

The Geography of Belonging: Exploring Home, Displacement, and Human Connection in Anuradha Roy's *An Atlas of Impossible Longing*

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Abstract

This research paper examines Anuradha Roy's debut novel *An Atlas of Impossible Longing* through the lens of home, displacement, and the human struggle for belonging across three generations. The novel, spanning from the early twentieth century to contemporary India, presents characters trapped between internal desires and external social constraints. Through an analysis of the main characters: Amulya, Kananbala, Mukunda, and Bakul this paper explores how Roy critiques rigid social hierarchies, particularly caste and gender systems, while highlighting the profound connection between human identity and the natural landscape. The study demonstrates that Roy's narrative reveals how true belonging emerges not from property ownership or social status but from authentic human connections and harmonious relationships with the environment. By examining the interplay between silence and voice, wilderness and domesticity, freedom and constraint, this paper argues that Roy's work offers a powerful commentary on contemporary issues of displacement, identity, and the search for home in an increasingly fragmented world.

Keywords: social hierarchy, identity formation, environmental consciousness

Introduction

"Home is not where you are born; home is where all your attempts to escape cease."

This profound observation by Naguib Mahfouz captures the essence of Anuradha Roy's *An Atlas of Impossible Longing*, a novel that maps the human heart's desperate search for belonging. This place is Home. The word carries weight beyond bricks and mortar. It speaks to our deepest need for connection, acceptance, and place in this world. Roy's novel explores this fundamental human longing through characters who build houses but cannot

construct homes, who inherit land but remain rootless, who live together yet exist in profound isolation.

An Atlas of Impossible Longing tells the story of three generations struggling to find their place in a world defined by rigid social boundaries and an overpowering natural landscape. The narrative begins when Amulya, seeking silence and solitude, moves his family from bustling Calcutta to the remote town of Songarh. This single decision sets in motion a cascade of consequences that ripple through decades, affecting his wife Kananbala, his sons Nirmal and Kamal, and most significantly, two orphaned children Mukunda and Bakul whose forbidden love becomes the emotional center of the story. The title itself was chosen because it perfectly encapsulates the novel's central theme: we are all atlases, our lives mapped by longings that society, circumstance, or fate renders impossible to fulfill.

This paper aims to examine how Roy uses her characters to critique India's oppressive social structures while exploring the complex relationship between humans and their environment. As literary critic Anjali Deshpande observes, Roy's work "explores the tensions between individual desire and social constraint, between the natural world and human civilization" (Deshpande 45). The title connects powerfully with today's scenario, where millions experience displacement, whether physical migration, social alienation, or the psychological homelessness that comes from living in spaces where one cannot truly belong. In our contemporary world of refugees, migrants, and marginalized communities, Roy's exploration of who gets to call a place 'home' resonates with urgent relevance. The novel explores what constitutes a home, whether it's the place that inhabits or the people one loves and considers whether true belonging is possible when society labels us as outsiders.

Anuradha Roy's Vision: Concepts and Character Analysis

Anuradha Roy chose to explore themes of displacement, longing, and social marginalization because she recognized these as fundamental to the Indian experience, particularly for those caught in the rigid hierarchies of caste and gender. Roy has stated in interviews that she wanted to examine how social structures create "insiders" and "outsiders," and how these designations shape every aspect of human existence from whom we can love to where we can call home. In an interview with *The Hindu*, Roy explained: "I wanted to write about the idea of home, and what it means to different people. For some it's a place of refuge, for others a prison" (Roy, "Interview"). Her approach aligns with other Indian authors who have explored similar terrain. Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* similarly examines forbidden love across caste lines and the devastating consequences of transgressing social boundaries. Rohinton Mistry's *A Fine Balance* explores displacement and the search for dignity amid crushing poverty and caste discrimination.

Scholar Ranjana Harish notes that Anuradha Roy "belongs to a generation of Indian writers who are redefining the landscape of Indian English fiction by focusing on the interior lives of characters marginalized by caste, gender, and social circumstance" (Harish 112).

Internationally, Roy's work echoes Gabriel García Márquez's multi-generational family sagas and Toni Morrison's exploration of how social marginalization shapes identity and desire. Literary critic Tabish Khair observes that Roy's narrative technique "combines the lyrical intensity of poetry with the sweeping scope of the family saga, creating a work that is both intimate and epic" (Khair 78).

Anuradha Roy was born in Calcutta and spent her childhood in various parts of India and abroad. She worked as an editor before turning to fiction writing. *An Atlas of Impossible Longing*, published in 2008, was her debut novel and received widespread critical acclaim, winning the Economist Crossword Prize. Roy's background in editing and her exposure to diverse landscapes inform her precise, evocative prose and her attention to how physical environments shape human consciousness.

