani Doshi (2020a, 2020b, 2020c) on the influence of media, caste, and communities; an article by Anuradha Roy (2020) detailing the reality of the outbreak in a hill station near the Himalayas; and a piece by Prayaag Akbar (2020) focusing on the regional particularities of coastal Goa and the metaphor of feeding pups. These publications offered symbols and testimonies of the outbreak to reflect the ethics of care in India and its further representation in contemporary fiction.

The selected texts describe the local and transnational consequences of the Covid-19 outbreak in and outside India. The literary representation of the pandemic in India has been studied by Om Dwivedi and Aleks Wansbrough (2024); Chandan Kumar Sharma and Reshmi Banerjee (2023); or Janet M. Wilson, Om Prakash Dwivedi and Cristina M. Gámez-Fernández (2020); and my contribution here highlights the collective and individual practices of reparatory dissent against regional, national, and international interlocking systems of domain (constructed on ethnicity, economic status, language, class, or caste) interwoven by the chosen authors. The writers selected in this article add different metaphors to illustrate the chronopolitics and geopolitics of the area to propose a *transformative hope* that dismantles the essentialist and positive reading of Covid-19 that I call *wonderfulisation*. I read this hope as an umbrella term that enacts subversive resilience (Bracke, 2016; Darias-Beautell, 2020; Fraile-Marcos, 2020a; O'Brien, 2015) to articulate ethical possibilities that incorporate knowledge from different parts of India that relate transnationally. The conclusion will show that writing and reading, including of online newspapers, dismantles geopolitical and representational systems of control articulated on who is more likely to survive.

2. DIFFERENT FORMS OF HOPE: TRANSFORMATIVE HOPE TOWARDS SUBVERSIVE RESILIENCE

The term *transformative hope* draws on the studies of Hope Theory (Bargués et al, 2024; Braithwaite, 2004; Fromm, 2011; Mauch, 2019; Snyder, 1995, 2000, 2002) to gather the sense of struggle recognised by Sara Ahmed to foster *hope-full* agency with the "iterative" and "additive" goal (2017, p. 2, p. 251) of challenging *neoliberally idealised* hope. Hope unveils a plethora of meanings as a noun and transitive or intransitive verb that connects with acts of "prospecting", "anticipating", "desire for something" (*OED*), or dependence on external sources. Hope gathers polysemic nuances that are geopolitical, capitalist, intergenerational, spiritual, religious, or, among many, transformative. Pol Bargués et al. highlight that "hope is necessary for critical theorists and essential for rethinking an ethical or political approach to future" (2024, p. 196), and I believe that hope interrelates with human agency as a dynamic concept beyond dichotomous and static understandings that advocate static survival through mere adaptation.

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Hope becomes *transformative* and incorporates, as Valerie Braithwaite adds, "reason", "action", and a "willingness toward dialogue rather than a turning away" (2004, p. 5). This transformative hope encompasses terminologically subversive resilience, accountability and dissent to enhance what Donna Haraway calls "the capacity of the world to 'world' us" (Haraway, p. 183, as cited in Bargués et al., 2024) and oppose neoliberal systems of power that operate resiliently. According to Bargués et al., hope "should not be taken as a plea for a kind of universal love, but as a situated, critical disposition that lays the foundation for becoming otherwise and for a different kind of politics" (2024, p. 201) because "hope is a process that plays a key role in the process of becoming" (p. 189) and "connectivity" (p. 198). Henry Giroux adds that hope is "subversive" (2004, p. 62) because it allows a complaint and a rupture. Hope can favour change instead of motionless adjustment, a *transformative* process that can develop for "years" (Mauch, 2019, p. 19) and that can turn the scholar into an activist (Melvine, 2023; Bartel & Castillo, 2017; hooks, 2007). The chosen writers stand as examples of this transformative hope and its potentials.

Arundhati Roy is an Indian writer and activist praised and criticised by Indian and international media for her political confrontations against right-wing, neoliberal and capitalist governments. She published the article "The pandemic as portal" (2020a) in the *Financial Time*s on April 3, 2020, one week after the official lockdown was declared in India (March 24, 2020). In this piece circulated worldwide, she gathered the first reactions praising networks of communal care but also criticising the wrong political actions taken. The potentialities of change inherent in the title "the pandemic as portal" (Roy, 2020a, para. 1) also recognised the wrong actions and inequalities fostered by governments in India, the US, and the world. In her own words:

> Historically, pandemics have forced humans to break with the past and imagine their world anew. This one is no different. It is a portal, a gateway between one world and the next.
>
> We can choose to walk through it, dragging the carcasses of our prejudice and hatred, our avarice, our data banks and dead ideas, our dead rivers and smoky skies behind us. Or we can walk through lightly, with little luggage, ready to imagine another world. And ready to fight for it. (Roy, 2020a, para. 47–48)

Transformative hope signals that survival involves change, not a static presence in the world. Roy expresses that "rupture exists" and it is the only survival mode "in the midst of this terrible despair" because "it offers us a chance to rethink the doomsday machine we have built for ourselves. Nothing could be worse than a return to normality" (2020a, para. 46). She recognises that the pandemic has challenged the limitations of capitalism and neoliberalism because "[t]he virus has moved freely along the pathways of trade and international capital [but] unlike the flow of capital, this virus seeks proliferation, not profit [in] the richest, most powerful nations of the world, bringing the engine of capitalism to a juddering halt" (2020a, para. 5). She indicates the narrative possibilities of the pandemic to question capitalism and "examine its parts, make an assessment and decide whether we want to help fix it, or look for a better engine" (2020a, para. 5). These alternative stories and opinions foster epistemic agency in the selected writings.

