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Can Postcolonial Art Heal A Broken World? Rethinking Identity And Resistance In Anuradha Roy's *The Earthspinner*

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Abstract:

The paper explores the potential of postcolonial art as a tool for healing and transformation in a fractured world through a critical reading of Anuradha Roy's *The Earthspinner*. Set against a backdrop of religious extremism, cultural disintegration, and personal alienation, the novel traces the life of Elango, a potter whose creative practice becomes both a form of resistance and a medium of reconciliation. By examining the interplay between tradition and modernity, identity and exile, Roy presents art not merely as aesthetic expression, but as a radical act of defiance against oppressive socio-political structures. This study argues that Elango's sculptures and pottery function as symbolic narratives that challenge dominant cultural ideologies, offering a space where marginalized voices can be heard and remembered. The novel also foregrounds the politics of belonging and the fractures that exist within communal identities, particularly in postcolonial societies marked by religious and caste-based violence. Elango's tragic trajectory and his bond with a Muslim woman challenge conventional binaries, illustrating how artistic creation can forge connections across cultural and ideological divides. Through a postcolonial lens, the paper analyzes how Roy deconstructs rigid identities and reimagines resistance through creativity. In doing so, *The Earthspinner* reaffirms the transformative power of art to not only reflect a broken world, but to also envision its healing. The paper concludes that postcolonial literature and art offer vital pathways for rethinking identity, agency, and resistance in an increasingly polarized global context.

Keywords: Postcolonial art, Anuradha Roy, *The Earthspinner*, identity, resistance, cultural violence, healing, creativity, marginalisation.

Anuradha Roy is a prominent Indian novelist, journalist, and editor, widely celebrated for her lyrical prose and profound exploration of complex social and political themes. Born in Calcutta and educated in India and the United Kingdom, Roy brings a transnational sensibility to her writing, deftly weaving together personal narratives with larger historical and cultural currents. Her novels, including *An Atlas of Impossible Longing*, *The Folded Earth*, *Sleeping on Jupiter*, and *All the Lives We Never Lived*, have received international acclaim and multiple literary honours, including the DSC Prize for South Asian Literature and a nomination for the Man Booker Prize. Roy's works frequently examine issues of displacement, trauma, memory, gender, and identity, often set in richly imagined landscapes that mirror the emotional terrain of her characters. "Roy's writing is characterised by deep empathy, rich description and the exploration of

complex human emotions and societal issues. She also co-founded a Permanent Black publishing house specialising in academic books on South Asian history and culture.” (Arivu Mani and Kannadhasan 870)

Roy's literary significance lies in her ability to blend aesthetic beauty with incisive socio-political critique. Her writing resists simplistic binaries of East and West, tradition and modernity, instead offering nuanced portrayals of lives caught between the personal and the political. In novels like *Sleeping on Jupiter*, she confronts issues of sexual violence and religious hypocrisy. At the same time, in *The Earthspinner*, she meditates on the role of art, love, and resistance in the face of rising communal tensions. As both a storyteller and a cultural critic, Roy positions herself as a vital voice in contemporary Indian literature, one that challenges dominant narratives and provides space for marginalised perspectives. Her work exemplifies how fiction can function as both witness and resistance in a fractured world.

The Earthspinner by Anuradha Roy is a poignant and meditative novel that follows the life of Elango, a gifted potter living in a small South Indian town, whose passion for art and love defy the constraints of his deeply conservative society. Set against the backdrop of rising communal tensions and growing religious extremism, the story unfolds through the eyes of a young student, Sara, who becomes both narrator and observer of Elango's journey. Elango's forbidden relationship with a Muslim woman and his obsessive artistic project, a mythical clay horse, place him in conflict with societal norms and ultimately lead to tragic consequences. Through Elango's struggle to reconcile his creative freedom with the rigid structures of caste, religion, and tradition, *The Earthspinner* becomes a profound reflection on love, loss, and the power of art to challenge and transcend human divisions. As Pearl Doherty praises on the cover blurb of the novel, “Poetic and evocative. Roy's writing is a joy.” (Doherty).

