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The Trauma of Dislocation: Portrayal of Migration and Memory in Anuradha Roy's *An Atlas of Impossible Longing*

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Abstract:

Migration is encapsulated with memory, nostalgia, identity, belongingness, and trauma. Literature mirrors the changes in society caused by displacement and its aftermath in the form of dilemma, nostalgia, identity crises, and trauma. Migration can be individual or collective; it can be permanent or temporary; it can be forced or by choice; it can be rousing for some, but most of the time traumatic. Torn between home and away, a migrant experiences loss and alienation while attempting to integrate into a new culture. They create fictitious homelands to escape the pangs of memory associated with their homeland because they have a sense of belonging and dislocation that plagues their memory. A person or a group of people may be forced to migrate for multiple reasons such as economic, educational, infrastructural, or any other personal reason. In the contemporary world, migration is unavoidable for certain groups. Memory plays an indispensable role in the process of migration. Kananbala, the radical protagonist of *An Atlas of Impossible Longing* by Anuradha Roy, suffered the trauma of dislocation when her husband Amulya moved from Calcutta to Songarh with their children. This 'Intra-India Migration' encompasses relocating people from rural areas to metropolitan cities where various factors play a significant role. However, most of the time, it is due to medical requirements, family disputes, education, better job opportunity, lifestyle change, etc. In *An Atlas of Impossible Longing*, Kananbala represents all those women who suffer trauma due to forced relocation. This paper intends to study the trauma of the dislocation and

specifically of those who are affected by 'Intra-India Migration' with special reference to Anuradha Roy's *An Atlas of Impossible Longing*.

Keywords: Trauma, Migration, Identity, Memory, Dislocation, Alienation, Homeland, Intra-India Migration, Existence, Belonging.

Dislocation is a postmodern situation to which we have all reacted with both exhilaration and anxiety, both of which are entirely understandable in the conditions of our modern existence. Leaving one's home, place, city, or country behind is something thousands of people do, whether voluntarily or involuntarily, throughout the globe. One can easily relate to how an individual, group, or community feels when they migrate from one place to another. Displacement has been taking place before the time of recorded history and since human civilization came into existence. The algorithm of displacement is a complex debate as understanding the causes and reasons behind people migrating can help explain some of the cultural, economic, and political patterns around the world. In simple terms, people moving from one place to another at any scale is called displacement. Migration can be individual or collective; it can be permanent or temporary; it can be forced or by choice; it can be exhilarating for some but traumatic for most people.

Before talking about displacement, it is essential to talk about the concept of 'place', which is something that defines one's identity. People's identity is attached to the place they come from, the culture they belong to, the religion they follow, and they are somehow attached to the place they come from. When an individual or a group of people willingly or unwillingly changes the place they used to live in, it is termed displacement. There is no definite definition of displacement but it is intimately linked to the diaspora. It depends upon the 'Push and Pull factors', the push factors are the reasons and causes of leaving a particular place due to population growth, inadequate educational infrastructure, medical care, and social security. Pull factors include the reason why someone chooses a particular location or destination to migrate to, such as labour demand, high wages, peace, security, a better environment, living standards, and more resources. India itself is very diverse, we do migrate from state to state and find ourselves in cultural shock. There is much research done on Diaspora studies but still, there is countable research on the Indian Diaspora, and that too from the perspective of the internal diaspora. According to Tanmoy Kundu, "Displacement, the very term has got a wide connotation in the context of diasporic literature as diasporic Literature involves an idea of a homeland, a place from where the displacement occurs and narratives of harsh journeys

undertaken on account of economic compulsions” (Kundu 76). Since this paper deals with intra-India migration and how it takes place from a smaller scale to a larger scale, the focus of this study will be on how displacement causes trauma, nostalgia, and belongingness and creates either pleasant or unpleasant memories. Also, how dislocation or displacement impacts one’s identity.

The first theoretical model of the discourse on migration either ignored or minimized the experiences of women migrants, assuming that they would be similar to the experiences of men. The experiences of Indian women were incorporated into homogenised meta-narratives along with the conceptions of migration and the processes of settlement. A rise in feminist scholarship on migration studies undoubtedly pushed gender problems to the fore. Still, sadly, topics on women’s agency and identity continue to be marginalised, with the very little systematic study being done. In actuality, the factors that compelled women to migrate, the experiences they had while migrating and their attempt at adapting and settling were always distinct from one another and highly specific to each group. Changing scenario of the process of migration and their self-dependency gave Indian women a chance to claim independence and redefine their roles. Even though they typically relocate inside the patriarchal structure. They are expected to preserve themselves as the bearers of the Indian tradition.

