

Civil and Uncivil Classes in the Light of the Pandemic: Postcolonial Perspectives on the Question of Who Cares

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The starting point for this article is the fact that four of the countries that have so far been most devastated by the pandemic as reflected in their death tolls are Brazil, India, Britain and the US. Much of the public blame for this centres on the leadership of these countries during the health crisis. While this is not inaccurate, it is insufficiently circumstantial without considering the political formations that were in place *prior* to the pandemic. What Brazil, India, Britain and the US may be said to have recently shared as a political formation is the right-wing and far-right emphasis on zealous nationalist self-promotion and patriotic xenophobia. This can be seen in Bolsonaro’s “Brazil First” policy with its dismissal of indigenous communities, in Trump’s anti-immigrant “Make America Great Again” campaign, in Johnson’s anti-immigrant Brexit campaign and in Modi’s Hindu nationalism programme. This nationalism is not actually a new phenomenon, nor limited to these countries, but a resurgent one that derives from, or can be aligned with, colonial legacies.

Regarding colonial legacies, the nation is primarily thought of in terms of *genos* – race, common descent, kinship – as opposed to the *demos*, a people composed of all of the nation’s citizenry. *Demos* is a relevant term to introduce in this context given the word “pandemic” etymologically refers to “all of the people.” While the countries previously addressed have been pursuing their policies of patriotic xenophobia, the pandemic has served to expose how this so-called nationalist “populism” has actually worked to hide a lack of care and concern for the *demos* or all of the citizens of the nation. In fact, nationalism presents itself in populist terms to distract ideologically from how the privatised state in fact deliberately and cynically neglects to provide services for the nation’s real welfare, and this lack of needed provisions and necessary structures is what the pandemic comes to expose.

It is my argument in this article that the pandemic serves to reveal *class* structures and social alignments that the neo-colonialist reliance on the logic of

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genos has obscured. I will approach these class structures initially through a critique of Arendt's *The Human Condition*, in that the pandemic serves to challenge the class hierarchies that Arendt sets up in her overview of society. The resultant analysis will then be used to explain the experience of the pandemic in the United Kingdom. While what emerges from this is a consideration of what may be termed "civil and uncivil classes," these social alignments are not something specific to the moment of pandemic but something long-entrenched, yet insufficiently registered, that is, a structure that the pandemic serves to bring to light rather than initiates, this in a belatedly undeniable way. While the postcolonial emphasis on oppressor and oppressed is mainly configured in terms of racial groups, this leads to insufficient engagement with how postcolonial societies struggle to establish civil societies on quite other terms. Accordingly, I will end this article through arguing how two Indian novels, Rohinton Mistry's *A Fine Balance* and Arundhati Roy's *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, are particularly forward-looking in that they are both concerned with overcoming colonial legacies with an ethics of social care relevant to our current pandemic times. Accordingly, they may be said to offer frameworks for us to understand what the pandemic requires us to re-consider.

A Review of *The Human Condition* in the Light of the Arab Uprisings

This essay's engagement with Arendt's *The Human Condition* is actually a re-engagement in that it builds on a critique that I first put forward in a recent book entitled *Creative Radicalism in the Middle East: Culture and the Arab Left After the Uprisings* (Rooney 2020). Given that Arendt's work, particularly *The Human Condition*, is quite frequently drawn upon in analyses of the Arab uprisings, and given that Arendt's thought is very much shaped by the German idealist philosophical tradition, it seemed to me important to interrogate Arendt's paradigm through a consideration of experiential accounts of the Arab uprisings on the part of its revolutionaries. Accordingly, what came to emerge in my study was that a certain perception of the Arab uprisings in effect serves to turn *The Human Condition* on its head, in a way partially comparable with Marx's stated intention of turning Hegel on his head.

When the pandemic unfolded, what I found striking is that it constitutes a challenge to Arendt's theories in much the same way the Arab uprisings may be seen to have challenged them. In this respect, there is an unexpected continuity between the uprisings and these times of global health crisis where both the uprisings and the pandemic may be seen, in their different ways of course, as wake-up calls prompting us to question certain ideologies through a renewed sense of reality. In order to address this, I will first recapitulate my initial analysis

of *The Human Condition* before going on to propose its extended relevance for an understanding of the UK experience of the pandemic.

At the outset of *The Human Condition*, Arendt establishes that, from her perspective, the human condition is a strictly secular one. She maintains that what she calls “the contemplative life” (distinct from “the active life”) is to be bracketed off from worldly existence in that it concerns a preoccupation with the mystical and the sacred (Arendt 1995, 20). With this foreclosure, she sets out to describe the secular human condition in terms of three main hierarchies. The first and lowest of these pertains to the class of menial labour, what Arendt refers to in terms of *animal laborans*, “the labouring animal.” For Arendt, the labour in question concerns tasks that need to be undertaken with monotonous regularity with no lasting effect, tasks that for her are a matter of the most bestial as well as most mundane side of life (Arendt 1998, 96-100). Such menial labour would, for instance, include farming and housework.

