

## Existential Dilemmas and Patriarchal Oppression: Female Perspectives in Anuradha Roy's *An Atlas of Impossible Longing*

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**Abstract:** Women have internalized their subjugation, often perceiving suffering at the hands of men as their inevitable fate. Their existence is often reduced to fulfilling prescribed roles—as mothers, wives, daughters, or sisters—defined solely by duties and responsibilities imposed by societal norms. Within this framework, women experience a profound loss of individual identity, their personhood overshadowed by the roles they are expected to play. The roots of patriarchy run so deep that dismantling it is a monumental task, one that will require years of collective effort. However, literature provides a vital space for voicing these suppressed realities and bringing such issues into broader discourse. Anuradha Roy's *An Atlas of Impossible Longing* captures the nuances of women's struggles within this patriarchal system with remarkable sensitivity and realism. Through her vivid storytelling and lifelike characters, Roy provides an intimate portrayal of the challenges faced by women, making their pain, resilience, and emotional turmoil palpable and relatable. Her work serves as a mirror reflecting the harsh truths of women's lived experiences. This paper explores the portrayal of women in Roy's novel, examining their struggles, the erosion of individuality, and their enduring resilience. It highlights how Roy's keen observations and empathetic narrative shed light on the silent suffering of women in a patriarchal society, creating space for their voices to be heard and understood.

**Keywords:** Patriarchy, women, Indian society, Literature.

### INTRODUCTION

To quote Virginia Woolf (1929): “Women have served all these centuries as a looking-glass possessing the magic and delicious power of reflecting the figure of man at twice its natural size” (Woolf 35). The dependence of women on men is not a recent development in Indian society; rather, it is an ingrained aspect of the patriarchal system that has been practiced for centuries. This deep-seated patriarchal structure has consistently placed women in positions of subordination, gradually eroding their sense of self and individuality as distinct beings. Over generations, women have internalized these roles, often believing that their worth is defined solely by their relationships to men—as daughters, wives, and mothers—rather than as autonomous individuals with their own desires, needs, and ambitions.

As a result, women have frequently found themselves subordinated to the dominant masculinity celebrated within society, where male power and authority are elevated, and female voices and experiences are marginalized. The societal narrative has long been shaped by the glorification of male strength, intellect, and independence, leaving little room for the recognition of women's individuality and agency. This dynamic has perpetuated cycles of dependence, reinforcing the notion that women's primary role is to serve and support the men around them, rather than to seek their own self-fulfilment or autonomy.

Through Anuradha Roy's *An Atlas of Impossible Longing*, these issues are brought to the forefront with poignant clarity. Roy's novel offers a window into the lives of women who grapple with the constraints of a patriarchal society, highlighting the internal and external struggles they face in their quest for identity and independence. The characters in Roy's novel are emblematic of the broader female experience within the confines of patriarchal expectations, where women are not only shaped by their relationships to men but are also forced to confront the limitations imposed on them by societal norms. This paper seeks to explore how Roy's work illuminates the profound impact of patriarchy on women's sense of self and their struggle for autonomy. It will analyze the portrayal of women in the novel, focusing on the ways in which their identities are shaped, constrained, and often diminished by the patriarchal forces at play, while also reflecting on the broader implications of these dynamics in contemporary Indian society. Through this analysis, the paper aims to shed light on the ongoing challenges women face in reclaiming their individuality and asserting their place within a world that continues to elevate male authority.

The gradual decay and eventual death of desire in Kananbala's character is a poignant reflection of her emotional and psychological isolation. Kananbala, the novel's central female character, is initially driven by love and the hope of fulfilling her husband's desires, which ultimately leads to

her relocation from the bustling city of Calcutta to the remote town of Songarh, located on the outskirts of Bengal. This shift is dictated by the overwhelming wishes of her husband, Amulya Babu, who finds joy in the rustic life of Songarh, with its surrounding forests and tribal communities. In stark contrast to her husband's sense of contentment, Kananbala feels utterly displaced in this rural setting. Isolated within the confines of their house, she has little to no connection with the outside world, as her only company is the household servants. Amulya Babu, indifferent to her emotional and social needs, fails to involve her in the vibrant local life. He never takes her to his factory or the tribal festivals that he so eagerly attends. His attitudes toward women—especially women of his own community—are deeply entrenched in patriarchal beliefs. He insists that respectable women should remain sheltered from such public events, viewing their participation as a threat to their social image.