Central to the exploration is the pivotal question: Can postcolonial art serve as a healing force in a fragmented, polarised world? In the aftermath of colonial rule and amidst ongoing social, religious, and cultural conflicts, postcolonial art emerges as a powerful medium for reclaiming identity, confronting historical injustices, and fostering collective healing. Unlike dominant narratives that often silence marginalised voices, postcolonial art gives expression to suppressed histories, hybrid identities, and fractured communities. It offers not only resistance but also the possibility of reconciliation, providing a space where memory, creativity, and empathy can intersect. Through symbolic storytelling, visual representation, and aesthetic subversion, postcolonial art challenges divisive ideologies and reimagines new, inclusive futures. Thus, the question invites us to explore whether art, rooted in postcolonial consciousness, can move beyond protest to become a transformative force for unity, understanding, and healing in an increasingly divided world.

Roy reconfigures art not merely as an aesthetic endeavour but as a potent vehicle for resistance, identity reclamation, and healing amid the ruptures of postcolonial trauma and socio-political violence. The protagonist Elango's obsessive creation of a terracotta horse, an emblem of cultural continuity and personal vision. Roy weaves a narrative where artistic expression becomes both a defiant act against communal intolerance and a deeply personal response to emotional loss and displacement. The novel critiques the ideological forces that seek to stifle creativity, particularly through the lens of religious orthodoxy and patriarchal control, celebrating art's transformative power to mend fractured identities. In Roy's world, to shape clay is to resist erasure, to dream despite destruction, and to assert a self that refuses to be silenced by historical and cultural wounds.

Roy situates art within a postcolonial framework where it transcends aesthetics to become a deeply political and healing expression. Elango's terracotta horse is not just a work of craftsmanship; it is a symbolic act of defiance against the rising tide of communalism, censorship, and cultural homogenization. The horse, imagined as a monumental structure, embodies a lost cultural heritage and an individual's yearning for freedom of expression. Elango's vision stands in stark opposition to the socio-religious forces that seek to suppress difference and creativity. In a society fractured by religious extremism and intolerance, the artist becomes a subversive figure, challenging dominant narratives through clay and fire. The horse's

eventual destruction by a communal mob underscores the fragility of artistic freedom in the postcolonial context, yet its very conception represents resistance a refusal to be silenced or assimilated.

Roy presents art as a form of personal healing and emotional reconstruction. Elango, torn by an impossible love across religious boundaries and haunted by personal grief, channels his turmoil into the act of creation. Art becomes a therapeutic space where the broken self seeks wholeness. The meditative process of sculpting allows Elango to externalise pain and craft meaning from suffering. Roy echoes postcolonial theorists like Homi Bhabha, who argue for hybrid cultural spaces as sites of both trauma and possibility. Elango's artistic journey, Roy shows how art mediates between the personal and the political, the sacred and the profane, ultimately offering a redemptive vision in a world otherwise marked by loss and fragmentation.

Postcolonial art and aesthetics refer to creative expressions that emerge from the historical, cultural, and political conditions following colonial rule, often interrogating colonial legacies, reclaiming suppressed identities, and imagining new futures. It is deeply intertwined with resistance, hybridity, and the rearticulation of cultural narratives that were marginalised or distorted by colonial discourse. Postcolonial aesthetics challenge Western artistic norms by foregrounding indigenous forms, oral traditions, and local symbols, often blending them with modern techniques to create hybrid forms of expression. As art historian Nikos Papastergiadis observes, "Postcolonial art engages in the reconfiguration of memory and identity by transforming the trauma of colonisation into a source of creative agency" (Papastergiadis 98). The aesthetic framework thus becomes not only a site of political critique but also a space for healing, continuity, and cultural resilience.

The theoretical framework for analysing the novel draws upon key postcolonial thinkers Homi Bhabha, Frantz Fanon, and Edward Said, whose concepts illuminate the novel's treatment of art, identity, and resistance. Bhabha's idea of cultural hybridity is crucial in understanding the novel's portrayal of artistic expression as a space where multiple identities and traditions intersect, resisting fixed binaries. As Bhabha asserts, "hybridity is the sign of the productivity of colonial power, its shifting forces and fixities" (Bhabha 112), emphasising the creative potential within cultural in-betweenness. Fanon's theory of decolonisation and the reclaiming of cultural identity explains the novel's emphasis on indigenous artistic forms as acts of resistance against imposed norms. Fanon contends, "The colonised intellectual who returns to his people through culture finds that the path to national consciousness passes through culture" (Fanon 210). Edward Said's critique of Orientalism also provides a lens through which to read the novel's critique of dominant cultural narratives and the silencing of local voices. Said writes, "The Orient was almost a European invention... a place of romance, exotic beings, haunting memories and landscapes" (Said 1), a perspective Roy subtly challenges by presenting indigenous art not as exotic but as vital and subversive. Together, these theorists frame Roy's narrative as a postcolonial intervention that reclaims cultural expression as a form of survival and resistance.