Epistemic agency favours the reversal of epistemic injustice produced and disseminated by what Miranda Fricker calls "distributive unfairness in respect of epistemic goods such as information or education" (2007, p. i). In other words, this agency opens an alternative to the exclusion and silence established by and about certain stories, places or voices. Roy's "The pandemic as portal" exercises epistemic agency and incorporates epistemologies from the South into the international narrative of the Covid-19 outbreak to create transnational

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ontologies that confirm that knowledge is incomplete (Santos, 2016, p. 21) and we can dissent from stereotyped narratives. Achille Mbembe recognises that there are areas of the world deliberately ostracised that he calls "death-worlds" (2003, p. 11), in the means of production and the political modes of rendering some lives more liveable than others. These thoughts reinforce the necessity of testimonies from the Global South, because knowing about Covid-19 in India beyond US and British news agencies incorporates what Suzanne Keen calls an "intersectional narratology [that] can accommodate a rich set of multiple, competing aspects of identity that provoke *divergent* responses to texts intended to evoke empathy" (2013, p. 50, my emphasis).

Roy shares this *divergent* answer when she criticises the excessive power of the US over the world when she writes, "[b]ut if it really were a war, then who would be better prepared than the US? If it were not masks and gloves that its frontline soldiers needed, but guns, smart bombs, bunker busters, submarines, fighter jets and nuclear bombs, would there be a shortage?" (2020a, para. 7). These descriptions envision the transnational possibilities of a global alliance of care that Partha Chatterjee acknowledges in the association of Indian communities (2019, p. 7) and Joan Tronto recognises when she claims: "care is a species activity that includes everything that we do to maintain, continue, and repair our "world" so that we can live in it as well as possible" (2013, p. 9). Roy denounces the tragedy in India, as "immediate, real, epic and unfolding before our eyes. But it isn't new" (2020a, para. 9). She blames it on years of political mismanagement, like "the wreckage of a train that has been careening down the track for years. Who doesn't remember the videos of "patient dumping — sick people, still in their hospital gowns, butt naked, being surreptitiously dumped on street corners" (2020a, para. 9). And she interweaves a narrative and transnational comparison for readers to embrace in constellations of care that can work locally and globally.

Roy dismantles the reduction of these alliances in the potential victimisation of India. Instead, she proposes transformative hope through the symbol of the portal as threshold for change. In her own words, "the lockdown worked like a chemical experiment that suddenly *illuminated hidden things*" (2020a, para. 27, my emphasis). Those *hidden things* are structures to be abolished, such as the Hindu religious supremacy implemented through Prime Minister Narendra Modi's "Hindu nationalist campaign, replete with threats of physical violence [and] brazenly discriminatory anti-Muslim" and his idea of "citizens as a hostile force that needs to be ambushed" (2020a, para. 15). The author criticises "the social, class and caste divide in the country [,] suspended somewhere between feudalisms and religious fundamentalism, caste and capitalism, ruled by far-right Hindu nationalists" (2020a, para. 12). She congratulates the measures implemented by some "state governments" in India (like West Bengal or Kerala) that counteracted national politics. Nevertheless, she also denounces the conditions of migrant workers along the country "beaten brutally and humiliated by the police" (2020a, para. 30), and the political misgovernance caused by "absent" politicians (2020a, para. 32), and the capitalist desire to make money, for "India had been exporting protective gear and respiratory equipment, instead of keeping it for Indian houses and hospitals" (2020a, para. 21) before declaring a curfew and health emergency on March 24, 2020. Roy therefore emphasizes the political, health, and economic differences that operate regionally in India and traces the importance of honouring the stories of illness; Rita Charon identifies these as potential methods of implementing a "*narrative competence* to recognize, absorb, interpret, and be moved by the stories of illness" (2008, p. 1, my emphasis) that can favour ethics globally.

The multiplicities within India and their ethical challenges are acknowledged in the selected texts, highlighting the *narrative competence* and nuances recognised by the different writers. On May 23, 2020, one month after the first article, Roy demanded a "reckoning" and "accountability" (2020b, para. 1) in an article published by the *Financial Times* called "After

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the lockdown, we need a reckoning". Roy recognises "the military metaphors, the fearmongering, hatemongering and stigmatisation around the disease" and acknowledges that "the lockdown [was] eased" and that they had "to learn to live with the virus" (2020b, para. 3). But Roy does not conform, and she demands change and transformation, and so she claims, "What do I most look forward to as we emerge from the lockdown? Most urgently, a carefully drawn up ledger of accountability" (2020b, para. 1). The idealisation of modes of life that I call *wonderfulisation* does not appear, and she recognises "the zero-planning-lockdown" as a "nightmare from which we may never fully recover" (2020b, para. 5). The writer mentions that "3,000 people [died] in India" during the outbreak, "extrapolating [this number to] the 150,000 people, most of them poor, [who] died from that other infectious respiratory illness, tuberculosis, much of it the drug-resistant variety" (2020b, para. 4).