Moving up the hierarchy from “the labouring animal,” Arendt considers the manufacturing class of *homo faber*. Arendt considers this labour to be more valuable than menial labour in that it produces commodities or other tangible products that outlast the labouring act. What is striking, given Arendt’s foreclosure of the mystical, is that she ideologically transfers the issue of immortality from questions of the soul to considerations of long-lasting human action, especially political action (Arendt 1998, 18-20). For Arendt, the economic sphere is inferior to the political sphere in that workers constitute a faceless mass, and she argues that human immortality (presumably fame) is achieved through the self-enactments and speech acts of political actors in the public sphere. What is very much missing from Arendt’s account is any consideration of civil society as well as of our cultural lives, as this essay will go on to engage with.

As I argue in *Creative Radicalism in the Middle East*, regarding the Arab uprisings, they may be said to have rejected the supposed immortality of the class of political actors who were merely performing themselves on their political stages without meaningfully working for their people. Arab leaders were clinging onto power, as if they were permanently essential while guilty of political negligence, where some were also trying to establish their “immortality” dynastically. While the lives of ordinary people were conversely rendered inessential and dispensable (as in the deaths of Mohamed Bouazizi in Tunisia and Khaled Said in Egypt), the Arab revolutionaries protested against this. In particular, the foreclosure of the sacred performed by Arendt was overturned in a way that allowed the revolutionaries to assert the sacredness of all lives, especially with respect to the revolutions’ martyrs. A similar insightful

reversal has emerged with the pandemic regarding the constellation of inessential leaders, essential labour and the sacredness of all lives.

What I wish to go on to explore is how both the Arab uprisings and the pandemic have served to confront us with the same question, and that question with its various nuances is: “Who Cares?”

The Experience of the Pandemic in the UK

When the coronavirus began to rapidly spread in the UK, there was initially widespread bemusement on the part of British citizens with respect to the government’s ostrich-like head-in-the-sand behaviour. That is, in spite of warnings from countries such as Italy and China, and from the World Health Organization, the British government seemed to think that if leaders ignored the virus, it would just somehow go away. In response to public concerns, the government then put forward that its policy was one of so-called herd immunity whereby the idea was that as many people as possible should have the illness in the hope that they would build up antibodies, even as there was no medical evidence to guarantee the success of this strategy. With this, the best that PM Boris Johnson could offer the public was, “Prepare to lose your loved ones.” He did not explain how anyone can do this. In fact, the real message was to accept the deaths of elderly or frail people amongst your friends and family because more important to us than saving lives is prolonging the “life” of the economy. The crux of neoliberalism is that the market is everything and that society counts for nothing.

With the government not prepared to take action, British people began to enter a lockdown of their own accord. Certainly, most of the people I know, people who were fortunately able to work from home, spontaneously decided to adopt degrees of social distancing and social isolation. Thus, I believe it was not the government that initiated the lockdown but members of the public of sufficient numbers that Johnson had to drop his herd immunity policy and go with the public’s lead. In addition, there was the belated realization that if the health crisis was allowed merely to escalate uncontrollably, not only would long under-resourced health services be unable to cope with it, treatments for a whole range of other serious ailments would become inaccessible.

During the lockdown phase, what came to the fore, as is well-known, was how crucial certain workers are while politicians came to appear more and more ineffectual or useless. Those who Arendt calls “labouring animals,” a dehumanising term, are those who the British media have come recently to posit in terms of “key workers.” In lockdown, people in Britain, and of course not only Britain, realised that certain forms of labour that are often taken for granted are

actually importantly necessary for the maintenance of life. For instance, people were reminded that the person who empties your waste bin is crucial, the delivery people bringing food supplies to the doors of the ill or vulnerable are crucial, the cleaners and care workers are crucial, and, most of all, the NHS staff of doctors and nurses working long hours in intensive care are indispensable. This unremarkable labour, in Arendtian terms, thus became very noticeable and highly appreciated.

As indicated, along with the re-evaluation of previously low-status labour as really socially useful, came a widespread perception of how ineffectual or useless the UK government's political actors were proving. The many moments of incompetence would be too long to document but some indication of this political negligence can be given. Journalist Patrick Cockburn, stating that "the serious failings of the Johnson government are too long to list," gives us the examples of allowing large public gatherings to be held such as the Cheltenham fixture and corrupt procurements diverting vast sums of money to Conservative Party members or allies lacking the expertise needed actually to fulfil their obligations (Cockburn 2020). The pandemic has turned *The Human Condition* on its head in acknowledging the value of key workers and in exposing the negligent ineptitude of neoliberal political actors.