As the novel progresses, Kananbala reflects on her situation, contemplating the stark contrast between her husband's desires and her own unmet needs. She comes to realize that her existence in Songarh is not only physically confined but also emotionally and intellectually stifling. Her desires—once vivid and full of life—begin to wither in the face of constant neglect. This internal decay manifests as Kananbala becomes increasingly detached from her sense of self and from any hopes of fulfilment, further deepening her isolation.

In one of her moments of introspection, as Amulya Babu returns from a tribal festivity, Kananbala silently acknowledges the chasm that exists between her world and his, an emotional rift that only grows with time. Her longing for connection, for a life beyond the house, is suffocated by the patriarchal constraints imposed by her husband. As she continues to endure this stifling existence, the death of her desire becomes inevitable, representing a broader commentary on the devastating impact of unfulfilled dreams and oppressive societal norms on women's lives. Through Kananbala's journey, Roy explores the profound consequences of a woman's desires being continually dismissed and suppressed in favor of a male-dominated worldview, leading to the eventual decay of her emotional and psychological vitality. Why could she, Kananbala, never be taken? He always laughed with condescension or said exasperated, "I have never met women at these parties, neither do I aspire to."

And what of today, the festival at the tribal village—could she not have been taken? If she were a tribal woman herself, she would have needed no man's permission. (Roy 10)

Kananbala's life in Songarh is marked by profound isolation, amplified by the rural setting and the absence of familiar social connections. With limited interaction outside her home, she rarely receives visitors from her family, and her social circle is virtually nonexistent. The only people around her are the servants—three Bengali workers who had accompanied her from Calcutta. However, she shows no interest in engaging with them. She is linguistically and socially confined, as the only language she speaks is Bengali, and the few neighbors she has are British, making communication even more distant. As Amulya Babu spends his time at the factory, Kananbala finds herself trapped within her own solitude. This isolation, however, begins to shift when she becomes a mother to two sons. The arrival of her children, especially after the marriage of her elder son Kamal, brings her a sense of purpose and a brief reprieve from her loneliness. For a while, Kananbala finds comfort in her bond with her younger son, Nirmal. He becomes her main source of emotional connection, and she cherishes the time spent with him. However, this sense of contentment proves to be short-lived. When Nirmal marries Shanti, the dynamics of their relationship change drastically.

Post-marriage, Nirmal begins to dedicate more of his time to his new wife, neglecting his responsibilities both at work and at home. As a history lecturer in a government college, his sudden shift in behaviour leaves his mother feeling abandoned and bitter. Instead of the companionship they once shared, Kananbala is left with fleeting moments of interaction with her son. Her growing sense of resentment and frustration becomes apparent in her harsh words directed at the other members of the household. One day, while her daughter-in-law Manjula and Shanti are working together in the kitchen, the tension in Kananbala's mind intensifies. Manjula repeatedly requests Shanti to sing, as she enjoys her singing immensely. As the two women converse and continue with their work, Kananbala stands at the door of the kitchen, silently observing them. She massages her knee absentmindedly, her mind simmering with the thoughts of neglect and abandonment. The subtle shift in her son's behaviour and the deepening isolation she faces stir up feelings of anger and resentment. The once-

cherished bond between mother and son seems to wither, and Kananbala's isolation becomes even more unbearable, as she realizes that her son is no longer the source of emotional sustenance he once was.

Kananbala's life thus reflects the constant ebb and flow of human connection and isolation. As her relationships evolve, the decay of her desires and emotional needs intensifies, underscoring the tragic consequences of neglect and the failure of familial bonds to provide the nurturing support she so desperately craves. All of a sudden, being irritated by their activities, she addressed the following words to Shanti: "What a Voice," she said. "You whore, why don't you get a job on the streets?" (Roy 40) This was the point of time where she started developing a thought of seeking revenge in her sub-conscious mind for all the sufferance in the previous years for being a victim to patriarchal norms. And moreover, she was getting aged as well. The very next day, when Amulya Babu was getting ready to go to the factory, Kananbala asked him: "You dandy, who're you fucking these days? Is it a Brahmo lady in a georgette sari?" (Roy 40). Kananbala's descent into emotional and psychological turmoil becomes increasingly evident as she continues to utter abusive and incoherent words, a reflection of her deteriorating state of mind. It seems as though each passing day, her consciousness slips further away, overwhelmed by the weight of her miseries. She is trapped in a cycle of suffering, her emotional pain manifesting in the disintegration of her mental clarity. Despite this, Amulya Babu remains largely oblivious to the true extent of her inner turmoil. The sudden transformation in his wife, which he cannot fully comprehend, puzzles him, and he is unaware of the deep-seated reasons behind her suffering.

