

Love and Longing in Anuradha Roy's *The Earthspinner*

¹Atisha Srivastava*

Research Scholar, St. John's College
Dr Bhimrao Ambedkar University Agra

&

²Shailendra P. Singh

Professor of English, St. John's College,
Dr Bhimrao Ambedkar University, Agra

ABSTRACT

In her latest novel, *The Earthspinner* (2021), Anuradha Roy profusely paints a poignant picture of delicate human relationships, giving more profound insights into shared human vulnerabilities. Roy is particularly adept at weaving a sensitive narrative that resonates with her readers. Infused with myth, memory and history, *The Earthspinner* chronicles the splintered lives of Sarayu, Elango and Chinna over five years. The novel beautifully portrays an artist's quest for art and how an artist's dream creation and his beloved are inextricable. Sectarian strife and the madness of fanaticism drive the protagonists towards irretrievable losses and inconceivable fates. The binaries of creation and destruction are skillfully depicted. The voiceless comforter, Chinna, who transgresses social and religious barriers and provides solace with his unconditional love, is the one to be abandoned repeatedly. The loss of and a longing for 'home' find prominence throughout the novel. The lapse of five years transforms their lives, but their cravings largely remain unfulfilled. Love for humans is a powerful motivator but it also makes them vulnerable. Unfulfilled longings may lead to a haunting sense of loss, which finds expression in myriad forms within the novel. The narrative is a compelling rendition of love, longing and loss themes. The proposed paper seeks to interpret love from multiple perspectives and understand the diverse longings and scattered losses as sculpted by the author in this work of fiction.

Keywords: Human vulnerabilities, myth, memory, splintered lives, love, longing, loss.

Love is an all-encompassing emotion that adds meaning to our lives and makes us feel at home with ourselves. It helps us steer our way through times, rough and rugged, making us feel less alone in this otherwise lonely world. Humans are relational beings and need some affirmation and association to sail through life's journey. Love is the affirming force that binds people together and gives them hope and the zeal to celebrate life. Conversely, a lack of love gives birth to cracked souls longing for affection.

Anuradha Roy's latest novel *The Earthspinner*, is permeated with the emotions of love, longing, and loss. The narrative, travelling between India and England, is a careful exploration into the several kinds of longing that various of its characters experience during the course of the novel. Roy weaves together the themes of art and aesthetics, communal disharmony, violence, love,

* Authors: Atisha Srivastava & Shailendra P. Singh

Email: psingh2000@gmail.com

Received 12 Oct. 2022; Accepted 22 Oct. 2022. Available online: 25 Oct. 2022.

Published by SAFE. (Society for Academic Facilitation and Extension)

[This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/)

longing, loss and alienation in a breathlessly beautiful setting. L. Subrani, in her review for the Deccan Herald entitled, "Turning and Turning in the widening gyre" (2021) praises the novel saying: "It's an exquisite portrayal of empty-nest, loneliness, broken relationships; the quest of an artist that's as ancient as the art itself, his love and defiance of social divisions and how he nearly paid for this audacity with his life." The narrative revolves around the fragmented lives of three characters: Elango, the passionate ceramist; Sarayu or Sara, the child apprentice to Elango, who is later a literature student at Oxford and Chinna, the abandoned dog. The narrative unfurls a saga of love, longing, and loss. A lapse of five years significantly transforms their lives and ways, but as in her article titled "Forbidden Art and Star-Crossed Lovers in The Earthspinner" (2022), Mira Jacob puts down, "their heartbreak remains an open wound that begs for healing." The novel's narrator, Sara, longs for her home while at the university in England. Alone, in a faraway land, all by herself, she reminisces about her time with her family. She is hard up on the scholarship and longs even to hear her mother's voice on the other side of the phone since she doesn't have enough for a three-minute international phone call, and it disconnects by the time she answers, feeling her only for a brief second. She comments, "For the time it takes to breathe one breath, we are together, at two ends of a fine string across continents and oceans." (13) Her idea of 'Home' constitutes her father, mother and sister and any place was home when she was surrounded by the three of them. She yearns for her childhood, locked away, lost, and forgotten on the day of the riots when the thought of fetching her younger sister from the junior school escaped her mind. Sara pines to be understood when her parents scold her for being heedless and selfish for forgetting Tia in junior school when panic strikes everyone, and she is rushed and dropped home by one of her classmates amidst the riots. She longs for reliving the happier times, when she still shared intimacy and an affectionate bond with her sister, Tia. "Our closeness had dissolved long ago, and each day was a quiet war over trivialities." (20). She feels excluded as she doesn't find any mention in the letters from home. The physical distance gradually drifts them apart. She says:

I feel as if I'm on a moving train and they are on another one travelling alongside, so that I catch a glimpse of Tia and Amma and for a moment, despite the noise, nothing moves, we look at each other from our separate windows. And then the storm passes and I am alone again, going further and further away from them. (22)

Sara is distraught at her father's death. It's a loss that changes everything and turns her world upside down, making her a stranger to her reflection in the mirror. Even a decade later, she feels lost and lonely and finds it difficult to put her pieces together. She reflects while gazing

at her face in a window glass: "I need to work out how to reassemble myself." (18) She longs for his presence when she sits in solitude at the studio, hoping to meet him again in some other element that he must have inhabited, thinking out the possibilities of turning his ashes into glaze and wishing to offer him tea in her just curated mug. His absence feels heavier when she inadvertently catches herself conversing with him, seeking answers and his advice, only to realize there isn't a soul to answer. She regrets her last argument with her father a few days before his death. She wishes to go back into the past and undo that part if she can. The pottery studio in a church basement becomes her go-to place where she finds solace from the humdrum and monotony of everyday life. She goes to the studio when she longs for solitude. She wishes to stay there night and day, not leaving it for even a second. The studio is her haven and a piece of her childhood transported to a faraway place. Pottery is her only binding thread to her memories of Elango. The scent of clay transcends an unbelievable expanse of time and space, taking her straight to Elango's shed by the moringa tree and the magnificent terracotta horse. She shares an intense and undefined relationship with her teacher, Elango, who had taken her under his care and had taught her all the intricate details of working on clay with absolute precision, right from the very basics. She longs for Elango's precision and perfection in her art. She reminisces about working at the wheel alongside him and longs for the times when she was his only confidant and assistant while working on his dream terracotta horse by the desolate pond. Looking around the studio, she examines every aspect, including method, order, and cleanliness, and thinks about Elango's reaction to it. His influence and significance in her life are as evident as her longing for him when she says, "When I look around this basement studio, I want him to see it." (27). In the studio, she is back with her father and his fossils and Elango, whose voice acts as a guiding light while she spins the wheel and shapes her pots. She wonders what changes those five years might have brought in Elango's physical appearance and if she will ever get to see her beloved teacher again.

Elango's relationship with the dog, Chinna, is that of two abandoned and forlorn souls longing for love and warmth, seeking solace in each other. He firmly believes that Chinna is another heaven-sent gesture for Zohra and his oneness since he catches a glimpse of Zohra right after checking up on the dog, which is reason enough to take Chinna under his care. His act of feeding Chinna by chewing the charred roti first to make it soft and chewable for the little puppy is pure love and compassion. The arrival and affectionate feelings of Chinna awaken in him a tenderness he isn't aware of possessing. He can fight the whole world and will act as a