Apart from the newly found appreciation of key workers, quite a lot of people in lockdown have come to value anew the kinds of activities that Arendt assigns to the lowest level of human expenditure in terms of its significance. For example, some of us have taken a renewed interest in cooking, taking care to source ingredients more mindfully and to prepare healthier meals. Neighbours along my street have been attending to home repairs such as restoring and repainting window frames or front fences. Others have taken up gardening. City dwellers have been walking and cycling much more than before. Urban parks are much more frequented, and camping has become hugely popular. These activities have been a form of consolation and resilience. What I wish to say is that people have been learning to *care* again in ways that are often ecologically aware. Added to this, there may be ways in which "the active life" has given way to "the contemplative life."

One of the unexpected effects of the initial lockdown period in London was the marked increase of birdsong in city gardens. While people temporarily refrained from driving, the spring air became purified of pollution, and it sounded as if the birds were celebrating this. What I, and I believe others, experienced through lockdown is a heightened sense of gratitude towards the natural world, a question that I will return to. And while increased appreciation of the animal (including human animal) world has been an effect of the

lockdown, at least for some, many inessential commodities of the manufacturing or business world have declined in value.

Obviously, in depicting the UK experience of the coronavirus pandemic, the previous account has had to resort to generalisations where there are indeed quite different kinds of experience to be registered. In fact, what came to emerge in Britain was a greater and greater split between, say, the carers and the careless, for instance, between the group of people who wore masks and advocated mask-wearing and the group of people who insisted on not wearing masks, the militant amongst this group even developing conspiracy theories about the virus being a hoax to justify this. Many consider that the turning point for this came about through the Dominic Cummings affair, that is, when Johnson's special advisor broke the lockdown rules by driving his virus-infected wife up to Durham with his son because he wanted family members to take over the care of his son with his wife being ill. (Bland 2020) For Cummings, kinship, and family (*genos*) appears to have been privileged over the safety of the people at large. In addition, Cummings later claimed his lockdown violation had also been due to concerns over safety threats to his family on the part of a local gang. (Weaver 2021)

Prior to Cummings breaking the lockdown rules, there had been quite a lot of community solidarity around social distancing and social isolation. However, when his selfish actions were made publicly known, things changed overnight. Some people said that they felt like suckers to have been following rules around socially responsible behaviour when the real imperative, illustrated by both the recklessness of Cummings and his unrepentant clinging onto power with the support of the Prime Minister, turned out to be putting your own private interests first over any collective commitments. With this, a very marked rift opened up between people whose priorities were to do exactly as they pleased and those who continued to believe in the importance of social responsibility and care. In other words, the rupture was between a class of people who asserted their right to be careless and carefree and a class of people with caring values and who value carers of various kinds. This constitutes the difference between uncivil and civil classes. That said, what should not be overlooked are the financial struggles of workers in situations of inadequate compensation for loss of earnings. While this consideration would strengthen the case for a universal basic income, my particular concern here is with social and anti-social attitudes.

The divide that transpired in Britain also occurred in Brazil where a psychological study was carried out by the University of Londrina on a group of adults in terms of their behaviour during the pandemic. There was a distinct rift between the careless and the caring, a summary of the study stating: "Researchers found that people who reported 'antisocial traits,' like low levels

of empathy and high levels of callousness and risk-taking, were less likely to adhere to COVID-19 health standards, including wearing a mask and social distancing” (Mahadevan 2020). The research goes so far as to assert that the risk-takers exhibited marked sociopathic traits; however, I think we should be wary of resorting to the mere pathologizing of behaviours that may be informed by an array of socio-economic and psychological circumstances where more research is needed.

The social rift that I speak of in the British experience dates not only from the pandemic times, for it has constituted a *recapitulation* over the deep division that occurred over Brexit. Brexit was a shock for people of my class, especially amongst academics who were largely against it, for we did not realise how many people in the country entertained a virulent xenophobia. It was also depressing for us when the previously Labour voters of the North turned against Labour. Although this moment shocked many of us who were against Brexit, it came with a curious sense of *déjà vu* for me. In class terms, it reminded me of the composition of colonial Rhodesia, where I grew up.