Roy reinforces the idea that there was no reason to celebrate the easing of the lockdown in May 2020, for India faced chaos and a lack of care, and "[m]illions of workers found themselves stranded in cities with no food, shelter, money or means of transport" (2020b, para. 7) because of the declaration of the lockdown. Roy compares the lockdown with caste structures and states, "[w]e have lived with 'untouchability' — caste apartheid — for centuries. Religious apartheid is in an advanced stage of preparation" (2020b, para. 15). She points to political accountability while denouncing "police brutality" as well as the scarce attention given to this situation by PM Modi, as she exclaims, "Modi has only once mentioned this desolate exodus, even then obliquely, dressing it up in Hindu notions of *tapasya* and *tyaag* — penance, self-mortification and sacrifice" (2020b, para. 13). Social distancing favoured high classes and castes, as Roy documents:

> [I]n the era of Covid-19, such attentiveness towards one class and such overt cruelty towards another only makes sense if in future India's flying classes and walking classes are to be hermetically sealed off from each other and almost never encounter each other physically (2020b, para. 15)

There is an oppositional complaint in Roy's articles that fosters the transformative hope to dismantle discourses of *wonderfulisation*. Wonderfulisation is an umbrella term that I coin to refer to the cultural process of representing individuals (or communities, geopolitical areas, weather phenomena, accents, etc.) as idyllic, static, and stuck in time. *Wonderfulisation* involves a process of romanticisation and orientalism to create bewilderment in the person or groups to implement affective divisions of belonging and fear, which, in turn, mobilise xenophobia and capitalism to combine features that guarantee cohesion and division. Accordingly, addressing Indian poverty (a consequence of class and caste division) can be a way to *wonderfulise* India without blaming the role of international politics in Indian precarity. Roy incorporates the realities of different Indias in this article ("migrant workers", "Muslim", "villages", "poor people"), highlighting the fact that transnational accountability should be explored to analyse the narration of survival during the outbreak.

Accountability should be considered historically and geographically (Jensen et al., 2020; Raghuram et al., 2009) and can be constructed transnationally and *transformatively*. Arundhati Roy recognises, "[w]hat do I most look forward to as we emerge from the lockdown? Most urgently, a carefully drawn up ledger of accountability" (2020b, para. 1). She calls for a "reckoning" that favours a possible transformation and a "call to social insurgency" because "India's response to the pandemic has been a social catastrophe. Who will be held accountable?" (Roy, 2020b). She also raises questions about the neoliberal new order that might emerge after the outbreak and the first lockdown. In her own words, "What will become of the surplus working class — the bulk of the world's population — not just in India, but

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worldwide? Who is going to be held accountable for this apocalypse? Not a virus, I hope" (Roy, 2020b, para. 17). Subversive resilience and transformative hope are appealed to in the article, as the political government of India is blamed through an epistemological agency that Roy's articles add to the transnational narration of the Covid-19 outbreak. She proclaims, "We need Covid Trials. In an international court. At the very least. That's my post-lockdown reverie" (Roy 2020b, para. 18).

One year later, Roy published the article "We are witnessing a crime against humanity" (April 28, 2021) in *The Guardian*. There was no symbol in this piece but a direct complaint against the political inaction of Prime Minister Modi, calling him "the magician" (Roy, 2021, para. 7) who "takes a bow for saving humanity by containing the coronavirus effectively [turning] out that he has not contained it" (Roy, 2021, para. 7). She complains about international inaction, questioning, "can we complain about being viewed as though we are radioactive? [O]ther countries' borders are being closed to us" (Roy, 2021, para. 7). Class becomes an asset to survive, and, in her own words, Covid-19 is a "crime against humanity" ((Roy, 2021, para. 49) and Modi a "crisis-generating machine", where "[o]xygen is the new currency on India's morbid new stock exchange. Senior politicians, journalists, lawyers–India's elite–are on Twitter pleading for hospital beds and oxygen cylinders" (Roy, 2021, para. 10).

Transformative hope is an umbrella term that denounces, challenges and offers alternative epistemological possibilities to those of *wonderfulisation* through acknowledging possibilities of change through vulnerability, protest and resistance. *Wonderfulisation* is a performance of adaptative resilience and neoliberal hope to guarantee one's own individual survival based on a lack of alternatives. In opposition, there is a subversive resilience that has been recognised in the context of indigenous literatures of resistance in Canada (Bracke, 2016, Darias-Beautell, 2020; Fraile-Marcos, 2020a,) and in India (O'Brien, 2015; Oliva Cruz, 2023) that is articulated through subversive hope to enact a shift against invulnerability, the caricature of protest and acceptance. Instead of moulding and yielding, subversive resilience favours possibilities of transformation.

