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Between History and Memory: Remembering the Dirty War in Alicia Partnoy's *The Little School: Tales of Disappearance and Survival*

Mukul Chaturvedi

The blurring of boundaries between history and fiction has been famously discussed by Hayden White who argues that representation of historical events is as much imaginative as it is rational and involves a narrative reconstruction or interpretation of the subject matter.¹ Much of the debate on the distinction between history and fiction has centered on the question of 'truth', and this is nowhere more apparent than in representation of historical trauma in literary testimony. Taking forward this discussion, this paper examines Alicia Partnoy's *The Little School: Tales of Disappearance and Survival*,² a witness memoir of a survivor of a death camp, during the period of Dirty War in Argentina, which forewarns the reader in the Preface itself that, "the boundaries between story and history are so subtle" that even she cannot find them.³ Captured, blindfolded and 'disappeared', Alicia Partnoy's fictionalized testimony bears witness to a period of severe repression and torture in Argentina's history and is a moving document where 'witnessing' becomes a crucial means of survival. The fragmented narrative attempts to recreate the memory of the death camp and echoes many voices of both the dead and the living. Interestingly, while the text is a fictionalized testimony, the desire for verisimilitude finds expression in paratextual devices like maps and list of actual prisoners in the camp.

Keywords: Memory, Fiction, History, Torture, Testimony

Alicia Partnoy's memoir recounts her experience of torture in one of the clandestine detention camps that had mushroomed in Argentina during the military regime (1976-83), a period also known as the Dirty War. In 1976 the Argentine military overthrew the government of

¹ Hayden White, "The Value of Narrativity in the Representation of Reality." *Critical Inquiry* 7, no. 1 (1980): 5-27. Accessed June 26, 2021. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1343174>.

² Alicia Partnoy, *The Little School: Tales of Disappearance and Survival* (San Francisco: Cleis Press, 1998).

³ *Ibid.*, 18.



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INDO-CHIC VS. THE POLITICAL NOVEL: ARUNDHATI ROY AND WRITING EXIGENCY

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ABSTRACT

*Arundhati Roy responds to political exigencies in a highly performative manner through her writing. As indicated by her, words yell from the housetop, dance or walk in her novels and essays, garnering starkly different responses that range from breathless adoration to virulent hostility. I discuss the celebratory reception to her first novel, *The God of Small Things* (1997) in terms of the phenomenon of Indo-chic. In contrast is the guarded reception to her second novel, *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* (2017), which I relate to the legacy of her essays and the strong and direct mode of address she employed in them. I submit that her second novel represents the political situation in the country faithfully and there might be a case for reviewing the parameters for fiction in the present time.*

Keywords: Strategic Exoticism, The God of Small Things, The Ministry of Utmost Happiness, The End of Imagination

Lionel Shriver: Do you ever worry that your work as an activist detracts – or at least distracts – from your fiction, and are you concerned that sticking your neck out politically changes the way readers and critics respond to that fiction?

Arundhati Roy: I have always quarrelled with this word “activist”. I think it’s a very new word and I don’t know when it was born, but it was recently. I don’t want to have a second profession added to writing. Writing covers it. In the old days, writers were political creatures also, not all, but many. It was seen as our business to be writing

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