Human beings have never been static and the nature of the job in India is moving from one place to another. Bhagat, in an article titled “Assessing the Measurement of Internal Migration in India”, talks about different types of internal migration and says that “It is possible to identify three types of internal migration – intra-district, inter-district, and inter-state – and to determine four streams of internal migration per type, namely, rural to urban, urban to rural, rural to rural, and urban to urban” (Bhagat 93). Later on, he explains the reasons behind internal migration in India and utters “the most important reason for migration in India is marriage, the reason stated by more than half of all migrants. Persons moving due to employment and business requirements or pursuit of education account for a Littlemore than one-tenth and about two per cent of all migrants respectively” (Bhagat 98).

There is a blurred line between displacement and migration. Migration is something that is vast and has both willing and forced dislocation. While displacement has a negative connotation attached to it, as displacement refers to the unwilling movement from the place one wants to stay at. This is how displacement causes trauma to people who get dislocated. These displaced people also long for belongingness. This paper deals with internal or local

migration leading to 'Trauma', citing instances from the text *An Atlas of Impossible Longing* written by Anuradha Roy.

Leena Devanesam and Manimozhi, in their article "Banality Leads to Trauma in Housewives: *An Atlas of Impossible Longing* by Anuradha Roy", discuss how unnoticed trauma leads to psychological disorders, especially PTSD (Post Traumatic Stress Disorder) and cites the example of Kananbala the homemaker whose forceful dislocation leads to trauma and she started to develop the symptoms such as suppression of her thoughts, talking to herself, uttering words which no one believes she knew and much more. They state that:

Amulya, a learned family man, left his family in Calcutta twenty years ago and settled down at Songarh town with his wife Kananbala and two sons, Kamal and Nirmal, for his business' sake. He was toiling the whole day to earn wealth. In contrast, his wife, a homemaker, left alone, not even with Indian neighbours, struggles and feels suppression of thoughts and feelings without exposure in later days, developing her as a traumatic person (Devanesam and Manimozhi 3670). Kabani R., in the article "Interpreting Isolation and Belongingness: A Study of Anuradha Roy's *An Atlas of Impossible Longing*", examines the theme of the sense of belonging and isolation in the context of the character and especially from the viewpoint of Kananbala, who suffered the most due to the drastic shift in her life and said:

Kananbala, the wife of Amulya, fails to share her partner's sense of longing for isolation and setting up a house in Songarh. Kananbala, the exact opposite of Amulya, loved chattering and the busy life routine in Calcutta. Being a member of a joint family in Calcutta and its noisy atmosphere, life in Songarh's surrounding forests and ruins was depressing to her (Kabani 66-67).

He also talked about how "isolation is forced, as in the case of Kananbala, it can lead to serious psychological consequences. Since one of the basic human needs is to belong, even if the relationship is not intimate, the connection must be there" (Kabani 67).

Bolla Jyothsna Phanija, in a book chapter titled "Resistance Form Ruins: An Exploration of Indian Female Gothic Narratives", compares *An Atlas of Impossible Longing* with Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* and says, "Anuradha Roy's *An Atlas of Impossible Longing* (2008) is characteristic of Indian women's gothic narrative space filled with dark imagery, old castles, diseases, jungles, monsoons and modernity, madness, vampires, wanderers, and isolation. Like Ammu's loss of sanity, Kananbala's dissent to madness is

mistakable” (Phanija 69). Phanija also analysed how Anuradha Roy “rewrites history from a feministic perspective contrary to Rushdie” (Phanija 70).

Trauma paved its way as early as human civilization came into existence. However, trauma as a study came in around the 1990s based on the Freudian concept of the unconscious mind. Nasrullah Mambrol states that “This model of trauma indicates that suffering is unrepresentable. Quickly following the traditional model was a more pluralistic model of trauma that suggests the assumed unspeakability of trauma is one among many responses to an extreme event rather than its defining feature” (Literariness). After Freud wrote his text *Studies on Hysteria* which he wrote in collaboration with Joseph Breuer, many researchers got influenced by the concept Freud introduced. Jean-Martin Charcot, Herman Oppenheim, Pierre Janet, Abran Kardiner, and Morton Prince are a few among those who got influenced by Freudian theory. Later Freud made an addition to his study by introducing *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, which is now studied as the most prominent text from where contemporary trauma theorists got the concept of trauma studies.