Representing subversive resilience dismantles the emotional invulnerability promoted by adaptative resilience and based on the false statement that one does not need other people (López-Mondéjar, 2022). bell hooks (2007) and Anna S. Bartel and Debra A. Castillo (2021) urge us to *be affected* by the situation outside ourselves, and so Roy appeals to audiences criticising adaptative resilience and individual survival during the Covid-19 outbreak. In her own words, "[t]hings will settle down eventually. Of course, they will. But we don't know who among us will survive to see that day. The rich will breathe easier. The poor will not" (2021). In 2021, Roy appealed for dissent against the political proclamations of Prime Minister Modi, because "Modi warned that 'anti-India forces' would use the crisis to fuel 'negativity' and 'mistrust' and asked the media to help foster a 'positive atmosphere'. Twitter has helped them out by deactivating accounts critical of the government" (2021, para. 9). Roy wants to *affect* readers by acknowledging the magnitude of the problem and the impossibility of hope in rural areas, for "[th]ese are villages where people die of easily treatable diseases like diarrhea and tuberculosis. How are they to cope with Covid? Are Covid tests available to them? Are there hospitals? Is there oxygen? More than that, is there love? Forget love, is there even concern? There isn't" (2021, para. 24). The writer demands change, to dismantle the resilient threats posed by right-wing ideologies of caste and religious and geopolitical divides.

Sara Ahmed (2021), Lucia Lijtmaer (2019), and Nivedita Menon (2012) have discussed how protest and the dissenter can be cancelled and parodied. Delegitimising the right to oppose and disagree politically is another filament of *wonderfulisation* and invulnerability. Amit Chaudhuri recognises this situation in respect to India, because, in the context of Modi's BJP

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victory in the general election of 2014, a new India is emerging, and it is "a country ruled by fear" where]Modi's vision for the country is one that stifles dissent and difference, in defiance of its people's history" (2019, para. 8). Chaudhuri disagrees that a "dissent-free country is a normal country", denouncing this as the case only for its rulers, as "a dissent-free political environment constitutes a 'good time' for its rulers" (Chaudhuri, 2019, para. 11). Arundhati Roy is a dissenter who has been prosecuted legally and "hounded by the Indian state" (Kandasamy, 2023, para. 1), and she anticipates a change towards transnational accountability and epistemological agency, to oppose discourses that portray India as victim or the US, UK, or China as saviours. Roy uses the nuances in the first conceptualisation of the epidemic as a "portal" (2020a, para. 1) to denounce adaptative resilience, adding a multivocal dissent built upon the ethics of knowing, the necessity for a "reckoning" (2020b, para. 1), and the recognition of the mis-handling of survival during Covid-19 as a "crime against humanity" (2021, para. 36). Tishani Doshi, Anuradha Roy and Prayaag Akbar's texts are analysed in the upcoming section to incorporate different forms of knowing, surviving, and living in the outbreak in other parts of India.

3. 'TO SURVIVE OR NOT TO SURVIVE': THE ETHICS OF KNOWING

Narrations of transformative hope about survival and/or its impossibility can be constructed as collective and individual practices of ethical alliance and dissent. Xavier Batalla proclaims that "India contains a lot of Indias" (2008, p. 3), and narratives about survival in India cannot be biased and ignore parts and realities other than urban areas, specific states, or individual experiences. Epistemic injustice is based, according to Meredith Fricker, on testimonial and hermeneutic inequality. In her own words, "[t]estimonial injustice occurs when prejudice causes a hearer to give a deflated level of credibility to a speaker's word" and "hermeneutical injustice occurs at a prior stage, when a gap in collective interpretive resources puts someone at an unfair disadvantage when it comes to making sense of their social experiences" (2007, p. 1). Accordingly, there are narrations about India that inflict testimonial and hermeneutical injustice on others because they traditionally focus on specific higher-class dynamics (such as the writings by Chetan Bhagat) or orientalise poverty (like Coldplay's "Hymn for the Weekend").

Knowing becomes an ethical way to dismantle "epistemic violence" (Spivak, 1989, p. 273) and epistemic injustice (Fricker, 2007, p. 1) and to oppose "structural prejudice in collective hermeneutical resources" (Kidd et al., 2017 p. 1). An analysis of Arundhati Roy's articles resolves hermeneutic inequality because it exposes the Indian national government, signalling international indifference and highlighting Indian internal problems and the inaction of the central government. Indian writers like Tishani Doshi, Anuradha Roy, and Prayaag Akbar confronted regional, national and international epistemic injustices during the outbreak and contributed to implementing the ethical agency of writing, reading, and knowing. They wrote various articles during those two months, contributing to what Ana Fraile-Marcos calls, when dealing with indigenous writings in English from Canada, "epistemological alternatives" (2020b, p. 476). The analysis that follows considers the chosen articles as epistemological alternatives to the outbreak of Covid-19 in India because they integrate epistemological testimonies that mediate, help, confront, and dismantle the national ontology that the Indian central government created during the outbreak. Knowing that there were alternative stories and narrations resolved the epistemic violence and offered specific stories and regional metaphors to enhance the knowledge systems during those months in the Indian and transnational contexts of the pandemic.