Art becomes a vital space for resistance against socio-political repression and a means of asserting autonomy in a fractured postcolonial world. Elango's creation of the terracotta horse is not merely a personal project but an act of defiance against the rising communal tensions and cultural policing in his town. His insistence on building a monumental sculpture, despite social disapproval and looming violence, transforms artistic creation into a political statement. The horse symbolises a cultural heritage that resists erasure and affirms the right to create freely. As Homi Bhabha notes, "Art enables a form of resistance that emerges in the interstitial spaces between fixed identities and dominant ideologies where new meanings can be articulated" (Bhabha 122). Elango occupies such an interstitial space, where his art both challenges communal boundaries and refuses to conform to societal expectations, especially regarding religion and caste.

Roy uses art as a mechanism for self-fashioning, where the protagonist crafts not only physical forms but also a renewed sense of self and purpose. Elango's work on the horse is intertwined with his

inner turmoil, his forbidden love, personal grief, and cultural alienation. Through the process of shaping clay, he reconstructs his identity, not according to societal definitions, but through his vision and emotional truth. This aligns with Frantz Fanon's argument that reclaiming culture through creative expression is essential to the decolonisation of the self: "It is through artistic expression that the individual begins to build a world that is his own, that reflects his real conditions of existence" (Fanon 221). Elango's artistic journey thus becomes an act of healing and self-realisation, demonstrating how art can resist external control and facilitate personal liberation.

The novel resonates powerfully in today's climate of escalating communal and ideological conflicts, where artistic freedom and cultural plurality are increasingly under threat. The novel's depiction of Elango's artistic vision being violently disrupted by religious fundamentalism mirrors the real-world suppression of dissenting voices and the politicisation of identity. As cultural theorist Arjun Appadurai asserts, "Violence today is often provoked by the fear of cultural extinction" (Appadurai 7), highlighting how minority expressions are frequently targeted under the guise of preserving dominant traditions. Roy's novel becomes especially relevant in the context, as it reminds readers of the enduring need to protect artistic spaces as zones of cultural resistance, empathy, and healing amidst rising intolerance.

The fragmented identities of characters like Elango, Sara, and the unnamed narrator highlight the destructive impact of religious extremism, social rigidity, and patriarchy. Elango's artistic pursuit, particularly his creation of the terracotta horse, becomes symbolic of his desire for a syncretic, inclusive identity that transcends communal boundaries. This ambition collides tragically with a society steeped in religious orthodoxy. When the narrator reflects on Elango's silence in the face of violence, she says, "He shut his eyes and sighed. He felt as if he had shed a great weight from his chest. What he had created came close to matching what he had imagined, which happened rarely." (Roy 145-46). The metaphor underscores how silence becomes both a symptom of trauma and a form of resistance against a world that denies complexity. Sara's struggle as a woman desiring freedom in a patriarchal context further reveals how identity is constantly negotiated and fractured in oppressive environments.

Art in *The Earthspinner* emerges as a powerful counter-narrative to violence and social fragmentation. Elango's sculpture is not merely aesthetic; it is political, a protest against communalism and a vision of harmony. His act of shaping the horse, an ancient cultural motif, serves as a symbolic gesture of reclaiming agency in a society that punishes difference. Roy writes, "Word had spread that Elango had made a horse for the temple- the old kind that his grandfather had known to make. The young had never seen one; the old began to reminisce about the holy processions, when decorated clay horses were wheeled around the neighbourhood and everyone waited for a glimpse" (Roy 144). The act of artistic creation reflects a utopian impulse, contrasting with the dystopian reality of his village. The narrator, too, uses the written word as a means of resistance. Her narrative, full of ellipses, gaps, and unspoken trauma, enacts a formal rebellion, suggesting that what cannot be said still carries weight. Both literal and figurative forms of art resist cultural erasure.

Roy's novel also delves into the psychological effects of cultural hybridity and diasporic tension, particularly through the narrator's return from England to India. Her perspective is liminal neither fully Western nor comfortably Indian. This in-betweenness allows her to perceive the fissures in both cultures. As Homi Bhabha notes, "Hybridity is the revaluation of the assumption of colonial identity through the repetition of discriminatory identity effects" (Bhabha 112). The narrator's dislocation makes her both observer and participant, highlighting how identity is continually reshaped by displacement, memory, and ideology. The novel does not offer a resolution but rather emphasises that in a broken world, fragmented identities may resist not by mending but by enduring, imagining, and creating alternative modes of being.