Gradually, however, Amulya Babu begins to reflect on his own role in her decline. He comes to realize that the decision to move Kananbala to Songarh against her will was a mistake. The isolation, the neglect, and the emotional alienation she has experienced in this remote town were not what she had envisioned for herself. The guilt begins to weigh heavily on him as he acknowledges that he has been so consumed by his work and personal desires that he failed to see his wife's suffering or provide her with the companionship and support she desperately needed. In an attempt to rectify the situation, Amulya Babu tries to spend more time with her, hoping that his presence might somehow heal the

rift between them. Yet, no matter how hard he tries, Kananbala remains impervious to his efforts. Her emotional wounds, built up over years of neglect, are too deep to be soothed by his late attempts at comfort.

Amulya Babu's realization of his own culpability—recognizing that he, more than anyone else, is responsible for her destruction—adds to his growing helplessness. He understands that, despite his guilt and attempts to amend his actions, he cannot undo the damage that has already been done. Kananbala's condition is beyond his reach, and he is left to face the painful truth that his failure to care for her has led to her irreversible decline. This moment of self-awareness, however, comes too late to alter the course of Kananbala's suffering, and he finds himself powerless to change the outcome. Lerner rightly remarks: Women have for millennia participated in the process of their own subordination because they have been psychologically shaped as to internalise the idea of their own inferiority...The connectedness of women to familial structures made any development of female solidarity and group cohesiveness extremely problematic. (Lerner 218). Portrayal of a widow and her troubles represented through the character of Meera Widow. The word consumes itself— Body, a sheet of newsprint on the fire Levitating a numb minute in the updraft Over the scalding, red topography That will put her heart out like an only eye. (Plath 164). Meera, a distant relative of Nirmal, was invited to Songarh by him to care for his motherless daughter, Bakul, as Nirmal frequently had to travel for his archaeological surveys. Meera, in turn, also needed a place to live, as she did not want to be a burden on her brother or mother. Widowed at a young age, Meera was likely no older than twenty-five or twenty-six and had no children of her own.

When Meera arrived in Songarh, her presence immediately became the subject of gossip among the neighbors. This was partly because Nirmal, too, was a widower, and Meera, being a childless widow, added fuel to the town's speculation. Their relationship, however innocent, was viewed with suspicion, and the small-town society was quick to pass judgment, casting a shadow over Meera's new role in Nirmal's household. This social scrutiny reflected the rigid norms of the community, where any deviation from the conventional was met with suspicion and harsh judgment. The two didn't pay any heed to all those conversations. In the beginning Meera had shown her inclinations towards Nirmal

which she didn't consider it necessary to express being a widow. As has been described in the novel: In the early days at Dulganj Road, she had begun to feel that Nirmal, who was not really related to her except by marriage, was a kindred soul. Nirmal did not speak very much to anyone, yet they always seemed to have things to say to each other when they met by chance on the stairs or in the garden. But who had heard of widows marrying again? Who had heard of a widow marrying a relative? She had overheard people commending Nirmal's compassion in taking her in. (Roy 114- 15)

After several years, Nirmal decided to settle permanently in Songarh and continue his archaeological surveys at the nearby ruined forts. Upon his return, both he and Meera were often seen at the fort, each for different reasons. Meera visited to enjoy the peace and solitude, spending her time drawing and feeding the dogs, while Nirmal focused on his work, excavating the ruins. Gradually, they began to form a bond, each seeking a way to fill the emptiness in their lives. However, their growing connection did not go unnoticed for long. Word soon spread among the local community, and it wasn't long before Nirmal's family became aware of their friendship. As the gossip intensified, it became clear that their relationship was under scrutiny.