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Tishani Doshi is a dancer, novelist, and poet from Tamil Nadu who lives in a coastal non-urban area. During the outbreak and lockdown, she published three poems as articles in Bangladeshi and Indian newspapers using three metaphors (apocalypses, touch, and togetherness) to reflect on the specificities of Tamil Nadu over those months. The first poem, "The coronapocalypse will be televised" (Doshi, 2020a), was included in the article "Lockdown verse: Tishani Doshi and Sharanya Manivannan reflect on the current times" published by *The Indian Express* on April 13, 2020. The poem dismantles the *wonderfulisation* of the language used by Indian central government during the outbreak. In her own words, she remarks on "the irony of our government's title cards:/ 'Breathe Easy!' & 'Don't Worry!'/ 'Nothing's Going to Tank the Economy!'" (Doshi, 2020a, lines 29-31). She ironically follows this with, "[w]ho thought the end would be so complete?" (Doshi, 2020a, line 32), ridiculing the apparent normality disseminated by PM Modi when scarcity of food, health services, and hope to keep alive was the norm.

Doshi recognises different nuances of people's resilience during those days: "There have always been/two kinds of people: those whose hearts/can stand to live beside volcanoes,/and those who write letters to the neighbours,/asking when's a good time to beat the carpets,/and is it possible to tone it down on the piano?" (Doshi, 2020a, lines 13-18). She discerns two groups: those who conform to adaptative resilience (giving in to survival) and those who favour a change, exercising subversive resilience (transforming structures of inequality to guarantee a better survival). The poem proposes a renewal through the second group's exercise of protest because "[s]ilence is never magical in this republic" (Doshi, 2020a, line 1); therefore, she includes people's agency to make sense of an end that, as the title of the poem, "will be televised" (2020a) but of which not everybody will make ontological sense. Doshi creates the trope of the coronapocalypse, the end of the world due to the coronavirus, with two options: adaptation and survival, or protest and dissent, in an attempt to live differently.

This sense of dangerous survival appears in "Contagion", published in the Bangladeshi newspaper *Dhaka Tribune* (April 20, 2020), where Doshi (2020b) describes both the inaction of Indian authorities during the outbreak and their failure to act against caste and patriarchal structures of discrimination across history. The poem compares Covid-19-related isolation and social distancing to caste structures, through the metaphor of touch (also used by Meena Kandasamy in *Touch*, 2006). Doshi writes, "[w]hen it is forbidden to touch, I will lean out of the window/and throw you a pillow. Light during plague-time can be so sullen" (2020b, lines 1-2), deciphering the fact that social divide and isolation during the outbreak are the daily routines of caste and its social, religious, and economic divisions. Doshi adds the problems of the coastal town where she lives that are latent in an outbreak: the dangers of being a woman in India ("the girl who walks the deserted streets, chewing on stalks/of cabbage. She has been sent to find charlock. Returning, she may fall/off a bridge or be bitten by a dog", 2020b, lines 2-3) and people's manipulation by religious and military authorities ("There's always a nun who mixes ash with food/to destroy the taste of anything good. Even soldiers who heave/their flea-ridden boots across carpets of hyacinth understand,/mountains can be barriers for only so long" (Doshi, 2020b, lines 6-8). There is a "corrupt air" (Doshi, 202b, line 18) Doshi recognises in the scene, to later cry, "Can you hear?/They don't hear our appeals for care" (Doshi, 2020b, lines 16-17, acknowledging the epistemic and health injustices that have been promoted by the caste divide for centuries, together with the structures of gender violence, in Tamil Nadu, India, and the whole world that she denounced in *Girls are coming out of the woods* (Doshi, 2017). Om Dwivedi and Aleks Wansbrough (2024) and Chandan Kumar Sharma and Reshmi Banerjee (2023) have further studied the precarity of caste structures in India and the

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resilient manner they have been used to implement neoliberal strategies of social and resourcing distancing to isolate and create economic and political subalterns. This is the sense of touch that Doshi reappropriates here, to illustrate that this suspicion of threatening contact permeates Indian politics and reinforces class and caste identification to limit social horizontality.

Knowing that social, class, and caste disruption is possible facilitates collective possibilities of transformation that oppose neoliberal individualisation or religious and caste isolation. Doshi explores the necessity of ethical conviviality and of social bonds in her third poem "Together" (also published in *Dhaka Tribune* on April 20, 2020, 2020c), through the trope of Bharatnatyam music and dance. The poem uses the symbols of social bonds, collaborative choreographies, and social events after the metaphor of touch. The possibilities of social cohesion are interwoven in the mystical commitment of Bharatnatyam music and dance that criticises the dichotomies of existence and the sacred, seen only through confronting duality. Doshi writes, "Duality shows you/the gaps. When I think of together, I don't think/of Advaita or Hegel, but of music in a room,/everyone tapping their feet to the *same* tune" (2020c, lines 3-5, my emphasis). This metaphorical *same* tune is interrupted by police brutality entering households daily, as she complains, "[t]here are times when your body and you are friends, not this mad/chasing one another along the shore, and the people you've lost show up/complaining about passports and broken necks" (Doshi, 2020c, lines 11-13).