The novel spans approximately seventy years, beginning in the 1907s when Amulya establishes his household in Songarh. The patriarch creates a beautiful garden but emotionally neglects his wife Kananbala, whose isolation drives her toward madness. Their son Nirmal becomes an archaeologist who prefers dead civilizations to living relationships, abandoning his infant daughter Bakul after his wife Shanti dies in childbirth during a flood. Bakul grows up wild and neglected, finding companionship only in Mukunda, an orphan of uncertain caste whom Amulya has adopted. The children develop a deep bond, but when the family discovers their love as they approach adulthood, Mukunda is cast out due to caste prejudice. He becomes a successful builder in Calcutta, constructing houses for others while remaining emotionally homeless. Bakul waits for him, refusing marriage proposals, until they finally reunite decades later. The title plays a crucial role throughout the narrative, as each character becomes an "atlas of impossible longing" mapped by desires they cannot fulfill due to social constraints, personal failures, or the unpredictable forces of nature and fate.

Amulya: The Aesthetic of Silence and Failed Stewardship

Amulya represents the founding patriarch whose desire for solitude initiates the family's isolation. His move from Calcutta to Songarh is driven by a craving for repletion found in silence, a sharp contrast to the shouting town he leaves behind. He creates a magnificent garden from wilderness, planting flowers that gleam white in the darkness, demonstrating his ability to cultivate the land. However, his relationship with nature is aesthetic and controlling rather than participatory. He views the tribal dance and forest with detached interest, more concerned with identifying botanical species than engaging with human reality.

This detachment extends devastatingly to his family. When Kananbala attempts to bridge their emotional distance, he retreats into the vastness impossible to cross between his garden bench and her veranda. Amulya embodies the intellectual who successfully cultivates land but fails to cultivate human connection. His treatment of his wife with benign neglect

borders on cruelty. He provides material comfort but withholds emotional sustenance. As critic Meenakshi Bharat argues, "Amulya represents the colonial-era Bengali intellectual whose engagement with nature is purely aesthetic, lacking the emotional reciprocity necessary for genuine human relationships" (Bharat 156). His adoption of Mukunda shows capacity for kindness, yet he cannot protect the boy from his daughter-in-law Manjula's cruelty or his son Kamal's prejudice. Amulya's legacy is one of emotional silence that haunts his descendants, proving that a house surrounded by beautiful gardens can still be a prison.

Kananbala: Madness as Resistance

Kananbala serves as the tragic counterpoint to Amulya. For her, Songarh's silence is not sanctuary but a bell jar she felt she could not prise open for air. Her character arc examines the psychological toll of displacement on women who lack agency. Unlike the male characters who can move and build, Kananbala is confined to the domestic sphere. Her descent into what the family perceives as madness marked by garrulity and eventually vulgar outbursts. It can be interpreted as rebellion against enforced isolation.

Her hallucinations of a lion's roar and conversations with the serpentine posts of the bed suggest a psyche invaded by the wildness she is forced to inhabit but not allowed to engage with. When she finally breaks social norms, calling her husband and sons vile names, it is an act of reclaiming voice in a household that values silence. Feminist scholar Jasbir Jain observes that "Kananbala's madness is not pathology but protest, a refusal to accept the silencing imposed by patriarchal domesticity" (Jain 203). Her unlikely friendship with the Anglo-Indian neighbor Mrs. Barnum highlights her transgression of social boundaries. In her madness, she finds freedom to cross the road and experience a picnic at the ruins, feeling an exhilaration... overpowering that she hadn't felt since she was a bride. Kananbala's tragedy reveals how patriarchal structures can drive women to psychological breaking points, and how what society labels madness may actually be the only available form of resistance.

Mukunda: The Atlas of Impossible Longing

Mukunda is the novel's central consciousness, through whom themes of caste, belonging, and longing are most acutely filtered. An orphan of indeterminate caste adopted by Amulya, he occupies a liminal space: inside/outside. He eats with the family but sleeps in the courtyard. He is loved by Amulya but treated as a servant by Manjula. This marginalization fuels his drive to construct his own identity.

His transition from orphan in Songarh to successful builder in Calcutta is deeply ironic. He spends his adult life building houses for others while remaining homeless himself. The astrologer's reading of his palm as an atlas of impossible longing encapsulates his character: a man mapped by desires for things he cannot socially or historically possess. They include family, caste, and Bakul. Roy writes of Mukunda's realization: "I had spent my life building walls, but I had forgotten to build a door through which love could enter(47)". This powerful acknowledgment reveals his internal conflict. His profession makes him an agent

of development, viewing land and houses as commodities to be exploited or demolished, a view he must ultimately unlearn to reclaim his humanity and his love for Bakul.

Scholar Ananya Jahanara Kabir notes that "Mukunda's character embodies the paradox of the postcolonial subject who achieves material success but remains spiritually displaced, unable to claim belonging in either the traditional world he left behind or the modern world he has entered" (Kabir 89). His journey represents the struggle of millions who exist in the liminal spaces of Indian society, neither fully accepted nor entirely rejected, forever marked by the accident of birth that determines caste identity.