shield to protect Chinna from all dangers. "Nothing bad will ever happen to you again. I'll keep you safe. I'll do whatever I have to." (61) His concern for Chinna's safety, while he is out on his daily errands, makes him request Devika, Sarayu's mother to let Chinna stay in their house for the hours he is at work. In the absence of a safe place for Chinna, Elango even ponders the possibility of not driving his autorickshaw until he grows a little older. Chinna soon becomes an integral and inseparable part of Elango's life. He can't bear to see Chinna in pain. Chinna's whimpering could make his heart contract. "Was he going soft? A woman. A horse. Now this dog." (53) Elango falls in love with a Muslim girl, Zohra, and his longing for her fills all his thoughts. He becomes restless when he notices and catches feelings for her, and his days are permeated with Zohra's dreams. He longs for a life with Zohra. "He wanted to look at her for the rest of his life" (40). He starts visiting Moti Block only to catch sight of her and feel her presence in his affinity for a brief while. He is keen to give her everything that she asks, willing to buy up the world and lay it at her feet but lacks the resources to make that happen. The mere sight of her limp strikes something inside him and thrusts him into a spiral of love, longing and lust, making him it's captive. He sees a divine sign for his mingling with Zohra in almost everything. The beautifully coloured bird that appeared out of nowhere and carried dust from him to Zohra, the 'z' or the lightning mark on Chinna's chest, and the letters ZM imprinted on the back of the watch that Chinna had found in the forest were all considered as Nature's gestures that all of its forces were working together to bind them both together, "The sky was raining signs." (56) His longing and desire for her grow stronger with each passing day. He finds it increasingly troublesome to concentrate on his work or feel life flowing within his body. When the thoughts of forbidden desires unnerve him, he draws his attention to his dream terracotta horse which, he believes, will come to life to bring Zohra to him. His devotion to his dream terracotta horse is as sacred and profound as his love for Zohra. Profoundly entwined with his passion for Zohra, his dream creation and his beloved are now inseparable.

Elango fights a formidable battle within himself as he is constantly worried by the fear of being separated from Zohra as they come from warring tribes, thirsty for each other's blood. Elango desperately wishes for the unbridgeable distance to be bridged, the crevasse to shut down and not suck him and his love in it. Communal tension has always been a deterrent in inter-faith romantic relationships. Elango constantly struggles with and is wearied by the thoughts about his future. To think of a life without Zohra is his nightmare, but to think of his life with her is nothing less than a revolt that will ensue bloodshed and horrors he didn't want to think of. The

narrator comments, "He could not imagine a life without Zohra. That was unbearable. But he dared not imagine a life with her. It was inconceivable." (44)

Devika's love for her family makes her keep the dog despite finding that Chinna is none other than Tashi, the dog the highway couple had lost in the incident and reported missing. Her conscience and ethics guide her to make arrangements to return the dog to the couple, but the thought of her daughters' bond with Chinna and Raghav's need for him outweighs all other thoughts. Her daughters' happiness and her husband's well-being matter to her more than anything else. Her compassion for Chinna makes her empathise with him and understand what an injustice it will be to keep tossing him between places. She decides to erase all the traces of his past life by replacing his old collar and leash with a new one. She tells Elango, "I've burnt the old collar and leash. It's gone, his old life." (73) Sarayu and Elango share a bond of trust and affection. Elango confides in Sara instead of his brother and discloses Chinna's gift of the watch and his secret place at the deserted pond where he would create his dream terracotta horse to Sara without fear. Sara learns more about Elango and his life at this solitary pond. Their love and longing for art make them contemplate the fate of the potters whose toil and skill in the form of clay idols only survive for a few days before being immersed in water as a part of some religious ritual and feel sad for their dying art. Elango empathises with those potters and begins to wonder "how those far-off potters, men like him, bore it year after year: their artistry surviving just five days." (84) Love breeds compassion and affection, but love also breeds envy. Sarayu begins to believe that the hideout at the pond is her and Elango's secret, and she is taken aback when she sees Zohra while engaged in her conversation with Elango. The desire for that person and place belonging to her in those hours and the realization of an outsider infiltrating their sacred space stir something inside her. "I didn't know that she too came to the pond; I had thought it something between Elango and me." (84). Zohra's arrival for a brief while changes everything for Elango and Sara. Elango appears preoccupied with the thoughts of Zohra even after she has left, forgetting everything else he has been speaking or doing. Sara can sense a fizzle of longing in Elango's behaviour. She gradually affirms that she felt something significant between Zohra and Elango that particular day by the pond and becomes sure that he mustn't have thought about anything but Zohra, how she, notwithstanding the limp, traversed the muddy path to the pond only to look for him. Sara's insecurity intensifies on her failing to meet Elango at his place when she goes for her weekend lessons. Sara misses working alongside Elango on his horse by the pond and listening to him. She immediately

