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Listening to the Subaltern: Silence, Subjectivity, and Impossible Longings in Anuradha Roy's *An Atlas of Impossible Longing*

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Abstract

In the modern age, discourse remains fragmented and continuous in its dichotomous existence between the dominant and the repressive. Human interrelationships revolve around negotiation and reconciliation concerning caste, class, and efforts to cross the liminality of subalternity. Although much has been said about social structures, much remains to be explored, especially how conscious efforts help maintain hegemony as people strive to have their voices recognised. This paper argues that Anuradha Roy's *An Atlas of Impossible Longing* powerfully reveals how longing and silence shape the subjectivity of characters like Mrs. Burnam, Kananbala, Meera, Bakul, and Mukunda, who attempt to transcend societal barriers in the form of patriarchy, caste, and class. While self-conscious subalterns seek to move up the social hierarchy, dominant groups reinforce their superiority, clearly defining the centre and the margin divide. The interplay of dominance and subordination becomes key to the formation and shaping of subaltern subjectivity. Drawing on the theories of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Homi Bhabha, and Vinay Behl, this paper investigates how Roy represents class and caste as persistent forces in human relationships. The novel, beginning during the British presence in India, expands from social context to individual interaction, reflecting how each relationship reinforces dominant-centre discourse, and suggesting new ways to read such structures. Roy skilfully presents an atlas of 'impossible longings'—hopes that are doomed to remain unfulfilled.

Keywords

Anuradha Roy, *An Atlas of Impossible Longing*, Subaltern, Hegemony, Caste, Class, Patriarchy, Longings, Silence, Marginality.

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When Gayatri Chakravarti Spivak wrote her seminal essay titled "Can the Subaltern Speak?" in her *Towards a History of the Vanishing Present* (1999), she started a new genre of literary thinking that raised questions on the original accepted identity of social and philosophic convictions. A new debate in postcolonial thinking was initiated, questioning beliefs about the traditional and sacred, the indigenous and the modern, the mainstream and the marginalised. With the expansion of the trajectory, new areas of subjectivity forced its attention and negotiated the rules of recognition that demanded a voice. This voice was to be dominant and overarching, loud enough to be heard in the dominant discourse.

In the modern age, the text is a site for social and cultural control. In this fast-paced world, few spare thoughts to write with conviction for those whose voices have not been heard. In this context, to make the voices of those not heard, here the marginalised, one has to challenge the dominant or the centre. Subjective identity is therefore in a continuous state of flux, as positions are adjusted to understand marginalised groups better.

The voice of the narrator in a text, therefore, becomes a highly effective instrument for the determination of the 'subaltern' by fixing them under the sign of the other. The term 'subaltern' was first used by Antonio Gramsci to refer to individuals and groups outside hegemonic power, who were often denied agency and voice. Spivak was concerned that there remain difficulties and contradictions in constructing a 'speaking position' for the subaltern. Denying a voice to the subaltern, as Spivak outlines, does not only mean that the subaltern cannot speak but also that the voice of the subaltern has been silenced.

Interestingly, it is the 'subaltern', as Homi Bhabha says, who is crucial to the definition of the majority group, as the presence of the subaltern necessitates the presence of the major, thus solidifying the authority and power of the hegemonic structure in a feudal society. This is regulated by specific, induced societal mechanisms, and knowledge of these mechanisms makes the rise within such a system difficult and thus patterned. The subject position of the individual becomes very significant for understanding the nature of performance.

The absence of knowledge, coupled with the ignorance in understanding the subject-position of the other, leads to the questions of centre or margin. Like Bhaba, Gyanendra Pandey correlates that the subaltern is a necessary presence for the existence of dominance,

not to say of society. It indicates the necessity of choice (however limited) and the ongoing negotiation of lives and worlds. The recognition of the subject-position is what Pandey calls self-consciousness. It is in the formation and consolidations of the lord/slave relationship that the seeds of recognition take the form of self-consciousness. And this conscious or unconscious desire for recognition takes the form of struggle. The victor sets himself as the master and forces the vanquished into slavery. The enslaved person has to be recognised to give recognition to the master, and yet their enslavement has to be maintained.

There is consequently a continuous negotiation of the liminalities of the privileged and the underprivileged—one long struggle for appropriation, accumulation, preservation of power, prestige and more. Dominance and subordination, in all their forms, become the defining factors in determining the subaltern as a subject and in shaping subaltern subjectivity. *Difference* – the hallmark of subordination is measured against the mainstream, which in turn is taken to be the standard. Transgressing the liminality becomes the focus of the self-conscious subject. This recognition of the condition is so diluted and absorbed into the system that one is conditioned to accept their subject position for the sake of peace, and any attempt to challenge, transgress, or question this subjectivity or subaltern positionality is met with resistance – physical, social, and mental. As a researcher, one might feel obligated to narrate and analyse the subject position of characters created by authors to decipher how an attempt is made to generate consciousness by the social responsibility does not end here, as long as the world remains unequal, not in terms of wealth but in terms of prestige, dignity and identity.