Then, one day, an incident occurred that deeply affected Meera and caused her to make a sudden decision to leave the house without hesitation. Upon discovering the nature of the relationship between Meera and Nirmal, Kamal, Nirmal's son, tried to exploit the situation. He assumed that, as a widow, Meera might be more open to him and attempted to flirt with her, even going so far as to touch her. This inappropriate behavior, based on his misguided belief that her widowhood made her an easy target, deeply disturbed Meera and shattered her emotionally. Unable to bear the violation of her boundaries, she made the immediate choice to leave, unable to stay another moment in the house. As has been described in the novel:

It struck her like a blow. Of course! He must have caught wind of her friendship with his brother! And decided he too would try his luck. She stood up in agitation. Of course! That was it, it was how men thought: friendliness with a man could be nothing but flirtation, and if you flirted with one you were easy, a slut, game for more. (Roy 160-61). Meera felt so powerless in her situation that

she didn't even consider telling Nirmal about the incident. She didn't want to risk it. She was torn, unsure whether Nirmal would side with her or with Kamal. In the end, she decided it would be wiser to leave the house, hoping that by doing so, she could prevent the situation from escalating further. Manjula, the wife of Kamal, is a character marked by deep emotional pain due to her childlessness. Despite being married for three years, she has not conceived, and this lack of children becomes a constant source of distress for her. Manjula internalizes her inability to bear children, believing that it must be a sign that she has unknowingly angered or displeased God. This internalized guilt and self-blame are amplified by the societal pressures placed on women in a patriarchal system, where women are often solely held responsible for reproductive issues. The failure to conceive becomes her personal failure, and no one questions the role of Kamal, her husband, in this matter.

In a society where women are expected to fulfill the role of mother, Manjula's infertility becomes a source of shame and grief. The arrival of Shanti's pregnancy further exacerbates her sense of inadequacy. When Shanti, who is newly pregnant, enters the picture, Manjula cannot help but compare her own situation to Shanti's. The sight of Shanti carrying a child serves as a stark reminder of what she lacks and intensifies her feelings of jealousy and resentment. Manjula, once lively and engaged, becomes increasingly withdrawn, sighing frequently and struggling to focus on even the simplest tasks. Her thoughts are consumed by the growing emotional void within her, leaving her absent-minded and distant from the world around her. One day, when Manjula hears that Nirmal is planning a trip to Calcutta with Bakul and Mukunda, she feels a sudden surge of hope. She too longs for a break from her routine, and the idea of a trip with Kamal fills her with excitement. However, her enthusiasm soon turns to frustration when Kamal dismisses the idea, and the conversation takes an unexpected turn. Manjula, feeling emotionally overwhelmed, bursts out in grief, questioning Kamal about why they never seem to go anywhere together. Her desire for the trip becomes entangled with her deeper frustration over their childlessness, and the conversation quickly shifts to the painful issue that has been haunting their relationship for years. This argument, which begins as a simple request for a vacation, reveals the tension and emotional strain that Manjula has been carrying silently.

Through Manjula's character, the novel sheds light on the oppressive nature of patriarchal expectations, particularly concerning women's roles as mothers. The weight of societal pressure to bear children is laid heavily on her shoulders, and her inability to fulfill that expectation leads to a profound sense of failure. Her character highlights how deeply these societal norms can affect a woman's sense of self-worth, leaving her feeling broken and incomplete. Manjula's longing for a child and her emotional turmoil serve as poignant reflections of the emotional burden placed on women, especially in societies that measure a woman's value by her ability to become a mother. The intense grief she feels over her childlessness is not just a personal sorrow but a reflection of the larger societal judgment women's face when they fail to conform to the traditional roles assigned to them. As has been described in the novel. In another room, Manjula was saying to Kamal, "When did we last have a holiday? I tell you! What a rotten day it was when my father decided to marry me into this family, so far from any city, any excitement. Why don't we go anywhere?" "Why we went to Varanasi just three years ago. Have you forgotten already? And that trip to Puri and Dakshineswar? Who took you on that?" "Those trips were all to pray for offspring, they weren't holidays, just days of fasts and mantras. And the prayers didn't work. Nothing's worked in my life!" "Stop grumbling," Kamal said. "Stop sounding as if I'm responsible for everything." "Who is, if you aren't?" (Roy 144)

Shanti, the wife of Nirmal, is a tragic figure whose life and death are deeply intertwined with the weight of societal traditions and expectations. Throughout her life, she was bound by the roles assigned to her, which often left her with little agency or freedom to make her own decisions. In this context, Shanti became a victim of the rigid structures of the past, which not only dictated her daily existence but ultimately determined the course of her life. The decision made by Nirmal's family to send Shanti to Mohanpur, a remote and underdeveloped area, was one that lacked rational thought and consideration for her well-being. If the family had been more thoughtful and had chosen a safer, more practical option, Shanti might have had a chance at a different life—one where her needs and health could have been better attended to.