begins to feel that Zohra must have forbidden Elango from teaching her by the isolated pond, which is why he had never called her to his hideout again. She is baffled by her rage, unable to identify the cause of it. She sulks over the fact that her time with Elango has been compromised since the day Zohra entered his life. A kind of rivalry with Zohra, however unspoken, begins brewing in her heart.

She examines her physical attributes and is filled with awkward diffidence, wondering if she could be considered pretty and desirable. Sara longs for romantic love, the one she witnessed between Zohra and Elango when she was a child. She yearns to be admired and looked at unwaveringly. She covets to be chosen. She wishes to be desired as Karin is desired by Darius when she is at the university. She longs to be loved passionately. The longing for freedom and free will is reflected when the school girls shrug their burqas off to unveil the same short school uniforms the other girls wear and then veil themselves again before leaving for their respective homes. But unfortunately, the conservative mindset of certain Muslim households presses on the need for women to cover their bodies, heads, and faces in the name of religious and moral strictures, thus denying them their fundamental right to dress freely. Zohra's yearning for Elango exhibits that the feelings of love and longing are mutual. Her non-verbal cues were enough to let Elango feel that his feelings are being reciprocated. Zohra's apprehension of witnessing the end and losing Elango forever amidst the riots' breakout makes Zohra's love for Elango amply clear without the need for her to be vocal about it. Her claims of ownership of Elango breathe a new life into him, and he feels rejuvenated. It gives Elango a sense of belonging, of which he, until then, was deprived. Falling in love with a Hindu was unanticipated, but once she has fallen in love with Elango, retreating her steps doesn't seem to be a viable option. She envisions a life with Elango and hopes they will find a way to make it happen. The desire to possess something juxtaposed with the realization of being deprived of it intensifies one's longing. The limp in Zohra's leg makes her walk unsteady where she wishes for speed. She hopes to fly and cries to ride the walls like the bikers. The moment she spots a woman rider, she excitedly calls out to Elango, "That's who I want to be... she's who I am inside!" (97) Elango's grandfather used to make a stately horse for the temples back in the day, but he is curating the horse for his goddess, Zohra. Once his dream submarine horse, an earthen one with flames, becomes a reality, Zohra is the first person he brings along to see his magnificent creation. He gives her a carving tool and asks her to carve three names on the horse in her language – hers, Elango's, and Chinna's and she feels a kind of homeliness at that

moment. Zohra and Chinna are his only family, his only home. The horse with their names on it symbolized their union.

Elango's horse doesn't go down well with the Hindu fanatics because of its Urdu carvings. The language of the Muslims is taken as an offense that demeans the sanctity of their ritual temple horse. As a result, Elango and his creation are brutally attacked. The moment Sara notices a shoe trying to crush her teacher's hands, she breaks free from her mother's grip and runs towards Elango, but Chinna reaches there well in time to bite the attacker with all his might to save his master but suffers a blow in return. The chaos bruised Elango badly, and he had to flee the town with Zohra to save their lives. Elango's sudden disappearance alters Chinna's life drastically. Initially, he wanders off to all the familiar points in search of Elango. He forgets home and food, engages in bloody dog fights but searches for Elango tirelessly. As days pass, Elango's absence creates a void in Chinna's heart, and he stops going on his trails to seek him. In her review for *The Earthspinner* (2022), Elizabeth Lawrence reflects, "Chinna inspires deep affections, but that does not stop him from being abandoned." He stays immobile on Sara's veranda, only leaving it at night to sleep closer to Sara's father and feel his warmth. After her father's death, Chinna gradually develops affection for Sara's mother, slipping into her bed just like he did with her father. Elango's abrupt abandonment of Chinna and his callous refusal to take him along to Delhi or even return once to meet Chinna make Sara wonder if he ever loved Chinna genuinely. Not just Chinna, Elango's disappearance affects Sara too, who starts crying in her sleep and wishes to quit pottery forever.