An upcoming Indian woman writer, Anuradha Roy, is one of the most interesting faces in the arena of Indian Writing in English today. Her works subtly address issues of women, nature, caste, class, most importantly trauma an individual encounters in life, the negotiation of identity, and the primal question of understanding the self as the ultimate truth, a truth even the new generation recognises. In this paper, I have chosen, for the sake of feasibility, Roy's first text, 'An Atlas of Impossible Longing', written in 2008.

An Atlas of Impossible Longing, as the title itself suggests, is the story of 'impossible longings'—longings that form the very part of sustenance, longings that build resilience, longings that push one to go through life, but which at the end look impossible. Were the choices wrong? What looked so easily achievable suddenly vanished into nothingness – like the smell of the perfume one longs to hold onto long after it is gone. The narrative is primarily developed through the character of Mukunda, a subaltern, whose early recognition of his subaltern position motivates him to break the chain of struggle, and through the three female characters, Kananbala, Mrs Barnum, and Bakul. Nirmal, another character in this story, remains the sole representative of the burgeoning intelligentsia, with subtle reformist motivations, as he falls in love with Meera, a widow. This relationship is socially unacceptable and hence doomed.

The book reflects on the margins of subalternity and subjectivity as created and presented through the experiences of its main characters, in the contexts of class, gender, caste, and marginalisation. The story unfolds in the past in a small town of pastoral Bengal – serene and slow. Relationships grow, and tensions build, even in this pristine land, as lives are intricately woven into the changing dynamics of the political landscape. Social constraints negotiate with personal desires as lives are woven into an atlas of 'impossible' longing, when the subject is subaltern and hence subordinated; at another moment, subaltern subjectivity alters life after years of subordination. Amulya and Kananbala live in a mansion with their two children, Kamal and Nirmal, and the only house in this small town is that of the

Englishman Mr Digby Burnam. The sound from the Barnum house pesters Amulya as Barnum shouts out to his workers, *"Bugger off, you black bastards, sleeping on the job." (49)* -the coloniser-colonised divide is already locked in place. With the use of the word 'black', a binary opposition is reinforced of the 'whites' of superiority. The changing political landscape does little to change the years of human domination. Amulya, a well-established businessman, fails to escape the whip of the colonial-subaltern divide, as Mr Barnum's language is the site of control that uses 'blacks' for all Indians. The novel's decades-spanning setting showcases how this power persists beyond colonial rule, shaping relationships and individual aspirations.

Anuradha Roy, in her work, confronts directly the hypocrisies of the society that we as individuals have compromised with, even though these biases, patriarchal forcefulness, subordination, gender, caste and religious prejudices are the realities of the society that has percolated through our veins and form an integral part of our very existence. Anuradha Roy's characters bring us the voices of 'domination' and 'subordination', so recognisable from the margins, to reclaim an identity that has long been assimilated into an invisible collective. In the primary scene, the tension between Amulya, as the representative of the subaltern, and Mr Barnam, as the representative of the colonised, stands in sharp contrast to the small town's pristine serenity.

The novel moves in three layers. We move from the macrocosmic background of the coloniser and the colonised subaltern subjectivity to the microcosmic subalternity that women as a gender face, like Kananbala and Mrs Barnum, or to be more specific, within the household as Shanti faces or does Meera or to the subaltern consciousness and struggle as reflected through the character of Mukunda. These three layers are skilfully woven into the narrative and define the narrator's dexterity in blending issues of everyday life with social responsibility. With these three layers, we see that destiny does not protect her chosen ones, as in the case of Bakul.

Patriarchy and the patriarchal hegemonic structure that subordinates women as secondary and her wishes, desires, emotions, demands and even rights as negotiable and negligible remains one of the first sites of contestation in this discussion. Amulya and his wife, Kananbala, live in Songarh, far from their relatives in Kolkata. As Amulya attempts to establish a business, his wife fulfils her wifely duties with almost no support. Amulya is hugely successful in his venture. He cares for his wife as a husband would for the mother of his children. Kananbala longs for time, care and romance. She longs for her home in Kolkata. Kananbala, who spoke only Bengali, would not have a language with which to communicate with others. She waited for that one letter from home. Being a woman, Kananbala is forced into a patriarchal system where women's longings and desires are sacrificed at the altar of the greater good. The only compensation in such a state is seeing other women bear the same pain. "Kananbala stood there for a minute or two…wanting Amulya to call out to her, half-expecting him to. But he did not" (24).

Kananbala looked across the road at the English woman, Mrs Barnum, and desired her freedom and autonomy. But was Mrs Barnum truly independent? The Indian woman looked up to the English woman. She envied her master position, only to realise later that the English woman is equally jeopardised by her subaltern position and is a subject of violence in the private sphere. "She spoke about her childhood, about Digby courting her, about Digby beating her with his belt and once slamming her face into a door" (84).

At one point, when the Englishwoman accidentally kills her husband, Kananbala keeps quiet. This silence is not unheard—it instead voices Kananbala's admiration for her

act, which she herself would not possibly have meted out in such a condition. She chose to keep quiet when interrogated by the police, perhaps suggesting a suppressed desire to break free.