It is an over-simplification of postcolonial studies, even if an understandable one, to divide the colonial world into coloniser and colonised, oppressor and oppressed. For a start, in Rhodesia, there was more than one class of coloniser. There was the class of capitalist oligarchs like Cecil John Rhodes intent on grabbing land and exploiting the country for wealth. Then there was another class of coloniser that came from the European lower classes where these colonisers were so-called “losers” in European terms. That is, they were not secure members of the European working class, but the unemployed or precariat of their societies, and sometimes even the criminals and thugs of their societies. That is, this class is a *lumpenproletariat* in Marxist terms rather than a true proletariat. Added to this, there is another class of coloniser, those of the upper middle class. Unlike the *lumpenproletariat*, this class is cultured and highly educated. Sufficiently comfortably off, this class, unlike the greed-driven oligarchical class, is less concerned with the amassing of wealth while also not exercised by the need to improve their status in the way that the *lumpenproletariat* class is. Its values tend to be more liberal.

The most virulent racism in the colony comes from an alignment of the oligarchs with the *lumpenproletariat* where both classes condone exploitative behaviour towards others out of their self-interests. For Marx and Engels, the *lumpenproletariat* (the riff raff, “the dangerous class”) are an underclass without true class consciousness, and in *The Communist Manifesto*, Marx and Engels state that instead of joining revolutionary movements they are more likely to sell out to “reactionary intrigues” (Marx and Engels 2012, 83). What Marx and

Engels do not consider is that in a colonial situation, the *lumpenproletariat* bond together on the basis of *racial* identities as opposed to class ones, and it is the displacement of class solidarities by racial groupings of self-interest that settler-nationalist identity politics effects. That is, what is important to understand from colonial history is that the *lumpenproletariat* class seek to overcome their inferior *class* status through positing themselves as coming from a superior civilisation defined in terms of *race*. With this, what it means to be civil or uncivil becomes less a question of ethics and behaviour and much more a case of the racial politicization of identities as effects the naturalisation of privilege or entitlement.

A split comparable to the Brexit rift opened up in Rhodesia particularly over right-wing leader Ian Smith's unilateral declaration of independence. Smith sought to sever the colony from Britain because Britain had begun to pursue a decolonisation policy with majority rule as its aim, thus allowing for African self-determination. This served to split the colonising classes into those who favoured white nationalist separatism (the majority of the white population) and those who were strongly opposed to this and who sought to support the African working class in its struggle for majority rule. Thus, the social alignments were of oligarchs and *lumpenproletariat* leading the racist side and certain elements of the educated and cultured European middle classes aligning themselves with African middle and working classes on the anti-separatist and pro-liberation side (see also Mamdani 2020, 164-76).

When I previously spoke of Brexit entailing a sense of *déjà vu* for me, this was because the social rift that opened up dramatically at this time was between the oligarchical class or very rich elite that had garnered the support of the *lumpenproletariat* class through the encouragement of racist attitudes and the cultured cosmopolitan middle classes in support of the working class including migrant workers. In the aftermath of the British election of 2019, that served to affirm Brexit and xenophobia and reject the socialist values of Jeremy Corbyn and team, there was, in my view, a distorted or simplified account in the media of this turn of events. The broad assumption was that the Northern working classes had deserted Labour in favour of Johnson through believing that the Labour Party was not concerned with them. In my analysis, what was once a working class, such as the miners, had been decimated by Thatcherism, the effect of which was to destroy the working-class civility that had bound people together in close community. What had been a working class became much more of a *lumpenproletariat* of people unable to get or hold down jobs, a group of people with little workers' solidarity and with low morale, this perhaps accounting for low educational attainment, and increasing loss of trust in the notion of civil

society since they felt it no longer existed. Marx and Engels write of the *lumpenproletariat* as comprised of those whose employment is precarious, as may also potentially lead to crime and corruption, and thus further indignity. The rise in precarity of our times seems to have much increased the size of the *lumpenproletariat*.

Thatcher's policy might be described as awfully successful, for she set out to destroy working-class community spirit by destroying the Northern working-class communities and by installing instead her neoliberal mantra of there being no such thing as society, where Thatcher could be seen as having a *lumpenproletariat* background herself. The social ruptures that have emerged in Britain over the pandemic thus have a long history that has taken the form of what I am terming civil and uncivil classes. I would add that the loss of community values may constitute a trauma that mistakenly (and exploited by propaganda) seeks its repair through ethnic nationalism and xenophobic patriotism. While the pandemic is distressing in itself, beyond this, it exposes how the nationalist narrative has long been cynically deployed to mask the lack of any actual concern for the non-elite classes of the nation.

Some insight into Johnson's attitudes and his popularity amongst the *lumpenproletariat* can be gleaned from an article of his in *The Spectator* that appeared many years ago, in 1995. Johnson, in addressing the proliferation of single mothers, writes:

And that brings me to the last and greatest group of male culprits. Most of these single mothers have had the common sense to detect that the modern British male is useless.

