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HYPOSTASES OF THE ARTIST IN ANURADHA ROY'S *THE EARTHSPINNER*

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Abstract: *Tackling existential crevasses, Anuradha Roy's latest novel, The Earthspinner, invites to pondering and multifaceted analysis in what we see as a plea for building metaphorical bridges in a world where the coordinates were long ago decided, where narrowed/biased following of tradition and religion undermine the coherent discourse of an identity that strives to survive the intrusion of the other. The artist and the act of creation prove once again vulnerable to the other's inability to understand and accept.*
Key words*: artist, exile, memory, selfhood, trauma*

1. Introduction

Built around a series of narrative nodal points, *The Earthspinner* opens to identity-(de)constructive themes that know no barriers of time and space while the unreeled thread of memory has the potential to bring together the past and the present, the self and the other/world, granting perspectives that are meant to bridge existential crevasses. The article focuses on the condition of the artist as reflected in Anuradha Roy's latest novel, on the hypostases of the artist which the author weaves and the various representations of the act of creation seen as metaphors voicing the inner world. The act of creation becomes a representation of the self and the Artist is contoured as a restless Wanderer dreaming of a centre.

2. The artist and the act of creation − scarred journeys of identity

Vacillating from the reality within (the self) to the reality without (the other), *The Earthspinner* advances a multi-layered narrative that furthers contrasting perspectives: real versus fictional, past versus present, the East and the West, childhood versus adulthood, secular versus sacred, individual versus collective identity, ability versus inability to change/share/accept, remembering versus forgetting. The themes reiterated in the writer's latest novel address social, political, cultural concerns, fiction ultimately "responding" to Roy's present, thus (partially) revealing the real, as we read in her interview for PTI, *The Indian Express*: the condition of the artist and the threat of alterity, fanaticism, loss and longing, home and exile, identity.

In terms of structure, the chapters of the book combine first person narration with third person narration, diary entries with letters, the epistolary form being felt by A. Roy as bringing "a different sense of time" and a feeling of "unedited", "almost unrehearsed glimpse into the lives of people", as the author asserts in a dialogue with the editor and writer Archana Pai Kulkarni, at the digital 2021 *Women Writer's Fest*. The before-and-after-trauma narratives reveal identities as both constructed and deconstructed in a chronotopic frame which places them in 1970s India and in England years later: Sara's life before and after her father's death and Elango's exile; Elango's life before and after the clay horse and Zohra and Chinna; Chinna's life before and after being found by Elango. Just like in Roy's *All the Lives We Never Lived*, the narrative strategies bridge the chronotopic boundaries, transgressing "temporal and spatial coordinates, blurring the boundary between past […] and present, between here and there, inner world and the world outside the self, but also between the fictitious and the real" (Nicolae 2021:116).

Our analysis concentrates on the different hypostases of the artist and their place within the social context as mirrored in the converging stories of *The Earthspinner*, on the inner turmoil that is voiced or comforted or fuelled through the act of creation seen as an identity representation which may be validated or silenced in the interaction with the other. The role of the artist (hence, of the writer as a creator of worlds) and the hostility of the mob annihilating the act of creation is discussed by Roy in the interview conducted by Will Forester for *PEN Transmissions*, with a focus on the artist's resilience and will to create:

> Not only must the writer or artist mine the force of her imagination – her personal seam of ideas and images – and then do what it takes to turn them into books or pictures or films; the outer world intrudes and alters the shape of things, too. […] In *The Earthspinner*, the potter finds that he has to overcome not just his self-doubt and his lack of material supplies; his dream of making a clay horse runs full tilt into the hostility of his community. The threat of the mob is something every artist now faces, anywhere in the world, and all of this together is fascinating to me: how people continue to create despite everything, including their own senses of themselves.
> (https://pentransmissions.com/2021/11/30/the-threat-of-the-mob-an-interview-with-anuradha-roy/)

The artistic hypostases bring into the foreground another contemporary theme: individual and shared trauma and its blurred boundaries. We find it relevant to refer to Bond and Craps' point of view as asserted in their 2020 book, *Trauma*:

> Trauma, then, is slippery: blurring the boundaries between mind and body, memory and forgetting, speech and silence. It traverses the internal and the external, the private and the public, the individual and the collective. Trauma is dynamic: its parameters are endlessly shifting as it moves across disciplines and institutions, ages and cultures. Trauma is contested […]. (Bond and Craps 2020:5)

We take the risk of asserting that Anuradha Roy's writing locates wounds we can label as traumatic truths or significantly charged moments in the history of a country/culture/world, reworking them into literature as a coherent and potent mode of release, of freedom, and most importantly of action (giving the text the power of a reenactor, a tool, a mirror, a reminder). Traumas are thus externalized by means of being transmitted as narratives to the other/reader, displaying the "alternation between episodes of remembering and forgetting" to which Ruth Leys refers (qtd. in Bond and Craps 2020:5).