Contemporary trauma studies begin with Cathy Caruth, whose theory relies on the Freudian concept. Freud theorises that one experiences a traumatic memory repeatedly. It divides the psyche, and trauma is not something that has happened in the first place but the after-effects of the incidents are what we call traumatic. From all these concepts of Freud began the contemporary trauma theory. Cathy Caruth, Professor at Cornell University, New York, is known as the first contemporary Trauma Theorist who authored the text *Unclaimed Experiences* (1996), where she proclaims that trauma is “not located in the simple violent or original event in the individual’s past” but is in “the way it is precisely not known in the first instance- returns to haunt the survivor later on” (Caruth 17).

Michele Balaev, in the article titled “Literary Treads in Contemporary Trauma Theory”, says that “A central claim of contemporary literary trauma theory asserts that trauma creates a speechless fright that divides or destroys identity” (Balaev 149). Further, she elaborates on her concept and defines trauma as “a person’s emotional response to an overwhelming event that disrupts previous ideas of an individual’s sense of self and the standards by which one evaluates society” (Balaev 150). Trauma can affect anyone, anywhere, in most unexpected situations, which we tend to ignore. There are no defined situations that can be called traumatic, as it depends upon the individual’s experience or the level of intensity of the incident. For example, many people, unfortunately, experience the loss of a loved one; but for a child, it can turn out

to be a traumatic event; for an adult, it is a part of life. Also, it is most traumatic for someone when s/he is met with an accident. Therefore, Michelle states:

The external event that elicits an extreme response from the protagonist is not necessarily bound to collective humans or natural disasters such as war or tsunamis. The event may include, for example, the intimately personal experience of female sexual violence, such as in Dorothy Allison's *Bastard Out of Carolina* and Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*, or the unexpected death of a loved one, as found in Edward Abbey's *Black Sun*. (Balaev 150)

According to Nasrullah Mambrol, trauma studies play a great role in psychological studies and evaluate how trauma is represented in language and literary studies, how memory or traumatic past play a role in shaping individual or collective identities and so on. Much scholarly research is being conducted on trauma studies. It is still going on as the concept of trauma is something which had left its footprint everywhere from world war to holocaust trauma, from sexual abuse to childhood trauma, from family to institutional trauma, and especially during Covid19 when many people lost their loved ones and saw their family and friends suffer. Trauma is a universally accepted phenomenon. We cannot scale an event based on the level of trauma one is going through. Judging the intensity of trauma based on an event is not justifiable. Whether a person is traumatized by a war experience or by witnessing a road accident goes through a similar kind of pain.

Christa Schonfelder, in the book titled *Wounds and Words*, delineates the importance of portraying and reading trauma in literature, especially from the postmodern perspective and says, "Trauma narratives raise important questions about the possibility of verbalizing the unspeakable, narrating the unnarratable, and making sense of the incomprehensible" (Schonfelder 30). People in the present age are very well aware of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) due to its widespread use, and that is the reason trauma is now viewed as a public health issue. J. Roger Kurtz says, "if trauma has become a conceptual touchstone in the culture at large, this is also true in literary studies" (Kurtz 1). Roger puts forward some fundamental questions about why so much importance is given to trauma nowadays, also the relationship between trauma and literature and its application in literary texts. All such questions were answered by Roger, saying, "These wounds, like words, require interpretation. What trauma means in the lives of individuals and communities, and how to promote the healing of this type of wound, are the principal concerns of the capacious field of trauma studies" (Kurtz 2) and to

interpret the pain and anguish, literature becomes a suitable medium through which one can represent the suffering and the consequent trauma.