If he is blue collar, he is likely to be drunk, criminal, aimless, feckless and hopeless, and perhaps claiming to suffer from low self-esteem brought on by unemployment.

If he is white collar, he is likely to be little better. (1995, 6)

Johnson sees male British workers in precisely *lumpenproletariat* terms. What is further interesting is that it is this group that Johnson has sought to win the electoral support of, as he is aware of their craving for esteem, usually as white British men who can be proud of themselves. I would speculate that the reason why Johnson, while of the rich elites, posits this class as useless is due to his own tendency to uselessness, given his repeated blunders and betrayals and his stance of blustering helplessness. A term that the press has repeatedly used for Johnson over his handling of the pandemic is in fact: "useless."

Johnson writes as if the uselessness of British men, those unable to assume responsibility towards others and unable to take care of themselves, was somehow innate, implying that “low self-esteem brought on by unemployment” (quoted previously) is an unconvincing excuse. Interestingly, Johnson ideologically naturalises socio-economic conditions. Surely, precarity is at stake, while beyond this, there are questions of servitude and dependency also at stake as the pandemic has revealed. While the traditional working classes are willing to be of service to others, the *lumpenproletariat* appear to believe that their freedom lies in not needing to be of service to others below them. However, I would suggest what this group posits as its libertarian freedom actually masks a sense of secretly vulnerable dependency on others and a fear that this might be exposed as a kind of inferiority in terms of class rivalries. The *lumpenproletariat*, in what seems to be an internalization of hierarchies, resent the educated middle classes whom they say make them feel inferior while they seek to posit themselves as superior to the class of migrant manual labour.

I observed a striking Covid-related incident in a video clip posted on *Facebook* of an American case of covert dependency where a woman explained how she called 911 to demand police intervention because a shop-keeper declined to serve her when she refused to wear a mask in his shop. (Eustachwick 2020) She kept repeating that it was her fundamental human right to be served. In other words, she asserted her right to be cared for while at the same time she insisted that this was a unilateral right in that she did not feel she herself needed to care for the shop-keeper’s concerns over his safety. What is also telling is that in other such episodes, anti-mask women, often associated with the “Karen” meme of badly behaved privileged women (Abcarian 2020), can be seen to exhibit the kind of meltdown of a child having a tantrum, as if they are not able to cope with the exposure of their own dependency on others such as shop-keepers. As this discussion illustrates, covert dependency cuts across gender lines, although the sense of automatic entitlement that masks the dependency is often a masculinist assumption.

In Johnson’s case, while he was reliant on the NHS to save his life at the time that he was hospitalized with Covid-19, his government has failed to meet NHS requests for adequate pay rises and better working conditions. Indeed, Jenny McGee, the nurse who kept vigil by Johnson’s bedside when his life was in the balance, went on to quit the NHS over the lack of respect shown by the government for the NHS and healthcare workers. My point is that the nurses are automatically expected to care, while the government feels no need for reciprocity.

The pandemic has thrown up certain paradoxes. One of these is that caring for others may entail distancing yourself from them. Another is that those who refuse to comply with the guidelines over social responsibility such as through wearing masks are in fact *masking* their dependency complexes, as in the demand that others serve them and fulfil their needs. As indicated, the pretense is that this dependency is an assertion of independence or freedom. What it may amount to is an assertion along the following lines: it is not my role to care for others, it is their role to care for me. As such, there is a demand for class hierarchies of masters and servants, including men reliant on their wives to look after them as if these men were children, and white people who believe that immigrants should service them with no entitlement to rights and services themselves. It is this that those who believe in civility challenge through maintaining the needed reciprocity of social care.

Coming back to the Arab uprisings briefly, it seems that their dynamics brought together the educated middle classes (intellectuals and artists) and the working classes against the rich elites and the thugs commandeered by them. Moreover, one of the striking things about the uprisings was how civil they were, meaning that they were well-mannered, considerate, respectful, decent, and that they expressed themselves through culture and the arts. This is a question of how the uprisings and the pandemic have, in their very different ways, displaced the conception of the nation in the patriotic kinship terms of *genos* with an emphasis on the *demos*, and thus the dignity and needs of the people.