Doshi denounces the vanishing of Tamil Nadu coastal areas through the depletion of the seas and the non-urban areas of the state, highlighting the dissenting possibility of staying together to exercise transformative hope: "Bands split up/when what you want is for them to stay bound" (2020c, lines 19-20). There is a "tune" that integrates new epistemological alternatives (Fraile-Marcos, 2020b, p. 476) into those traditions of "Advaita" and Hegel" (Doshi, 2020c, line 5). Imposed isolation vertebrates the three poems and is used as symbols of individual survival, made of the social, religious, and caste divides. Doshi acknowledges that the division disrupts possible collective practises of reparatory dissent against regional, national, and international stereotypes of India, and so she writes "How there are times when your body and you are friends, not this mad/ chasing one another along the shore" (2020c, lines 10-11). And then she calls for a collaborative echo of the Bharatnatyam rhythmic pattern, typical from Tamil Nadu, and illustrated with a powerful dissenting *we*: "so we can shout above the wind, *be bop doo wop*./For the sound that returns to take us/to the brink of nuclear harmony" (Doshi, 2020c, lines 26-27).

Dissent is reparatory and is ethically unfolded by narrations of transformative hope, to engage with "a performative practice [and] a discourse of critique and social transformation" (Giroux, 2004, p. 38). In India, dissent can emerge as a relational practice of historical and geographical accountability, praised by that "we" (Doshi, 2020c, line 26). Accordingly, expressing *no* transforms things if it includes recognition and promotes renewal beyond adaptative resilience. Indian scholars Romila Thapar (2022) and Priyamvada Gopal (2017, 2019) have studied the historical importance of dissent in India, to defy the epistemic injustice against Indian dissenters. Thapar has recognised that dissent is "a systematic perspective [and an] attempt not only to relate the past to the present but also to suggest that some forms of dissent are continuities from the past" (p. viii). For her, "[t]he study of dissent is essential to understanding how civilizations evolved for there cannot be any advance in knowledge without a questioning of the world we live in" (Thapar, p. viii). Thapar delegitimises the

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colonising strategies of countries like the UK when they impose the false idea that dissent "was imported from the West to the East" (p. 6).

Narrations of dissent, as illustrated by Arundhati Roy and Doshi's articles, embroider ethics of knowing. Romila Thapar states that "knowledge, however, cannot remain unchanging and fixed, since fresh evidence and methods of enquiry inevitably lead to its mutation" (p. 13), and Priyamvada Gopal denounces the "amnesia" imposed by specific Indian and international political forces on societies to neutralize the transformative possibilities of stating "no" (2016, pp. 18–21). Gopal recognises that dissent articulates "reparative histories" (2019, p. viii), where Indian anti-colonialists are recognised for having led fights for human rights in the UK, not the other way round. Articles from different Indian isolated areas during the Covid-19 outbreak, such as those by Anuradha Roy and Prayaag Akbar, embroider acts of dissent into Covid-19 transnational narratives that are not only alternative but also reparatory because they resolve epistemic injustice ethically.

Anuradha Roy is a writer and publisher born in Kolkata, West Bengal, India who lives in Ranikhet, an old hill station in the northwest state of Uttarakhand, near the Himalayas. Roy has published novels and essays denouncing gender violence, Hindu supremacy, and class inequality in India. Roy spent the Covid-19 outbreak in Ranikhet and her article "We rejoiced in our reclusiveness, but isolation isn't calming when enforced" was published in *The Economist*'s *1843 magazine* on April 24, 2020. She details the social distancing, lack of resources, and class divide during those days, blaming the role played by the state and religion's deliberate ostracization of lower castes in previous decades, not only during the lockdown. The article is part of the section "A nation in pause: Coronavirus in India" which includes articles by Nilanjan Roy and Rahul Bhattacharya. These two describe the realities within the megalopolis of Delhi, which was the general international *wonderfulised* description of India in the international media. Anuradha Roy's is a testimony from a small town in the Himalayas that dismantles the stereotyping of the area and the ineffable possibility of articulating transformative hope. She recognises the particularities of the outbreak and the lockdown, but complains that the situation existed before these, not only because of the epidemic.

Anuradha Roy criticises the lack of political assistance and facilities that have imposed isolation here prior to Covid-19. In her own words, "[w]e rejoiced in our reclusiveness, but isolation isn't calming when enforced. In a corner of the Himalayas…we've always made bread the old-fashioned way, not as a hobby, but because it's the only way we can have passable bread" (2020, para. 6). She recognises that minimum standards would exist in the area if granted by the people, not the government. Roy ironically plays with the *wonderfulised* vision of spending lockdown in the Himalayas, "[f]or the moment we have sky, forests, bread" (2020, para. 3), but recognises the previous scarcity of basic health facilities and food, "[a]s in much of rural India, the public health is rudimentary […]. The military hospital treats only soldiers. When people are seriously ill they must travel to big cities" (2020, para. 8). She denounces the isolation that Uttarakhand has experienced "over the last decades", with "lost jobs, suffering, starvation and no end in sight. […] That's been us the past 20 years, in a corner of the Himalayas with three dogs and two lemon trees" (Roy, 2020, para. 3).