The characters in *The Earthspinner* experience traumatic events, which are recalled by Sara in the unfolding of the story; the narrative flashbacks bring to our mind Cathy Caruth's analysis of trauma in her book, *Unclaimed Experience. Trauma, Narrative, and History*, where it is asserted that "In modern trauma theory […], there is an emphatic tendency to focus on the destructive repetition of the trauma that governs a person's life", a repetition of the traumatic experience in the flashback which "can itself be retraumatizing" (Caruth 1996:63). However, the re-traumatizing flashbacks are played rather quietly in the novel as if the characters had resigned themselves to loss, and the reader might be left with the feeling that cathartic redemption is eschewed, though expected.

The character of Sara brings the past into the present, she relives the trauma at the level of memory, chronologically retracing one traumatic event (the smashing of the clay horse, triggering Elango's exile) and spasmodically the other (the father's death: "But by the time I got to middle school, the weight of my father's illness pressed down on us at all times and the sense of his fragility settled within me so deeply that he seemed almost the walking dead, kept alive by twenty colourful pills every day" [Roy 2021:109]). Elango sees his creation smashed and is forced into exile, his subsequent identity itinerary contoured as a struggle to add meaning to his burdened existence and to overcome the moment of trauma in the homeland and the trauma of uprooting.

The characters whom we see as representations of the creative mind, circumscribed facets of the Artist's identity, are Sara's father (the tales of the 'earthspinning', the inventions), the blind calligrapher (the written worlds), Sara the grown-up/child (pottery apprentice), Elango the potter

(the clay horse, pottery, tales). The title itself, *The Earthspinner*, is a metaphor for the Creator of all things big or small, who has spun the world out of some primeval clay. "'The Earthspinner' in the title of this book refers to the Creator god, who is represented as a potter, across religions. In the way that the Creator has created the earth, which is being destroyed by human action, Elango the potter's beautiful creation too is destroyed by human action.", states Anuradha Roy in an interview for *The Indian Express* (https://indianexpress.com/article/books-and-literature/my-book-is-about-death-of-aspiration-of-coexistence-in-india-anuradha-roy-7534989/). Thus, the sacred nature of the act of creation is revealed to the reader from the very beginning, together with the concept of change, of perpetual transformation the human existence, selfhood, the world itself are subject to: "[…] change was the work of the earth spinning, spinning as it always had" (Roy 2021:159).

As previously mentioned, the perspective of the Artist as the creative self is one which ponders on the interaction with a hostile Other; a dual approach to human action is therefore followed throughout the book, foregrounding it as either (identity) constructive or deconstructive. The motif of the spinning clay becomes central to the novel, echoing the potentiality of creation, change, novelty, but also vulnerability. The writer emerges as an artist as well, crafting the book out of an existential clay.

Our choice of the first facet of the Artist's identity is Sara's father – the childhood figure whom she associates with the safe space of home, but who also renders her vulnerable and suffering once the ghost of his illness and subsequent death crept into the family space. Fascinated with the universe, passionate about cricket, and always dreaming of following a Test match at the Wankhede and visiting Elephanta to see the Hindu temples, the father dives into the mysteries of planetary time engraved in geology and history (Roy 2021:23): "My father had three passions: geology, cricket and ancient history" (19), "His heart was a union of the two worlds and if he had made it to those caves, I was sure he would have pointed out stone gods positioned at slip s mid-off" (19). He is an *artist of words*, the worlds he weaves out of soothingly uttered words are his creation, in which objective coordinates of time and space are suspended and the beginning of Earth comes alive before the daughters' eyes:

> his voice seeped into us, and his oddly soothing discourses on plate tectonics, much of which we did not understand, collected in me and Tia and *shaped us* in the way limestone forms unnoticed in warm and calm seawater from sediments of shells and algae that remain in it as fossils. We would fall asleep to the sound of plates diverging, converging, sliding past each other, in the process causing new mountains to rise, oceans to churn, and continents to form or rupture. My father lived to only fifty-seven, but t*he time frames in his mind were made up of billions of years*. (23, emphasis added)

This artist that could craft the world back from its beginnings, transcends time by means of stories told about the past, his anchor is cast in what has been, in describing and explaining how the Earth has been *changing*; at the same time, the father is gradually crafting the inner worlds of his daughters (Sara and Tia) and of everyone who would listen to his stories about rocks, fossils, continents, and tectonic plates. The act of creation is present also in the potter's wheel the father and Elango create for Sara, while the fashioning of the wheel replaced another hobby of his – repairing somebody else's crafted invention:

> The usual weekend scene at our house was my father with some kind of machinery spread out around him. He repaired fans and plugs, he rigged up a home projector for us using a torch and a sheet of paper 103 with a pinhole. […] he would polish with linseed oil the wooden handle of a gun he had inherited from his father. […] Maybe the gun had long forgotten it was a weapon and not an object of adoration. It had been put aside, however, for a new passion: the fashioning of my wheel. (102-103)

The father figure understands time and understands interconnectedness. In the dialogue with Archana Pai Kulkarni to which we have previously referred, Anuradha Roy talks about a

sense of "deep time" in the father's mind, "he sees everything happening as something that is part of a larger thing, and so the change is a constant thing that we see in this evolution of the larger thing that is continuously going on" (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nCoM6nevm98). Her characters are aware of change being at the very heart of existence. Even the death of Sara's father is not deemed an end but a passing into another element which has an existential path of its own: "I think now, my father too has merely gone into another element, somewhere I will find him again in another form" (Roy 2021:24).

The blind calligrapher is a character which we see as portraying a different facet of the Artist's identity. Analysed from this perspective, the old man becomes a fundamental narrative strategy in the unfolding of the plot when he uses the art of calligraphy on Elango's clay horse (the verses written in Urdu on a Hindu horse: "The language of poets!", "The language of mullahs" [149]), a 'marriage' of two arts and cultures which results in a display of fanaticism, destruction, fresh pain, exile. The essence of his art are again the words − written, not spoken − elegant strokes made with his bamboo quills; change is employed again as he would use his beautiful writing not on paper, but on clay, not with ink and quills as he used to, but with carving tools; yet, stepping away from tradition in such rigid cultures or communities is a choice that triggers punishment. Reluctant at the beginning, the blind calligrapher grows more and more enthusiastic for he understands the nature of the artist also in terms of ability to cross boundaries for the sake of the enduring beauty of art.

> What tool could he use on clay in place of a quill? He used to cut his own quills when he did professional calligraphy for books, newspapers, sacred sayings, wedding cards. People called him from far and wide, his strokes flowed straight from Persia, they said. He did not wish to disgrace himself with crude lines on clay. […] He grinned into his white beard. "Old dog . . . new tricks . . . […]. (116-117)

However, the old man knows too well the gap between cultures and senses the boiling, inevitable conflict: "What will your people say when they see Urdu words on your Hindu horse? Have you thought of that? Isn't this a holy thing you're making for your temple? Your priests will not like it." (121). Which takes us again to Anuradha Roy's words: "people continue to create despite everything, including their own senses of themselves.", despite the awareness of dangers "when we function as artists in dangerously repressive societies." (https://pentransmissions.com/2021/11/30/the-threat-of-the-mob-an-interview-with-anuradha-roy/).

The third instance of artistic identity we refer to is that of Sara, the grown-up child reminiscing about her past in India while living her present in England as a student on a scholarship at a prestigious university. Sara reminds us of Roy's main character in *All the Lives We Never Lived*, Myshkin, in that they are both grown-ups cathartically remembering the past in a quest for answers which would provide a sense of coherence and closure, both with a childhood shattered by traumas, both outsiders, both living in biased cultures which deny or limit freedom of expression, both longing for a lost parent (Myshkin for his mother, Sara for her father) and for a past life which shielded them and made them feel loved and safe (see Nicolae 2021:118).

Sara is the narrator in the novel (the first person perspective). Her trauma narrative is central to the plot, fuelled by the events we have previously mentioned: the father's death, Elango's exile, uprooting. One of the mechanisms employed to cope with trauma now that she is in an alien country, emotionally and mentally revisiting the childhood landscape, is the craft of pottery she learnt from Elango the Hindu ceramist; it adds meaning to an uprooted existence, it provides continuity, coherence, equilibrium. The space of creation is the pottery studio, "a safe heaven" (Roy 2021:15), where she feels protected from the intrusive other, exempt from explaining herself/her Self ("For the hours I am at the wheel I don't have to deal with new people" [14]). The studio is also a space of memory where time and space are defied while being at the potter's wheel,

memories are brought back into the present, death is suspended ("In the studio I am back with my father and his rocks and minerals, and with Elango" [166]), and forgetfulness is annihilated.