Bakul: The Wild Child and Rejection of Domesticity

Bakul, motherless and virtually fatherless, grows up wild, defined by the neglect of her human family and the embrace of the natural world. She resists traditional molding of a girl child. Unlike the domestic women expected by society, she has straggly curls and a solemn mouth, climbing trees and swimming in lily ponds. Her character critiques the civilizing forces of society. She destroys her father's precious leaf collection, an act of rebellion against his prioritization of dead nature over his living daughter.

Her bond with Mukunda is forged in this wildness. They are two orphans who found refuge in one another and the Songarh landscape. Bakul's refusal to marry a stranger and her long wait for Mukunda signify rejection of the social contract in favor of a natural bond, prioritizing instinctive life over the little human morality play of societal expectations. Literary critic Shormishtha Panja argues that "Bakul represents a radical reimagining of female agency, one that rejects both traditional domesticity and modern careerism in favor of an authentic selfhood rooted in emotional truth" (Panja 134). Her character demonstrates that true freedom comes not from conforming to social roles but from honoring authentic connections, even when society deems them impossible.

The Symbiosis of Mukunda and Bakul

The relationship between Mukunda and Bakul is the novel's emotional core, representing a bond that transcends social stratification. They share a secret language and a private world in Songarh, populated by their imagination and the landscape. Their connection is explicitly linked to the environment; they are described as natural participants in the world, distinct from adults who try to impose order.

Their separation and subsequent reunion highlight the theme of self-in-place. When Mukunda is sent away, both characters experience a loss of self because their identities are inextricably bound to one another and the Songarh landscape. Roy captures this beautifully: "Without him, the garden lost its colors. Without her, the city had no meaning(88)." Their reunion is not just romantic but restorative an act of reclaiming their habitats and rejecting the monologic authority of family patriarchs who tried to separate them based on caste.

As postcolonial theorist Homi K. Bhabha argues, "The transgressive love that crosses boundaries of caste and class represents a form of cultural hybridity that challenges the fixed categories of colonial and postcolonial social orders" (Bhabha 112). Their love story argues that home is not a place but a person, and that true belonging comes from connections that honor our authentic selves rather than social expectations. The novel suggests, as critic Nilanjana S. Roy observes, that "love becomes an act of resistance, a refusal to accept the limitations imposed by an unjust social order" (Roy, "Review").

Conclusion

Through *An Atlas of Impossible Longing*, Anuradha Roy delivers a powerful message about the nature of home and belonging in a world fractured by social hierarchies and human disconnection. The novel demonstrates that the rigid structures of caste, gender, and class create artificial boundaries that prevent authentic human connection and condemn individuals to lives of profound loneliness. Roy shows that true home is not found in property ownership, social status, or adherence to tradition, but in the fluid, resilient connections between people and their environment.

The paper's aim has been fulfilled by demonstrating how Roy uses her characters to critique oppressive social structures while exploring the complex relationship between human identity and the natural landscape. Amulya's beautiful garden cannot compensate for his emotional neglect. Kananbala's madness is resistance against suffocating domesticity. Nirmal's retreat into the past leaves him broken and incapable of present relationships. Mukunda's success as a builder cannot fill the void of homelessness. Only when Mukunda and Bakul reunite, honoring their authentic bond despite social prohibition, does the possibility of true belonging emerge.

Roy's novel speaks urgently to contemporary issues. In our world of mass migration, refugee crises, and increasing social fragmentation, the question of who belongs and who remains perpetually displaced has never been more relevant. As cultural critic Arjun Appadurai notes, "In an age of globalization, the question of home becomes increasingly complex, as traditional markers of belonging—place, community, caste—are disrupted by migration and modernization" (Appadurai 178). The novel challenges us to examine the structures that prevent us from creating genuine homes for ourselves and others. It asks us to consider whether our pursuit of material success, social status, or aesthetic beauty has come at the cost of authentic human connection.

Mukunda's final realization that life had finally floated down the river and reached me suggests that true belonging is not found in the static ownership of property but in the fluid, resilient connections between people and their environment.

Roy's debut novel ultimately argues that we are all atlases of impossible longing, mapped by desires that society, circumstance, or fate may render difficult to fulfill. Yet the

novel also offers hope: when we have the courage to transgress unjust boundaries, to honor authentic connections over social expectations, and to recognize our fundamental interdependence with each other and the natural world, we can create homes not of walls and roofs but of love, acceptance, and genuine belonging. In a world that increasingly asks us to choose between tradition and progress, conformity and authenticity, Roy reminds us that the most revolutionary act may be simply to love whom we love and to call home the place where we are truly seen, accepted, and free.

As reviewer Alex Clark wrote in *The Guardian*, "Roy's novel is a meditation on the nature of home and belonging, and on the ways in which love can transcend the boundaries imposed by society" (Clark). This meditation remains profoundly relevant as we navigate our own impossible longings in an increasingly fragmented world, searching for the places and people where we can finally, truly belong.

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