Mohanpur, the place where Shanti was sent, was far from the support systems that could have ensured her safety and well-being. The town lacked basic infrastructure, including healthcare

facilities, which put its residents at a significant disadvantage. The nearest hospital was located in another town, miles away, making access to immediate medical attention virtually impossible. For a woman like Shanti, whose health and safety were paramount, this geographic isolation proved to be a fatal flaw. The absence of adequate healthcare infrastructure in Mohanpur meant that any medical emergency or complication could not be addressed quickly, and it was this lack of support that ultimately played a key role in the tragedy that befell her.

Shanti's untimely death highlights the tragic consequences of blindly following tradition without taking into account the practical realities of a situation. Her death wasn't simply a result of fate—it was a consequence of decisions made by others, particularly Nirmal's family, whose actions were motivated more by custom and convenience than by rational thought or concern for Shanti's well-being. This situation reflects the larger societal issue where women, particularly in patriarchal systems, are often subjected to decisions made by those around them, with little regard for their health, desires, or personal autonomy. Shanti's life and death serve as a poignant reminder of how deeply ingrained traditions can not only limit a woman's choices but also endanger her life when practical needs and rational decision-making are overlooked.

As has been mentioned in the novel: The first child would be born, as tradition demanded, in her childhood home, even though Nirmal disapproved of the tradition, saying Mohanpur was no place to have a baby; it didn't have a hospital nearer than the next town, which was far away. (Roy 63) Shanti's house was situated near the bank of a river which seemed to be coming closer each year. During Monsoon the house used to be nearly drowned in the river water. Moreover, the river didn't have any dam constructed to prevent the flood. During her pregnancy in Mohanpur, when Shanti inquired her father regarding the danger to their house during monsoon, then her father replied confidently: Why it should be? Is it built of clay? ... Haven't you seen with your own eyes how strong the walls are? Don't you remember how the workers' solid iron tools broke when they were trying to take down the old kitchen wall? (Roy 71)

Still not convinced by his father's words, Shanti tried to convince her father by saying: "I was just thinking...maybe we could move to..." (Roy 71). Despite Shanti's concerns and the looming risks,

her father-in-law remained unconvinced. He insisted that he was accustomed to the challenges brought by the monsoon season and dismissed her worries as unnecessary. His belief that the situation was manageable led him to downplay the potential dangers, refusing to consider alternative options or take her concerns seriously. This dismissal of her fears highlights the rigidity of patriarchal thinking, where the decisions made by older generations are often unquestioned, even when they place the well-being of others in jeopardy. His stubbornness became a critical factor in Shanti's fate, as it prevented any proactive measures from being taken.

Just a month before Shanti's expected delivery, her labor pains began on the same day that the monsoon rains intensified. The heavy downpour caused the river to breach its banks, creating a barrier that made it impossible to transport Shanti to the hospital. Despite the urgency of the situation, the lack of foresight and preparation left her with no options. Her father-in-law's refusal to acknowledge the severity of the situation, coupled with the physical and logistical challenges of the environment, ultimately led to Shanti's tragic death. This heartbreaking outcome underscores how the combination of arrogance, negligence, and the failure to act in the face of clear danger can have devastating consequences, especially for women whose needs are often ignored or undervalued. In the above context Simone de

Beauvoir (1972) rightly observes: Representation of the world, like the world itself, is the work of men; they describe it from their own point of view, which they confuse with absolute truth. (Beauvoir 161)

In conclusion, as the title of the novel suggests, the novel serves as an atlas mapping several characters, women in particular, whose desires remains unfulfilled. The Patriarchal norms followed since ages are so influential that women can neither revolt against it nor they can lead a contented life: A state where neither one can live nor die, just survive. To quote Lerner (1986): "The sexual regulation of women...is one of the foundations upon which the state rests." (Roy 140) and is "an essential feature of patriarchal power." (Roy 140)

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