Social Alignments in Postcolonial Indian Fiction

In India, Narendra Modi's abandonment of the people to the Indian variant of the virus has been described by Arundhati Roy as "a crime against humanity" (Roy 2021), given the government's failure to provide hospital beds, oxygen, vaccines, and crematorium facilities to devastating effect. However, this is not just a failure of the moment. Julia Hollingsworth writes: "As human rights activist Harsh Mander puts it, India had 'starved' its public health systems for decades—long before Modi's time in office" (Hollingsworth 2021). As many Indian citizens are aware, the current health crisis is not new so much as a matter of bringing into full view the long-entrenched negligence Indian hyper-nationalist ideology and neoliberalism have aimed to cloak. A novel that explores this decades long disastrous political negligence is Rohinton Mistry's *A Fine Balance* (1995), while Arundhati Roy's *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* (2017) shows how what Mistry first explores extends into Modi's political ascendance that her novel treats of. Both novels are thus critical of the structural pre-conditions that have issued in the contemporary Indian virus crisis,

both displacing a politics of race, caste and kinship with an ethical consideration of the civil and uncivil class formations that have come even further to the fore during the pandemic. I will now offer readings of these novels in an illustrative rather than exhaustive manner.

A Fine Balance is a heart-breaking epic novel set in Indira Gandhi's India, exposing its dark side. It begins with what may be considered two back stories in order to explain how the characters of the stories come to be thrown together.

One of the backstories of *A Fine Balance* is about a middle-class woman called Dina. Her father is a doctor with a strong sense of social responsibility, so when there is an outbreak of cholera and typhoid among the rural poor, he decides to go to their aid. However, he himself receives a fatal snake bite in the rural area, and so he ends up giving his life to his sense of social mission. When he dies, Dina's brother takes over the role of head of the family. However, he is a man with an inferiority complex that leads to him bullying his sister to give him a compensatory sense of superiority. In brief, one of the ways she reacts to her hostile home environment is to take refuge in classical music concerts where she gets to know a man who shares her love of music through which they fall in love and marry. Unfortunately, their happiness is short-lived when Dina's husband is killed in a traffic accident. Dina then decides that to keep her independence she will set up a clothes-making business.

The second back story concerns a family from the untouchable Chamar caste whose occupation is tanning and leather work, and who are determined to improve their fortunes through their sons learning to be tailors. One of the sons, Narayan, stands up to the local tyrannical landholder, the Thakur, in asserting his voting rights. As a punishment for this transgression of caste hierarchies, supposed to be permanent, Narayan is captured and gruesomely tortured to death as a lesson to others. His brother and his son, Ishvar and Omprakash (Om), having set up as tailors, find there is not enough business locally and so they head to the city that Dina resides in, in search of employment leading to their being hired by her for her new business. She also takes on a middle-class student lodger called Maneck.

At first, there is a lack of trust between Dina as an employer and her tailor employees, yet with the intercessions of leftist-leaning Maneck this improves, and gradually the four of them become an unusual alternative community brought together against caste, gender and generational divides (as could be read as metonymic of how the nation ought to be). While the tailors first live at a subsistence level in slum housing, when this is destroyed and they are reduced to sleeping rough, Dina gradually gives in to allowing the tailors to live on her

front porch, even as her landlord threatens her with eviction if she is not the sole occupant of the property.

What Mistry shows us, without any sentimentality, is how alternative communities animated by warmth, humour, decency and social care may be constituted against the odds. While Dina and Maneck are from the educated middle classes, with Dina having a cultured and creative side to her with her love of music and dress-making, the tailors are from the lowest and poorest class. That an alliance across these classes occurs is due to their mutually caring and civil treatment of each other. The civil class, signified by the alternative community, yet finds its enemies in the uncivil class that is comprised of the *lumpenproletariat* and the oligarchs or wealthy and powerful elites. It is not possible to cover the many illustrative scenes and characters in the panoramic sweep of *A Fine Balance* regarding what may be termed India's uncivil class. However, Mistry shows how desperate poverty drives individuals into becoming criminals and selfish thugs, as well as henchmen acting for the rich, and he also attends to social bandits that cross between civil and uncivil divides.

With their rise in fortunes, the elder tailor feels it is his responsibility to arrange a marriage for his nephew, so they return to their village for this purpose. Unfortunately, this coincides with Indira Gandhi's sterilisation campaign coming to their home village whereby the two tailors are forcibly sterilised. Prior to this moment, Om has encountered the Thakur, the man responsible for the torture and killing of his father, and expressed his rage at him. When the two tailors have been sterilised, they are given a moment of hope in learning that vasectomies are reversible. However, in the case of Ishvar, the unsanitary conditions of the clinic he was operated in lead to an infection that necessitates the amputation of his legs. In the case of Om, the Thakur forces the clinic to re-admit him through the pretence that he has cancer, and the Thakur gives the doctor orders to castrate him. Through these harrowing events, the two mutilated tailors eventually end up as beggars.

