

Mapping Pain: Domestic Violence and Intergenerational Trauma in Anuradha Roy's *An Atlas of Impossible Longing*

Dr. R. Kumara Sethupathi, Assistant Professor, Department of English, PSG College of Arts & Science
Coimbatore

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the nexus between domestic violence and psychological trauma in Anuradha Roy's *An Atlas of Impossible Longing* (2008). Set against the backdrop of an evolving Indian society, the novel examines how trauma operates within domestic spaces and across generations. Drawing on trauma theory, particularly Cathy Caruth's work on the unassimilated nature of traumatic events and Judith Herman's insights into interpersonal violence, the article investigates how domestic violence fragments identities and disrupts familial bonds. Through Roy's evocative portrayal of characters like Kananbala and Mukunda, the novel critiques patriarchal structures and highlights the cyclical nature of trauma. This analysis ultimately demonstrates Roy's profound engagement with the themes of suffering, resilience, and the possibility of healing amidst intergenerational strife.

INTRODUCTION

Anuradha Roy, the distinguished Indian writer, was born in Kolkata and spent her formative years in Hyderabad, with her nomadic upbringing exposing her to diverse cultures across India. She holds a degree in Literature from Presidency College, Kolkata, and Cambridge University, UK. Roy has authored five critically acclaimed novels, beginning with *An Atlas of Impossible Longing* (2008), which has been translated into sixteen languages and lauded internationally as a *New York Times* Editor's Choice and Book of the Year by *The Washington Post* and *Huffington Post*. Her third novel, *Sleeping on Jupiter*, won the DSC Prize for Fiction (2016) and was longlisted for the Man Booker Prize (2015), while *All the Lives We Never Lived* received the Sahitya Akademi Award (2022) and was shortlisted for the International Dublin Literary Award.

Anuradha Roy: Chronicler of Trauma and Resilience

Her writing is celebrated for its lyrical prose, complex storytelling, and vivid portrayal of landscapes and human emotions. Her narratives often explore the intersections of personal and collective histories, shedding light on the hidden fractures within relationships and societies. A recurring theme in her works is trauma, both individual and intergenerational, examined through the lives of characters struggling with displacement, domestic violence, and psychological suffering. Roy's thoughtful depiction of trauma is not confined to overt acts of violence but extends to the subtle, often invisible wounds inflicted by societal norms, familial expectations, and historical upheavals. This thematic richness, combined with her keen psychological insight, makes her work a compelling exploration of resilience and the human capacity for survival.

Anuradha Roy's *An Atlas of Impossible Longing* is a poignant narrative set in rural India, where secrets, silence, and violence test family bonds. At its heart, the novel grapples with the lived realities of domestic violence, embedding the characters' experiences within spaces that both reflect and exacerbate their suffering. Roy subverts the concept of "home," revealing its potential to become a space of psychological distress rather than comfort.

Theoretical Framework: Trauma Theory and Domestic Violence

Domestic violence is more than physical harm; it is a psychological weapon that leaves deep, invisible scars. Trauma theory, particularly as articulated by Cathy Caruth, Judith Herman, and others, offers a lens through which these scars can be understood. Trauma disrupts the continuity of experience, creating a fractured narrative for survivors. In Roy's novel, these disruptions are evident in the silences, ruptures, and incomplete relationships that dominate the characters' lives.

Trauma theory examines the lasting effects of events that overwhelm an individual's capacity to cope, often manifesting as emotional, psychological, and even physical symptoms long after the event. According to Cathy Caruth, trauma "is not locatable in the simple violent or original event in an individual's past, but rather in the way it is very unassimilated nature – the way it was precisely not known in the first instance – returns to haunt the survivor later on" (4).

Domestic violence, as a recurring traumatic event, reinforces a sense of powerlessness and loss. Judith Herman, in *Trauma and Recovery*, emphasizes that domestic violence involves a "violation of human connection" and undermines the victim's sense of safety (51). In *An Atlas of Impossible Longing*, Roy

captures these violations within the microcosm of the family, portraying domestic spaces as sites of suffering where trauma is perpetuated, remembered, and internalized.

Home as a Site of Suffering: Redefining Domestic Spaces

The novel opens with Amulya and Kananbala's family in Songarh, where the house serves as a central locus of domestic unrest. While Amulya thrives in his business pursuits, Kananbala retreats into the shadows, her life dominated by Amulya's indifference and the restrictive norms of her environment. Her isolation and emotional neglect exacerbate Kananbala's mental instability. Her gradual alienation within her household mirrors the systemic silencing of women in patriarchal societies.

The Silencing of Women: Kananbala's Descent into Madness

The portrayal of Kananbala's descent into madness underscores the insidious effects of domestic violence on mental health. Her isolation reflects what Judith Herman describes as a "violation of human connection" that is central to trauma (51). Roy writes, "She talked to herself, answering unheard voices. No one asked why. No one wanted to hear her answer if she had one" (31). This silence, both imposed and internalized, exemplifies how societal norms suppress women's voices and perpetuate cycles of abuse. As Elaine Scarry observes, "The act of naming pain requires language, but trauma resists this act by remaining outside of narrative comprehension" (12). Kananbala's inability to articulate her suffering highlights the inexpressibility of trauma, as her pain is dismissed as madness rather than acknowledged as a response to her environment. It reflects the societal tendency to stigmatize mental illness rather than addressing its roots in domestic violence and emotional deprivation.