Negin Heidarizadeh, in his article “The Significant Role of Trauma in Literature and Psychoanalysis”, observes the role of literature in portraying trauma or the inner world of man. It explains that “considerably, literature has influenced the lives of human beings. It has an empowered language to display the inner world of man. There is a space for memories, introspection, retrospection, foreshadowing, flashback and awful remembrances that are coloured by pain, wound, and trauma” (Heidarizadeh 788). Heidarizadeh also writes about the contemporary situation, the current scenario of the modern world and points out that “now is the time of producing the plot of anxiety in the modern world” (Heidarizadeh 788). Babitha Justin, in her book *From Canons to Trauma*, says, “According to Freud, an overpowering event, quite unexpected and debilitating, can be forgotten for a while and yet return in the form of compulsive, repetitive symptoms in human behavior” (Justin 175). This paper examines the text *An Atlas of Impossible Longing* from the perspective of displacement and how it causes trauma. This is done by applying the trauma theory. This paper also depicts how memory, belongingness, and exile are related to each other and how they have the capability of bridging the gap between them. The most important study is the application of contemporary trauma theory to a literary text.

Anuradha Roy is an internationally acclaimed author, editor, and journalist from Uttarakhand, India. She is the author of five fictional works, namely *An Atlas of Impossible Longing*, which was her debut novel written in 2008 and is the focus of this study. *The Folded Earth* was written in 2011 and won Economist Crossword Book Award. The same year is about the trauma of a widow Maya. *Sleeping on Jupiter*, written in 2015, revolves around the protagonist Nomita whom a religious guru sexually abused in the safest walls called an ashram and was longlisted for Man Booker Prize. Later came *All the Lives We Never Lived* in 2018 and recently won Sahitya Akademi Award in 2022 is about the boy narrator Myshkin and his childhood trauma and her latest novel *The Earthspinner*, came out in 2021 and won Sushila Devi Award for Best Novel in 2022. Many critical reviews, newspaper articles, and research papers were published just after they arrived in the literary world. Discussing it from the lens of ecocriticism, some researchers of the works of Anuradha Roy described how India was during the pre-independence under the British raj and the predicament of Indian society in the post-independence era. Some scholars drew heavily on the Indianness of the novel, while few of them talked about Roy’s narratology. Some researchers found it to be Gothic Fiction and

drew a comparison with Jane Austen. Evelyne Hanquart Turner made a similar comparison in a book chapter, “ ‘Who Shall Inherit Bengal?’ A Reading of Anuradha Roy's *An Atlas of Impossible Longing*” and mentioned its connection with E.M. Forster's *Howards End*. Talking about the narrative style, Turner points out how Roy has divided the novel into three parts, namely ‘The Drowned House’, ‘The Ruined Fort’, and ‘The Water's Edge.’ Each part talks about the damage to mental well-being and how a house is damaged. A different set of characters in a sequence of the first generation to the third generation narrates each chapter.

Away from the crowd and noise of Calcutta, Amulya Babu moved to an isolated place near the forest named Songarh with his two sons and his wife Kananbala in 1907. Kananbala unwillingly supported her husband's decision and found herself trapped in a ‘Bell Jar’. Her body and mind started to show the symptoms of some unidentified disorder which was not named throughout the novel, and the author left us with the pieces of a jigsaw puzzle to solve. The silence and isolation started to haunt her and she could hear herself inhale and exhale inside the four walls. She had no one to talk to because the only language she knew was Bengali, and from here starts the trauma she faces and longs for belongingness. Just like the title of the novel, she feels it impossible to go back to her place Calcutta and there starts her longing. The displacement led to cultural shock and Kananbala started showing the symptoms of depression and the trauma she suffered because of the displacement, which no one understood. Roy says, “The silence that to Amulya meant repletion locked Kananbala within a bell jar she felt she could not prise open for air” (Roy 16).

Kananbala suffers from an unnamed mental illness, and as Turner says, the novel “stresses the unhappy and secluded life of the lady of the house, Kananbala, whose very seclusion leads to depression and a mild form of madness, thus reinforcing her imprisonment in her own house on Amulya's orders” (Turner 60). Kananbala started to show the symptoms of depression on the emotional, physical and behavioural levels. Her sudden withdrawal from others, anger, changes in appearance, lack of energy, neglect of responsibilities, and much more. S. Leena Devanesam and Manimozhi, in their paper titled “Banality Leads to Trauma in Housewives: *An Atlas of Impossible Longing* by Anuradha Roy”, State that “Depression is of many kinds. She suffered out from situational depression” (S. Leena and Manimozhi 3673).

Emma Jane Tserisin's “Trauma Theory Without Feminism? Evaluating Contemporary Understandings of Traumatized Women” referred to Judith Herman's views on how women get traumatized when exposed to trauma. Herman, in his book *Trauma and Recovery*, argues

that “women’s exposure to traumatic events results in significant psychological harm that gives rise to a number of mental health symptoms, including difficulties in regulating effect, problems in relating to others, and alterations in self-perception” (Herman 155).