Indira Gandhi's sterilisation campaign, that sterilised millions and issued in hundreds of thousands of deaths, targeted especially the poorest castes, a form of eugenics of familial biopolitics, revealing that Gandhi's theatrical nationalist rallies (depicted in the novel) masked the fact that this "nationalism" was not for all of India's citizenry. The Thakur and Indira Gandhi are representatives of an elitist *class* that accords no humanity to the poor and allows them no social services or hopes of betterment. The lower classes exist *only* to serve the dominant classes that just take and take with no possibility of any reciprocity. The contrast between civil and uncivil classes is very stark and bleak in *A Fine Balance*, the fine balance being between hope and despair.

In *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, another panoramic Indian novel set in more contemporary times, Arundhati Roy also explores the stark division of civil and uncivil classes, while positing the value of eclectic alternative communities. The novel begins where it ends in a graveyard in Delhi that has become the home of Anjum, one of the main protagonists. However, the graveyard we first encounter is not the graveyard we re-encounter, as I'll return to.

The significance of Anjum in the novel is that she, having been born intersex, elects to live as a woman (for the most part), leaving her family to join the *Hijra* community: *Hijra* being a term used in India to refer to those who are eunuchs, intersex or (male-to-female) transgendered. Anjum then learns how to live in a marginal way with the support of her community, one outside of the family, where she also adopts a foundling child. She further learns of how historically the *Hijra* community are the custodians of a spiritual legacy where they are respected as a “third gender” able to bestow blessings on their society. In fact, androgyny often has a spiritual significance in cultures outside of the West.

Why Roy is particularly interested in the *Hijra* community concerns her critique of identity politics, one of the *Hijras* commenting: “The war is *inside* us. Indo-Pak is *inside* us” (Roy 2017, 23). For Roy, those who live between or across genders may have something to teach us about the acceptance of ambivalence or ambiguity as well as about the transformative magic of the imagination. The other main strand of the novel concerns the rise of Modi's saffron far right and the ethnic-religious conflicts of Muslims and Hindus, and also the Indo-Muslim conflict in Kashmir. Firstly, Roy takes us back to the Gujurat massacre of Muslims—that Modi apparently incited according to the film *Final Solution* (Sharma 2004)—when Anjum pays a visit to the region to become a witness to the barbarism, including mass rape, of the massacre. Secondly, Roy sets part of the novel in war-torn Kashmir with gruesome accounts of cruelty.

What the scenes of conflict show is how countries can become graveyards. This is through the obsessional politics of identity purity such as the RSS ideology of a purely Hindu India. The novel provides much evidence of how this purity is not at all pure but entails a great deal of toxic corruption, criminality, and barbarity. While there is sympathy for the struggle in Kashmir, the country is revealed to be a place of “black marketeers, bigots, thugs and confidence-tricksters,” who “grafted the language of God and Freedom, Allah and Azadi, on to their murders and new scams” (Roy 2017, 316).

Apart from Anjum, a prominent protagonist of Roy's novel is an educated middle-class woman called Tilo, an architect turned activist on behalf of people whose lives are torn apart by the conflict in Kashmir. Despite their different

backgrounds, Anjum and Tilo have a sensibility in common in the way that they are free spirits who are able to care for outsider others or outcasts (both adopting children), and eventually their paths meet when Anjum sets up the Jannan Guest House in the graveyard she has come to make her home, *jannan* translating as “paradise.”

Anjum, traumatised and haunted by her witnessing of the Gujarat massacre, finds that younger members that have joined the *Hijra* community are bringing to it an ethos that she is no longer comfortable with. Roy seems here to offer a subtle critique of how Western-style transgender ideology is serving to displace the older *Hijra* culture. The younger trans activists are said to lecture Anjum with what seems to be a literal-minded form of identity politics that she is sceptical of in the wake of her experience of sectarian violence. Furthermore, when Anjum visits Gujarat, she does so dressed as a man and it is implied that this saves her from the sexual violence of the riots, explaining why she then seeks to dress her adopted daughter up as a boy, something that the trans activists deem politically incorrect. So, she leaves the *Hijra* community that has been taken over in this way, and comes to make her home in the graveyard where she gradually builds up a new community that takes in all kinds of waifs and strays (those who might otherwise potentially turn into riff raff), along with stray animals. Among other things, she sets up a school, significantly so, that Tilo joins as a teacher. Again, the educated middle classes and underclasses come to co-operate in building a world beyond that of oligarchs and thugs.