Sara spots Elango in one of Karin's pictures from St. Ives and feels a gush of emotions. She looks up the leaflet Karin has brought with her that places the ceramist in London and heads for the place without much thought. At first, their encounter is a little awkward, but their shared past reveals this chance meetup's oddities. Pottery is like breathing for both of them. It is the thread of the ceramic art that binds them together. They spend the next five days together at work and leisure, sharing thoughts, conversations, and even silences. The days spent with Elango fill her with renewed vigour and zeal. She says, "I keep daydreaming about the sheer, uncomplicated happiness of the last week and wish I had stayed longer." (187)

Bereft of home and everything familiar, living among strangers for over five years, Elango pours his heart out to Sara, talking about things he had bottled up inside him. "He might not have spoken to me with this unsettling honesty had he not been far from all he had known, unable to unburden himself to anyone – and then a girl who shares his language as well as

momentous bits of his past turned up out of the blue." (193) They are like two people living in exile, suddenly finding home and warmth in each other's company. "It was as if he had a lifetime of talking to finish in five days and I listened without stopping him." (191) The time spent with Elango still seems significantly less, and Sara looks for reasons and excuses to meet Elango one last time before he leaves. "Maybe I can go with him to the airport. A few extra hours. That's all I want." (200) Sara is filled with despair as the time for Elango's departure approaches. In the next few minutes, he'll be gone, and she will have to walk the paths back alone, and she isn't ready to part from Elango again. She doesn't want to return to the same life where strangers and loneliness surround her. She doesn't want to live in exile anymore. She yearns to go home. She says, "I didn't want to leave. I wanted to get onto that plane too and go home with him, back to people I knew. My mother. Chinna. Even Tia." (203)

Parting from Elango another time stirs up a well of emotions inside Sara. She wants the time to slow down and for Elango to go on speaking. She tried to breathe in every word that came out of his mouth. With Elango, she can revisit and relive her childhood. She puts down, "I didn't know when I would hear again these intonations and words, this particular language of my childhood. I listened as if my life depended on remembering every word." (204)

She wraps Elango's scarf around her neck to cling to his scent and feels a strong desire to return to London to be around him. Elango gifts her his coveted toolbox – a gift he received from the Korean potter and has been so precious to him that he never used it. It was used for the first time by the blind calligrapher to carve the lines on his most majestic creation, his earthen horse from a long-ago dream, and he now hands it over to Sara, saying, "A teacher should pass on something valuable to his student. This is the best thing I can think of." (203)

Sara too, feels exiled in this English World, bereft of her homeland, her people, and everything familiar. A micro review in the Times of India observes, "This feeling of being constantly disoriented in the world, forced to find their place, again and again, is a key motif in the novel." Days after Elango has left, she reflects on the joyous time spent with him in London and in an instant, is filled with a longing for her past. She writes, "I want to be at home, home as it used to be when my father was alive, when my mother was strong, when Elango was down the road, when I was small enough to be hoisted by him into his autorickshaw." (214)

Chinna shares an affectionate relationship with the people of the neighbourhood. He is loved by everyone whose lives he has touched. His desire to meet and be around them is so powerful

that he finds his way to them by escorting them to places, visiting them at their homes, sitting on their doorsteps, having bowls of meat and rice and sprawling at Devika's place for a siesta and being petted by Raghav and the girls. He acts as a medicine for Raghav's ailing heart. Chinna's evenings are incomplete until he accompanies the blind calligrapher, Zohra's grandfather and accepts a ghee-soaked roti that the old man offers him as a ceremonial conclusion of their daily meetup. Chinna's longing for love gets fulfilled in the arms of Elango, who is working on his dream submarine horse at the pond.