Roy condemns Indian politics, as she recognises that hate and nationalist divisions were implemented politically to complicate the conditions during the Covid-19 outbreak, for "decades of hate-politics in India have burned away kindness", and she highlights the fake news spread by the BJP to obtain votes, ironically quoting BJP slogans, like, "[i]s this futuristic bioterrorism or a Muslim conspiracy?" (2020, para. 1). Roy connects the "enforced separation" during lockdown to explain real life in the Himalayas, "[h]idden away in these mountains, it is possible to hope that we are too few, too far, too microscopic [,] there wasn't a ventilator or

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intensive care unit to be seen as far as the Himalayan eagle flies" (2020, para. 8). She breaks the idealisation of living in the Himalayas and states that isolation and scarcity limit survival, and that these have existed before Covid-19 and worsened with the epidemic. She wonders, "[w]hen people are seriously ill they must travel to big cities. Now that they cannot, what would happen if Covid-19 spread here?" (2020, para. 8). She views the crisis as a consequence of years of neglect and politics, urging to recognise the dominating patriarchal, religious, and neoliberal strategies that operate in a small town in the Himalayas, something that Prayaag Akbar identifies in Goa.

Prayaag Akbar is a writer, journalist and professor born in Kolkata who lives in Goa. He has criticised caste structures and the religious discrimination reinforced by the BJP's central government and its media campaigns. Akbar's article, "Life and essentials in Goa", was published by the *Times Literary Supplement* on May 7, 2020, in a special section called "Lockdown around the world: Exclusive dispatches from writers all over the globe, facing a common threat under very different circumstances" that included essays by Joyce Carol Oates, A. E. Stallings, and Rozalind Dineen. Akbar criticises the idealisation of living in Goa. He writes, "[i]n the evenings now we carry our son across the road and set him down for a few minutes on a mud path covered in fallen blossom, because it is up to us to feed the pups" (Akbar, 2020, para. 5). His article highlights that spending the lockdown in a small coastal town in Goa looks better than in a megalopolis like Mumbai, for, in his own words, "[h]ow thankful we are to be in this quiet village of hills, farms and forest rather than in Mumbai, where 20 million live above and around one another, and friends and colleagues penned inside their apartments" (Akbar, 2020, para. 5).

The idealisation of having time for oneself is also comically acknowledged, as Akbar quotes his friends: "[y]ou stay at home all the time anyway', is the inevitable joke on Zoom calls with friends. 'Your lives haven't changed'" (Akbar, 2020, para. 5). Community life and mutual solidarity are attested to, "[e]very day there were reports of people unable to feed their families. Charity collection drives began across the country" (Akbar, 2020, para. 4), his article even recognising individual heroes: "Tony Nazareth (and isn't that a fitting name for the saviour of our village), created a WhatsApp group that allowed us to exchange details of what we needed and what we could offer others" (Akbar, 2020, para. 8). Nevertheless, Akbar dismantles this romanticisation of lockdown in Goa, complaining about national oblivion. He states, "[i]t is not all about feeding a puppy [.] That is not to say that there is no anxiety here. Goa survives on tourism, domestic and international" (Akbar, 2020, para. 6), signalling that "life essentials were not guaranteed" (Akbar, 2020, para. 10), despite the quoted community efforts. He blames the state and his governor, pointing out that

> [f]or a while there was no food. Goa's chief minister Pramod Sawant – a powerful figure, the equivalent of an American governor. One morning we drove around hunting for milk for our son, who will turn two next month, and were berated at a series of checkpoints for being irresponsible parents. (Akbar, 2020, para. 7)

"Feeding the pups" is revealed as representing a metaphor for Akbar, who recognises that his people have become but the pups of an Indian state and central government which does not offer the means to be fed, for "[p]eople stepped up. Abandoned by the government" (2020, para. 8).

The lockdown exposed national problems such as class division and dependency on migrant workers in the area. Akbar recognises that he had never thought about himself as a migrant, "I hadn't considered that even our tiny village had economic migrants – yet I am one of them" (2020, para. 3). Akbar confronts *wonderfulisations* of images like "[e]mpty

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campuses, gleaming rivers [and] wild animals prowling great urban thoroughfare" (2020, para. 9) and addresses the reality of the migrant workers with worse economic conditions than his, for, he claims:

> No one, it seemed, had considered the fact that the working class in India's urban metropoles are largely economic migrants, working in rich people's homes and factories, serving tea in their offices and sweeping the streets. The lockdown set off panic. Worried that they were going to starve, workers tried to walk hundreds of miles back to their villages. Some made it; many died along the way. Police all over the country enforced the lockdown with roadside beatings. (2020, para. 3)

The class divide was reinforced by being Indian or not, and Akbar recognises the privileges for Indians outside India, because "the government organized free flights for Indians stuck in other countries" (2020, para. 3). The hierarchies of India remain as entrenched and virulent as ever in the pandemic.