Intergenerational Trauma: Mukunda's Journey of Displacement

The narrative's exploration of intergenerational trauma is particularly poignant in Mukunda's story. Roy vividly portrays the transmission of trauma across generations. As an orphan adopted into the family, Mukunda witnesses violence and neglect, shaping his understanding of relationships and self-worth. The loss of his parents and his displacement into a dysfunctional household highlight the cyclical nature of trauma. It mirrors Cathy Caruth's assertion that trauma is "the unwitting reenactment of an event that one cannot simply leave behind" (2).

Memory, Longing, and Fragmentation

Memory plays a pivotal role in how characters process their trauma. The titular "atlas of impossible longing" encapsulates the fragmented nature of memory, where the past is both a source of pain and a refuge. Mukunda's recollections of his childhood are tinged with longing for connection but also marked by the violence and neglect he endured: "I wanted to believe I belonged, but belonging was a concept denied to me" (Roy 142). Roger Luckhurst asserts, "Trauma fiction frequently fractures chronology, reflecting the disjointed temporality of traumatic memory" (90). The novel's nonlinear narrative mirrors this fractured temporality, with past and present constantly intersecting in Mukunda's psyche, emphasizing how deeply trauma disrupts the coherence of one's identity and experience.

The Gendered Dimensions of Trauma: Patriarchy's Invisible Scars

This tension between desire and rejection exemplifies how trauma fractures identity and creates an enduring sense of displacement. Mukunda's eventual estrangement from the family mirrors his internalization of rejection and loss. Mukunda's inability to entirely escape the psychological scars of his childhood echoes Abraham and Torok's concept of the "phantom," where unresolved traumas of one generation unconsciously shape the next (181). His estrangement from the family serves not only as a physical departure but also as an embodiment of the emotional scars that linger.

Roy's depiction of trauma is deeply gendered, reflecting the societal constraints placed on women. Kananbala's madness and Bakul's thwarted aspirations highlight the gendered dynamics of

trauma in patriarchal settings. It reveals how patriarchal norms exacerbate psychological suffering. Judith Herman's observation that trauma is deeply tied to "the betrayal of intimate relationships" (50) is evident in the oppressive roles women navigate. This is particularly resonant in Bakul's stifled desires and Kananbala's isolation. Bakul's dreams of independence are overshadowed by familial obligations, reflecting a societal structure that limits women's agency. As Bakul reflects, "Freedom was a distant concept—so near, yet always out of reach" (Roy 211). Her longing for freedom is overshadowed by her duty to her family, illustrating the complex interplay between agency and societal expectations.

Escaping the Cycle: Healing and Resilience

Despite the pervasive suffering depicted in the novel, moments of resilience and recovery emerge. Mukunda's eventual departure from Songarh symbolizes an effort to reclaim agency and build a new identity. The shift from the suffocating confines of Songarh to the expansive vistas of Mukunda's adulthood, his journey toward self-discovery underscores the healing potential of physical escape, reinforcing Judith Herman's stages of trauma recovery—safety, remembrance, and reconnection (155). The transition from the oppressive domestic space to more open landscapes underscores Roy's belief in the possibility of healing through physical and emotional escape.

Anuradha Roy's *An Atlas of Impossible Longing* masterfully explores the intricate interplay of domestic violence, psychological trauma, and societal constraints within the microcosm of a family. By delving into the lives of Kananbala, Mukunda, and Bakul, Roy unravels how trauma is internalized and how unacknowledged pain prolongs its impacts across generations, illuminating the profound effects of patriarchal structures on individual identities and relationships.

The novel critiques the cyclical nature of trauma, portraying how unacknowledged pain, especially within domestic spaces, creates a legacy of suffering. Kananbala's descent into madness, Bakul's thwarted aspirations, and Mukunda's fractured sense of belonging exemplify the ways in which trauma disrupts lives and relationships. Roy portrays a world where the silencing of pain exacerbates its impacts; the cycles of alienation and loss extend their reach into future generations.

Summing Up: Dismantling Structures of Oppression

Furthermore, the novel's critique extends beyond the individual to question the cultural and societal norms that condone silence and oppression. Domestic spaces, often considered sanctuaries, become prisons of suffering, reflecting more extensive systemic failures. Mukunda's eventual escape from these spaces suggests a glimmer of hope and resilience, enabling healing.

Roy's narrative thus portrays trauma and critiques the societal structures that sustain it. By exposing the invisible wounds of patriarchy and the intergenerational transmission of pain, the novel invites readers to confront the cultural frameworks that normalize violence and stifle agency. It is both a poignant exploration of human fragility and a call to recognize and dismantle the structures that perpetuate suffering, making it a profound contribution to trauma studies and contemporary Indian literature.

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