Roy has finely weaved together a human-animal bond and has beautifully painted the paw prints left by the voiceless in human lives. Chinna becomes an inseparable part of Elango's life and being, and he needs the dog within touching distance for survival. His absence amplifies Elango's longing for him and leaves him exhausted. Chinna's company calms his pacing heart and puts an end to his worries. Elango can live anywhere under any circumstances if he has Chinna. While reviewing the novel, Elizabeth Lawrence opines, "His love for Chinna bursts with poignancy and authenticity." The pain of abandoning Chinna resides deep and fresh in Elango's memory, even five years since their separation. The guilt of forsaking Chinna still hangs heavy on him, and he refuses to return to Kummarapet "because the black ink floods his veins at the idea of meeting Chinna again." (193)

By the novel's end, Chinna strolls about the town as the grand old dog of Kummarapet and has become Devika's only company. He is longed for by his former owners, who had lost him in the highway incident, who are eventually able to locate him towards the close of the narrative, but Chinna doesn't seem to recognize the woman. The man who rescued, fed, and loved him unconditionally, Elango, abandons him without a word, never to return. Chinna gets used to Elango's absence, but his yearning and memory are still fresh. After his daily stroll is over and he sits on the veranda with Devika gently caressing him, his thoughts wander back to Elango. Even years of Elango's absence couldn't fade away his memories. Chinna's love and longing for Elango is evident when Roy pens down, "And then a deep, sweet nap during which he would dream of a bushy-haired man who had long ago picked him up in a forest, bathed him in a pond, held him close, and fed him morsels from his own mouth." (220)

Chinna is depicted as a symbol of abandonment, but this little dog can transgress religious and communal barriers, seemingly insurmountable to humans. Roy writes, "He was Chinna, the grand old dog of Kummarapet, who had lived and loved and populated the neighbourhood with versions of himself." (220). It is Chinna who binds together the separate and fragmented lives

of a brutally attacked city couple, a ceramist, two young girls and their ailing father, a Muslim girl and her blind calligrapher grandfather with a common thread of his love, acting as a ray of hope and sunshine in their dark and gloomy lives. In her article entitled "The little master of Kummarapet" (2021), Uma Mahadevan-Dasgupta puts it, "Chinna brings them all together with his fearless and unconditional love. And shows them a way to heal and reconcile, a way out of the painful darkness." The novel bears an eloquent testimony to the power of love in impacting lives- both human and non-human.

Works Cited:

- Dasgupta, Uma Mahadevan. "The little master of Kummarapet". The Hindu, September. 2021. <https://www.thehindu.com/books/the-little-master-of-kummarapet-uma-mahadevan-dasgupta-reviews-anuradha-roys-the-earthspinner/article36250708.ece>
- Jacob, Mira. "Forbidden Art and Star-Crossed Lovers in The Earthspinner". The New York Times, 2022. <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/07/05/books/review/the-earthspinner-anuradha-roy.html>
- Lawrence, Elizabeth. "The Earthspinner by Anuradha Roy". Asian Review of Books, August. 2022. <https://asianreviewofbooks.com/content/the-earthspinner-by-anuradha-roy/>
- Roy, Anuradha. The Earthspinner. Hachette India, 2021.
- Subrani, L. "Turning and turning in the widening gyre". Deccan Herald, September. 2021. <https://www.deccanherald.com/sunday-herald/sunday-herald-books/turning-and-turning-in-the-widening-gyre-1026493.html>
- <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/life-style/books/reviews/micro-review-the-earthspinner-by-anuradha-roy/articleshow/88728221.cms>