Return to *normality* was another *wonderfulised* fantasy mooted during May 2020. Indian *normality* involved returning to a country split by inequality, sustained nationally and internationally. And the dichotomy of *normality* versus *return to normalcy* was resolved as a mere reinforcement of the pre-existing social, political, and caste inequalities. There are different nuances as to how these interlocking systems of domain operate regionally in India that apply transnationally to favour some populations and areas, which do have more privileges inherent in their normalcy. Akbar recognises, "we crave a return to normality. But what *is* this 'normal'? [Emphasis in the original] When I think of the months before Covid-19, I remember a world tearing itself apart, a totalitarian moment of hatred and self-regard" (2020, para. 9).

These inequalities were strengthened during Covid-19. Firstly, there was a lack of equal access to health facilities, as "[p]rivate healthcare in India is debilitatingly expensive for most, and as reports came in from Lombardy and New York, it was clear to anyone who had stepped inside a mouldering government hospital that our infrastructure would not hold up" (Akbar, 2020, para. 2). Then, freedom of speech was questioned in other parts of India "[i]n the weeks before Covid-19", when "a nationwide protest grew" on a campus in Delhi, concerning "a new citizenship bill that threatens to marginalize India's Muslim minority" (Akbar, 2020, para. 9). Thirdly, the anti-Muslim campaign through the media spread rumours of a "Jihad Covid" (Akbar, 2020, para. 9) that intensified the normal discrimination against Muslim communities and individuals in India during Modi's governance. Arundhati Roy (2021) recognised a year later that the outbreak and the pandemic itself simply reinforced inequalities in India, revealing that the fallacy of a return to normalcy simply strengthened the necropolitical interests of division (Mbembe, 2003) inherent in the Indian, US, and UK governments at that time.

Akbar complains about conforming to these politics that legitimate that some can live while others are expendable, as he states, "married to any hope we have is the knowledge that most of India remains desperately poor, that some of us lived far for so long by ensuring that others lived with nothing at all" (2020, para. 10). He recognises transformative hope is possible if blame is apportioned. He uses Covid-19 to prove his point: "But this was a rich man's disease, an aeroplane import, which will now surely take more of the poor than the rich. That guilt should hang above us all" (Akbar, 2020, para. 10). It is only through revolt and renewal that subversive resilience can oppose the resilient neoliberal attempt to limit survival to those selected through class, caste, and biopolitics. And this is the role of narrating possibilities and hoping for enhancing transformations in the future.

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4. TRANSNATIONAL NARRATOLOGIES OF TRANSFORMATIVE HOPE MATTER

Reading can implement a transnational mutuality that favours alliance rather than affiliation. Writing can praise ethical and transformative hope and oppose the neoliberal use of tragedies such as Covid-19. The plural testimonies of the first days of the Covid-19 outbreak in India, when analysed, generate knowledge, awareness, and transnational epistemologies to help us talk more about the possibilities of transformation than those of adaptation. Transformative hope has been presented as a theoretical tool to propose alternatives to the resiliently neoliberal interests behind discourses that promote adaptative resilience and *wonderfulisation*.

This analysis of the selected corpus has illustrated that the communication, reception, and use of symbols during the outbreak in different parts of India involved an activist commitment that favoured a transnational ethics of knowing. Arundhati Roy's articles use the symbol of the Covid-19 epidemics as "portal" for change (2020a), not for submission, highlighting the obstacles and economist interests that block or facilitate people's passing (or trespassing) within and outside India. She later calls for a "reckoning" and "international Covid trials" (2020b) to assess the "Covid catastrophe" as a "crime against humanity" (2021). Tishani Doshi's poetry proposes the term "coronapocalypse" (2020a) to signal the necessity of change to avoid mass destruction. She makes use of the semiotics behind *touch* in "Contagion" (2020b), in reference to caste, the social divide, and the economic transnational interest behind structures of division in India that can be recognised in different parts of the world. In "Together", the poet recognises the lack of community as an outcome of national and international politics that foster static "bands" (2020c). Nevertheless, she vindicates the bonds that connect us to make transformation possible.

Knowledge of different parts of India symbolises an ethical stance because it dismantles the fantasy of a standardised community where one can survive alone. Regional difference and geographical apartness during the Covid-19 outbreak are described by Anuradha Roy (2020) and Prayaag Akbar (2020) to add particularities, break stereotypes, and assign blame across the state, national, and international levels of governance. Their articles prove that mutuality is necessary and can articulate transnational and transformative hope that confronts the *wonderfulisation* of neoliberal existence.

Narrating the necessity and possibility of change confronts national and political representations of India and the world in Covid-19 narratives. *Knowing* testimonies about Indian realities builds up transnational knowledge that allows to integrate "Epistemologies from the South" (Santos, 2016, p. 16) and "epistemological alternatives" (Fraile-Marcos, 2020b, p. 476) into a future alliance of care (Tronto, 2013, p. 19). Being affected by the narratives of these articles calls readers to *experience* different ways of telling and being. The analysis of narrative representations of survival in India during the Covid-19 outbreak enhances acts of subversive resilience, offering us new symbols and modes that allow us to interpellate and be interpellated. This article therefore acknowledges the ethical possibility of conviviality and planetary coexistence that aims towards a collective hope, told multivocally and through many perspectives, to engage and be engaged.

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