However, Kananbala's constant attempt to keep up the façade, to keep things going as the perfect homely woman, falls off when she hears the young Shantibala singing a song one day in the kitchen. This song now symbolises a carefree, pleasant, happy life that Kananbala had long since ceased to experience. Kananbala feels disturbed. The only way to stop the pain is to harm the very source of the pain, and Kananbala ensures that Shantibala no longer sings. She perpetrates a generational trauma on the young bride and stops her from singing. This gendered trauma forced by subalternity arising from accepted patriarchal customs and traditions, in the case of Kananbala, forceful separation from her family, forces Kananbala into mental illness – the 'unheard voices' of the subaltern woman, who, as Spivak says, cannot speak in a dominant discourse, finds voice in the abusive language that Kananbala unknowingly vents out suddenly. Paradoxically, in the abusive language, Kananbala finds her language of control unknowingly.

This gendered and intergenerational trauma is found even in Bakul, an independent, free-spirited girl who, even with her intellectual acumen, foresight and wisdom, fails to voice her love for Mukunda, the adopted orphan, lower-caste boy. This illustrates how subalternity shapes independent choices and how personal desires are constrained by prevailing societal norms of caste and class. Despite her feelings for Mukunda, Bakul is forced to suppress them. It's interesting to note how Bakul wants to transgress the liminality of her master-class/subject position in a desire to be part of Mukunda's other existence. Still, it is cut short by the societal demands of class consciousness and codified social structure. Bakul's struggle is treatedas merely natural and as a deviation from established patriarchal hegemony. In this society, love is forbidden for widows, and to love a widow is a heinous crime committed by both Nirmal and Meera in the novel. Such love is doomed to end ruthlessly. The private sphere of an Indian household is also feudalistically arranged, with the mother-in-law at the top, followed by her favourite daughter-in-law, and with constant changes in dynamics among the daughters-in-law, here between Kananbala, Manjula, and Shanti.

Vinay Bahl notes that one is not born with an enemy class; instead, one begins to struggle. On the contrary, people find themselves in a society structured in ways that lead them to experience exploitation or the need to maintain power over those they exploit; a continuous process of struggle to exploit or to avoid being exploited. We find points of antagonistic interest, then struggle over these issues, and in the process discover ourselves as classes over which we have no control, and then come to realise this as class consciousness. In the story, Mukunda's subjectivity is shaped by his dual marginalisation—he neither belongs to the dominant class nor is he embraced by his subaltern caste because of his upbringing in a higher household, when Amulya adopts this motherless orphan. His struggle to negotiate his position within caste and class is central to this narrative. Mukunda leaves the house in Songarh, where he has grown up, to negotiate his sense of displacement and to create an identity that is at once respectable and fixed.

> You're not my god; you haven't done anything for me", Mukunda was saying." But despite you, I'm going to be better than all of them. One day I won't need them anymore. One day it'll be me sheltering them. (96)

His relationships with his Muslim mentor, the English woman who sometimes sheltered him, and, later, with Bakul reflect Mukunda's failure to come to terms with social hierarchies and to distinguish between the real and the unreal. Mukunda finds a voice, only to

lose it again. His attempts to transgress his subaltern position only end in disappointment and fragmentation. The failure of the love relationship between Mukunda and Bakul is not due to the loss of love but to the societal structure that foregrounds how caste and class subalternity infiltrate the private sphere. To rise in the social ladder, Mukunda is forced to marry Malini, only to sacrifice his wife and child to raise the money for a house in Manoharpur for Bakul. The emptiness of his life reflects the broader struggle of the subaltern to achieve agency and recognition within hegemonic systems. Mukunda's failure to gain upward mobility results in disaster as in a sickening choice to save Bakul's only connection to a past she loved through the ancestral property and only remaining sign of her mother on the one hand, and Mukunda's child and wife, with whom he had started a new life on the other. Mukunda chooses the former, thereby permanently sacrificing his ties to his young child. It is important to note that Mukunda's marriage to Malini was economically motivated, as his relationship with Bakul remained unresolved. This indicates how economic aspirations motivate private decisions. In the process, Mukunda is partially assimilated into the system as he attempts to navigate social mobility through assimilation, but ultimately fails because the structures of power are entrenched in rigid hierarchies that dismantle the ambitions and aspirations of a man like Mukunda.

The question, therefore, is not whether the subaltern can speak but whether we are willing to hear them. In the trajectory of caste, class and patriarchal hegemonies, the voice of the subaltern is muffled and fragmented. Anuradha Roy sheds light on this tapestry of subalternity and subjectivity through the longings and desires of Kananbala, Bakul, Nirmal, Meera and Mukunda that are 'impossible' as the very title declares. The novel critiques societal rigidity and affirms the subaltern position and its need for communication. The writer attempts to investigate the 'argument' and 'assertions' the characters make, thereby listening to the diverse ways they communicate. By doing so, Roy's novel situates itself within contemporary literature that seeks to challenge and redefine the boundaries of representation and reclaim its mode of communication. Through this kind of analysis, we can further explore the possibilities for reading Anuradha Roy's other texts.

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