

INTERPRETING ISOLATION AND BELONGINGNESS: A STUDY OF ANURADHA ROY'S *AN ATLAS OF IMPOSSIBLE LONGING*

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Abstract

The theme of isolation has always been a subject of literature. In its powerful psychological rendition, isolation engages distinct zones of experiences and expression. Anuradha Roy's multigenerational tale, *An Atlas of Impossible Longing*, narrates the varied forms of its expression with utmost importance. This paper tries to explore how far the novel effectively dealt with the subject of isolation and belongingness in the narrative and thematic environment.

Key Words: Anuradha Roy, *An Atlas of Impossible Longing*, Isolation

Anuradha Roy's debut novel '*An Atlas of Impossible Longing*' deals with the theme of isolation and longing in the multigenerational tale of panoramic setup. The subject of isolation has always had its place in literature. It can be physical, emotional or spiritual isolation. The way character reacts, responds and mould up while facing the isolation was the crust of many literary works. Situations and circumstances challenge and bring changes in Humans. Anuradha Roy's work in grandiose landscape and setting of a pre-independent period did not undermine to portray the intensity of desolation one faces or had gone through their lives.

The first section of the novel, titled as "*The Drowned House*" narrates about Calcutta-born Amulya Babu who moves with his family to a small town called Songarh and starts a business on herbal medicines and perfumes. Since he loved an isolated living atmosphere, he built a house not far from the forest, but away from town. As it remarked in the novel, despite all the windows and balconies "it turned out to a secretive house once translated into brick and plaster" (13). Here, the house named curiously as '3' and it turned to be a metaphor for geographical isolation. For Amulya, the house marks his sense of independence and the successful attempt to establish a family in his terms. The reference to another house in the novel, afloat on the river owned by his widowed son's father-in-law, Bikas Babu is a mark of his taste of architecture. Though Bikas Babu had to witness her daughter's death due to the isolated and dangerous location of the river, he refused to change his secluded lifestyle. In the case of Amulya and Bikas, Roy narrates a keen sense of statement which both of them tried to keep through an isolated house setup.

When the house became a statement of their life to owners, for others this territorial isolation creates a sense of oppression or burden. Kananbala, the wife of Amulya, fails to share her partner's sense of longing for isolation and setting a house in Songarh. Kananbala, an exact opposite of Amulya, loved chattering and the busy life routine in Calcutta. Being a member of

joint-family in Calcutta and its noisy atmosphere, life in Songarh surrounding forests and ruins were depressing to her. Even her husband did not try to appreciate a companionship with her and finally she forced to find 'solace in talking to herself'. Roy writes, "She found she could effortlessly become two people and have conversations that sometimes went on a whole afternoon." (25). When isolation is forced, as in the case of Kananbala, it can lead to serious psychological consequences. Since the one of the basic human need is to belong, even if the relation is not intimate, the connection must be there. As English psychiatrist, Anthony Storr denotes: "[W]hether or not they are enjoying intimate relationships, human beings need a sense of being part of a larger community than that constituted by the family" (13). When the need to belong was denied for Kananbala, she slowly began to spill sweet-tempered curses, words that nobody could believe she knows. Finally, Amulya has to lock Kananbala in her room which prolonged her life of imposed isolation, but Anuradha Roy never gives a name to this problem. As William James says in his Principles of Psychology; "No more fiendish punishment could be devised, were such a thing physically possible, than that one should be turned loose in society and remain absolutely unnoticed by all the members thereof" (293).

Feeling of isolation Kananbala has to undergo in her family lead to silencing her identity also. The patriarchal mindset carried it out efficiently in various ways. Amulya never wanted her wife to go out alone. So her capability to carry out alone was also not appreciable for him. In a situation, Amulya says to Kananbala, "You'd never be able to go on your own. I send them with you for your safety." So citing Kananbala's life, it can be said that denial of her identity is more of an emotional isolation from her 'self'. So when Amulya locked her inside a room, for Kananbala, windows were her only view of the world. Thus, slowly she slipped into the world in which no else could understand, but it was the only source of survival for her identity. When she was being taken to the outside by Mrs Barnum for a picnic, author's narration proves that how badly Kananbala wished to be a part of outside world at least in presence. Roy writes, "A feeling of exhilaration swept over her, something overpowering, something she could not remember feeling after she was newly married" (78). This also raises the question of the identity of women whether it should be determined by men in a married life.