Feminine creativity, embodied by Sara and the narrator, functions as a quiet yet potent form of symbolic resistance against the dominant structures of patriarchy and violence. Sara's quiet rebellion through her choices in love and career, though constrained by social expectations, reflects a personal form

of agency. The narrator's act of storytelling becomes a generative space where silenced histories and unspoken traumas can find voice. As Roy writes, "...finally the very name of the village was erased from the maps and it merged into the silent oblivion of the Deccan Plateau on which it had once lived." (Roy 159). The creative reimagining, the narrator asserts control over a fragmented world. Their feminine agency does not manifest through confrontation but through acts of creation, language, care, and remembrance that challenge systems of erasure and suppression. Roy aligns feminine creativity with the power of endurance and meaning-making, placing it in stark contrast to the destructive masculinity that dominates the novel's socio-political landscape.

Nature in the novel operates as both a literal and symbolic site of healing, renewal, and subversive knowledge. Elango's use of clay and fire to sculpt his horse draws directly from the earth, grounding artistic expression in the elements of nature. Similarly, animals, dreams, and the rural landscape become vessels of unspoken connection, emotion, and survival. The narrator recalls, "My mother clutched us hard, her arms over us like a shield. Other people stepped aside as the tall, burly men walked forward. They raised their rods and brought them crashing onto the horse" (Roy 151). These dreamscapes serve not only as psychological refuge but also as eco-aesthetic expressions of trauma and hope. Roy's novel exemplifies this interconnection, proposing that storytelling, rooted in nature and feminine perception, can nurture resistance and healing in a fractured world.

The novel vividly portrays the devastating consequences of rising communalism and intolerance on art, memory, and individual agency. Elango's terracotta horse, born from a syncretic cultural vision, becomes a target of fundamentalist violence, symbolising how art is often the first casualty in ideologically polarised societies. The mob that destroys the sculpture does not merely attack clay but assaults the very idea of pluralism and peaceful coexistence. Roy writes, "...Kill the potter. Break the horse... Break it down, it is evil...break it down..." (Roy 171). The scene starkly reflects the fragility of artistic expression in a world increasingly hostile to cultural hybridity. Elango's subsequent isolation, emotional, physical, and social, mirrors the broader marginalisation of voices that refuse to conform to communal dogma.

The novel also delves deeply into the politics of memory, trauma, and erasure in postcolonial societies. In the aftermath of violence, official narratives often silence the pain of individuals, especially those on the margins. The narrator becomes the custodian of Elango's story not through linear documentation but through fragmented recollections, absences, and dreams. "I was afraid, he said after a long silence...when things go wrong, they go really wrong..." (Roy 189). These silences and narrative gaps highlight how trauma resists full articulation. They also become a powerful mode of resistance: refusing to forget. In this, Roy engages with postcolonial concerns about who controls history and which stories are allowed to survive. Memory, even when painful and incomplete, becomes a political act of defiance against state-sanctioned forgetfulness.

Therefore, *The Earthspinner* juxtaposes the creative resilience of the individual against the often-destructive instincts of the collective. While the community succumbs to violence and division, the individual Elango with his sculptures, the narrator with her story, continue to imagine alternatives. This creative impulse is not naive but fiercely radical. As Edward Said argues, "Survival is the result of resistance, and resistance is grounded in memory" (Said 249). Roy's characters survive not by overpowering the forces around them but by remembering, creating, and bearing witness. The novel suggests that the individual, though vulnerable, holds the power to preserve beauty, memory, and truth against the tide of communal destruction.

Anuradha Roy's *The Earthspinner* reimagines postcolonial art as more than resistance; it becomes a vital process of healing, identity negotiation, and cultural rebirth. Through Elango's sculptures and the narrator's storytelling, art emerges as a space where fragmented identities and silenced memories find expression. In postcolonial societies marked by communal violence and historical erasure, such artistic resistance becomes a moral and political necessity. While art may not prevent destruction, it reclaims

human dignity, preserves collective truths, and dares to envision alternative, inclusive futures. The novel affirms the enduring power of creativity in confronting oppression and imagining hope.

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