While Mistry’s novel has a rhythm of alternating hope and despair, Roy’s performs an inversion, as noted by Eleanor Birne in a review of the novel (Birne 2017). Although Kashmir is often referred to as a paradise, it has become a graveyard, along with Gujarat. Inversely, what we take to be a graveyard at the start of the novel is something we eventually come to see in a different light as a place of potential re-birth, a place of “ministry” as healing service towards happiness. What is significant about Roy’s novel is that it is strangely percipient in imagining a country as a graveyard, with the current tragic scenes of India’s mass funeral pyres, contemporary India is becoming a graveyard. This is no mere coincidence for Roy’s ongoing concerns show us how there is a distinct connection between Modi’s violent neo-colonial advancement of race, sect, and caste as naturalised, permanent hierarchies, from Modi’s incitement of the Gujarat violence onwards, and the callous abandonment of the nation’s actual citizenry as is evident in the Indian government’s negligent handling of the pandemic. What is at stake in this is the difference between the idolized Hindu nation treating itself as sacred and Roy’s alternative sense of life as that which

is truly sacred. It is among the social carers and environmental carers that this true sense of the sacred is to be found.

There is a passage in the novel concerning a character displaced by the flooding of his village, and with this a whole way of life in which the natural world is cared for. Roy writes:

In his dream his village still existed. It wasn't at the bottom of a dam reservoir. 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. In his dream his brother Luariya wasn't a tour guide at the dam site whose job was to showcase the miracles the dam had wrought. His mother didn't work as a sweeper in a dam engineer's house that was built on the land that she had once owned. She didn't have to steal mangoes from her own trees. (2017, 113)

I wish to juxtapose this with a recent message to the West offered by Nemonte Nenquimo, a Waorami woman of the Amazonian rainforest. She says: "You forced your civilisation upon us and now look where we are: global pandemic, climate crisis, species extinction and, driving it all, widespread spiritual poverty. In all these years of taking, taking, taking from our lands, you have not had the courage, or the curiosity, or the respect to get to know us" (Nenquimo 2020).

A virus is a strange thing. It has no life of its own, and so its existence depends on going from host to host in random and blind disregard of its hosts. If the virus were seen in anthropomorphic terms, it would be sheer ingratitude. Those who are guilty of expecting to be cared for and served with no reciprocity exhibit the viral dynamics of ingratitude as a definitive feature of the uncivil. Where the term "viral" usually refers to rapid replication, as in a meme or tweet going viral, what I wish to draw attention to is that the viral entails a colonising dynamic of "living on" through living off others, though blindly without recognition of this. It is not transmission through, say, call and response, or other forms of reciprocity, but merely through self-replication, as it actually lacks a life of its own in being merely a template of literality.

The coming together of the working class and middle class, variously addressed in this article, also reflects how the gap between them has lessened. For instance, significantly, one of the things that neoliberalism has effected is the proletarianization of certain jobs that used to have status. Being a university lecturer used to be a well-regarded job in the UK, but it is now the managers of the university that have status, while the teaching staff are treated as drones and

minions. Coming back to my critique of Arendt, we need to re-evaluate key labour against the kind of management that can constitute merely covert parasitical dependency.

Furthermore, what needs to be understood is that the proliferation of the *lumpenproletariat* under nationalist revivals is, in effect, symptomatic of the resurgence of colonialism as fascism. This internalisation or re-importation of colonialism as fascism is something that Aimé Césaire pointed out many years ago, where Césaire also maintains that Europeans see the colonies as a safety valve, that is, as a place where they can offload their undesirable or dangerous citizens (Césaire 2000, 41-42). In very starkly polarised terms, Césaire sees Europe and America as what he calls “decivilizing” powers that have lapsed into barbarism while he designates African civilisations as “courteous,” (51) “fraternal” and “co-operative” (44). While I appreciate that Césaire is deliberately writing a stark polemic, there remains a certain danger of entrenching the divides as racial ones. As Mahmood Mamdani has argued of colonial nationalism and of fascism, the desire is to produce permanent minorities in the service of a dominant class through presenting this class as constituted by race, tribe, caste or ethnicity (Mamdani 2020, 9-15), that is, as a birth right. An emphasis on nations as a diversity of cultures and as societies that can work for social justice across class lines, indeed towards much less class-divided societies, constitutes a certain corrective to this insistence on ethnic identity politics.

In this article, I have tried to show that the pandemic has thrown into stark relief how governments of patriotic xenophobia, reliant on colonial legacies of naturalising entitlement as a question of race, caste or kinship, have especially and hypocritically failed their people, their fellow citizens, while the pandemic also brings to the fore the division between civil (caring) and uncivil (uncaring) classes that nationalist zealotry is designed to hide in order to exploit structural exclusivities of care. If the negligent power, so to speak, of the uncivil classes is to be overcome, this depends on heeding percipient warnings, before being eventually forced by disasters to confront what is at stake, and on the civil classes unifying within nations across politicised generic divisions as well as across transnational borders through what can be identified as common causes.

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