In contrast to Kananbala, Amulya loved shutting away from outside world and enjoyed the self-imposed isolation as his idea of freedom. For Amulya Babu, the meaning of his existence is constituted not by any close family ties or any friendships. It was his affinity with Songarh, the ruined fort and forest gives significance in his life.

"He was on his way to the ruined fort. It comforted him to sit soundless among the fallen stones, thinking of nothing, in particular, waiting for his sense of his calm to return. The fort was his ivory tower; he went to it whenever he needed to think anything through in solitude. Perhaps it was the suggestion of evanescent empires, the grittiness of centuries-old stone, or perhaps the memory of people who, in those ruined rooms and dark passages, had lived lives as real as his own. It might have been the twisted grey-brown bark of that tree with its suggestion of the Buddha's face" (45).

In the case of Bikas Babu also, even after his daughter's tragic death, he chose to remain alone in the house near the indecisive river. Bikas Babu and Nirmal Babu, chained by the same string of tragic memory revised their life-path after that and preferred their life to be more accustomed to Nature. Their solace was with nature in their life of embracing solitude.

It was Bakul who had to suffer a depressing life as a child in the absence of her parents. Nirmal Babu failed to undertake the role of a father in her phase of childhood. Hence, the life of

Bakul became distressing in childhood. Her life was in an abandoned state, and she began to grow up in a way in which Roy describes as "there was a hard, recalcitrant centre in the child which made it difficult for other people to approach" (115). As Roy narrates, "Bakul clung to herself, her solitude seeming to her both romantic and inescapable" (105).

Meera, care-taker of Bakul and Mukunda, an orphan being looked after by Amulya's family has a different story to unfold when society imposes isolation on them. Meera, being a widow is viewed by the society as an outcast and enforces restrictions on the preferences in her life which extends even to her food habits. There is a situation in the novel where Meera is being asked what she would like to do before she dies and she replies: "Onion, garlic, fish," Meera said, surprised by the words that came out of her mouth, the clarity of her enunciation. "I'd like to eat everything I'm forbidden. I'd like to eat everything once before I die" (150). The life of a widow is decided by the society, and her identity is forcefully suppressed to a denial state.

Mukunda is the boy the family has taken in from an orphanage. Since they don't know about his parentage so of his caste. The question of caste raised their eyebrows on Mukunda and treated him on the bias of pollution. For Mukunda, caste imposed isolation was distressing where he was always treated as separate in the home. In his adulthood, status of an orphan given him a sense of freedom which he recounts as:

"Among parent-owning boys, I began to feel a sense of freedom as I grew up: they had a hundred things forbidden them, I had none. I could make myself as I pleased. I was free of caste or religion; that was for the rest of the world to worry about. I felt released from the burden of origins, from the burden of belonging anywhere, to anyone" (179).

The novel also discusses a crucial episode in the history of India, period of the 1940s, time of approaching Independence and partition. There were references in the novel of violence and bloodshed in which Muslims scared of their life in India. Like the Muslim schoolteacher, Suleiman Chacha, many of them had to flee from their home place because of their identity as a Muslim. Here, the religion was the factor contributing to isolation not just of an individual but for a community. They had to leave everything on their own even their identity and forced to resort to the status of a refugee in another country. The incident of partition and Hindu-Muslim rivalry at the time of pre-independence has historical significance, especially in Calcutta, which was effectively brought in to the work by Anuradha Roy.

Thus, the article tried to point out the different phases of isolation author explored in this novel. Isolation, whether it be voluntary or forced have its consequences in the life of an individual. At the same time, while engaging in the variety of relationship, human being tends to forget the necessity of solitude or the need for contemplation in one's space. The instances of social isolation portrayed in the novel accompanied by the feelings of lost and marginality also discussed with the utmost importance. Anuradha Roy, through her maiden novel with the backdrop a significant period in Indian history effectively brought forth significant social issues and its related psychological consequences.

Work cited

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