In her recent book titled *Women Writing Trauma in the Global South: A Study of Amnitta Forna, Isabel Allende, and Anuradha Roy*, Annemarie Pabel talks about how these women writers’ portrayed trauma in their works, especially in the south Asian context. In the fourth section of her book, Pabel discusses the representation of trauma in three novels by Anuradha Roy *All the Lives We Never Lived*, *Sleeping on Jupiter*, and *An Atlas of Impossible Longing*. She examines the transgenerational family, topography, architecture, unbelonging, uprootedness, traumatic experiences, and familial disintegration in Anuradha Roy’s *An Atlas of Impossible Longing* very systematically. Pointing towards the reason behind Amulya’s naming his house as “3 Dulganj Road”, she says, “Amulya’s choice of the number three for his plot, even though it ought to be the number two, is a deeply patriarchal act of delineating territory and, implicitly, degrees of ‘belonging’ and agency within its boundaries. Defining the home by the number of male family members and inscribing its address, hence its cartographic referent, accordingly, invalidates the female family members from the public and reduces their existence to the domestic sphere” (Pabel 125).

The close relationship of literature with memory has become obvious. While talking about trauma or a traumatic experience, one cannot subside memory, which involves the process of ‘Remembering’ and ‘Forgetting’ the past. In the case of dislocation, memory works as the concept of recollection or how we try to commemorate a place we can no longer visit. Nostalgia is when an individual or collective group yearns for one’s home or country where they feel a sense of belonging. Everything is interconnected, from displacement to memory, memory to trauma, and nostalgia to displacement. Vanessa May, in her article titled “Belonging from Afar: Nostalgia, Time and Memory”, talked about temporal displacement as “a sense of belonging to a place is not anchored in the place as it is now, but in memories of the place as it was in the past. For some, visits to the place can act to trigger such happy memories and bring their old sense of belonging to the surface” (May 404). That is what Kananbala felt when she moved in with her husband and two sons. She never felt that she belonged in the place.

The nostalgia of an Indian housemaker who longs for connections and her memories haunts her because Calcutta was her birthplace, and all her memories of that place are unforgettable. Her forceful displacement from where she felt belonged to an alienated place

where the silence of that place was therapeutic for her husband but not for Kananbala. Our mind is a storehouse of memories- both pleasant and unpleasant. In the case of Kananbala, she was missing her home and the good memories she had with her family there in Calcutta, or in short, the nostalgia she felt by remembering her past. Memory is all about 'remembering' and 'forgetting' the past. In the case of Kananbala, it was remembering her past, which she now cannot return to. Her longing for her city, Calcutta, and the loneliness she feels in the present house make her traumatic and lead to an unknown mental illness. After shifting to Songarh, she lost her identity because no one knew her. The cultural difference where Kananbala could only speak Bengali and had no Indian neighbours, and the only Indians were the tribal people of Songarh, who did not know how to speak Bengali. Kananbala is fighting against her everyday mundane loneliness. Throughout the novel, she struggles to make her own identity and locate herself in her cultural environment in Songarh. What we are today, our self and 'I', are made from memories.

While talking about migration, dislocation, and exile, it automatically connects to Diaspora, which is a huge concept in itself. Displacement till now is seen from a larger scale, like migrating from one country to another or international migration but is rarely seen from the viewpoint of internal migration. Dislocation can happen at any scale, but most of the time is seen from the larger perspective as international migration. This paper studies dislocation from intra-India or internal migration, which takes place from urban to rural, urban to urban, rural to urban, etc. Researchers conduct their study mainly from a collective perspective but not from an individual's perspective, and that too from the viewpoint of the domestic setting. The novel taken under this study is analysed from the perspective of intra-India migration, where the characters suffer from the trauma of dislocation and especially the woman character Kananbala who is doubly marginalized. This paper locates how a minor change of location affects someone's psyche and makes him/her vulnerable to emotional disorder. This paper also illustrates how the character of Kananbala is left unaddressed by the family members. In conclusion, it is stated that the concept of intra-India migration, trauma studies, and memory are less explored areas; therefore, such texts as Anuradha Roy's *An Atlas of Impossible Longing* can also be analysed from the above perspectives.

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