> The wheel turns, I place a ball of clay on it, I cover the clay with both my hands, and if I close my eyes I have the planet spinning in my palms to the hum of a motor. (14)
> I come in though, even if briefly, for the touch and scent of damp, pliable earth which I need as other people need food and water. The feel of clay is the same everywhere and this cave with tools and kilns is *a piece of my childhood transported to a faraway place*. […] In my new, cold country, the scent of clay is *a way of travelling through improbable stretches of time and space* to his low, turquoise-blue house set back in a beaten-earth courtyard, the autorickshaw rides to school through which he made up long and fantastical stories about the buildings, rocks and river we passed. (24-25, emphasis added)

In the case of Sara, we see the artistic drive present in her childhood curiosity about the craft, translated into the practicality of her apprenticeship, having Elango as her teacher. Spinning the clay on the potter's wheel is a metaphor for change, as well as for vulnerability. Legends, mythology, tradition are included in the subtext of such a metaphor – the craft has been passed on from one generation to the other, it has reached her, Sara, and offered her roots to grow; the legend of the clay horse, sacred and protective at the same time, adds a feeling of safety which is echoed in the shard of Elango's broken clay horse which she always carries with her: "I thought of the horse. It protected whole villages from harm. I put my hand into the pocket of my jeans and wrapped it around the small piece of terracotta that I always had with me" (212). A talisman she believes in and relies on: a "shard I always kept in my pocket or the bag I was carrying, as a talisman. It held two strokes of the calligrapher's carvings" (180). Through the character of Sara Art proves cathartic once again, healing wounds, soothing the troubled soul.

Lastly, the most powerful image of the Artist in the novel is that of Elango and the dream that consumes him. The character is framed as a young educated Hindu potter who decides to follow tradition in preserving the craft of pottery. He is animated by his love for Zohra (a Muslim woman) and the burning horse appearing in his dreams. The act of creation follows two paths: words and clay. On the one hand, he is a storyteller for the children he takes to school in his autorickshaw, creating imaginary worlds (stories and teachings alike):

> It was a long journey and because Fauzia and I were very little when Elango started taking us to school he had begun the practice of diving into an inexhaustible treasure chest of stories for us to while away the time. […] Once long ago, his stories always began. […] Geography and history were transformed daily during our journeys with Elango. (65-66)

On the other hand, the clay is a story in itself, an encapsulated, invisible microcosm which takes infinite shapes, the very earth in which long-gone worlds collapsed/melted. His craft moulds a clay which tells stories to the ones who know how to listen, and the art of spinning clay carries with it the origins of world making. The horse breathing fire, roaming the ocean floor, came to him in a dream and he saw in it "both sign and envoy, telling him Zohra would be his" (39); it became his burning desire to transpose his "submarine horse" into one crafted out of clay, away from any prying eyes, sculpted and fired by the pond, in solitude.

This artistic work revives Hindu mythology and the tradition of clay horses made for an annual festival as a sacred sign of collective worship: "It was a divine horse, dedicated to the sons of Shiva, protector of the village. It shielded them from illness, bandits, evil" (81); "Elango's urns were monumental enough, and timeless, but the terracotta horse came from *a past more ancient, a place deep inside him where memories and stories lay waiting* like a rich seam of clay" (38, emphasis added). However, the novel moves the perspective from sacred to secular, from collective to individual for the clay horse Elango creates is not intended for collective worship, but thought of as a recipient of the potter's feelings, a gift for Zohra: "The horse was a deeply private thing, inextricable in his mind from Zohra." (113), "as powerful a symbol of their union as they

would ever have, he and Zohra" (142), "It struck him that he could make Zohra a horse like those, but also not like them. Not a cunning subterfuge nor a restless omen below water nor a sentinel. It would be their wedding horse, a steed for a man to seat his bride upon and sweep her away into a gold-and-red sunset" (46).

Paradoxically, the horse born out of love brings about exile, destruction, pain. The love between a Muslim and a Hindu is a forbidden one, the Hindu clay horse with Urdu verses on it (along with Elango's, Zohra's and Chinna's names) is forbidden art, too, and will become a blasphemous work which will eventually create wounds instead of healing the existing ones, will widen the cultural/religious/existential crevasses instead of bridging them.

> He wanted this sign to bring him the only message he yearned for, one that would tell him the unbridgeable crevasse between him and Zohra would one day close, the earth would heal itself, and he would be able to walk across to the other side where she was waiting for him. […] The space between the two was a charnel house of burnt and bloodied human flesh, a giant crack through the earth that was like an open mouth waiting to swallow him. (44)

Once revealed to the world, the potter's work of art enrages the mob who cannot understand its pure and sacred nature as both an act of creation and a proof of love. The artist's narrative becomes one of non-belonging, of homelessness. Fleeing his homeland, he embarks on a journey for a place where he would be accepted, reinventing himself from the roots that speak of the "ancient tradition of terracotta pottery he comes from", running in "his family and blood for generations" (192). The end of the novel portrays Elango as a famous artist travelling the world, teaching potters how "to make *his kind* of sculptures" (182, emphasis added), exhibiting his giant urns and animals carved by Zohra with the same Urdu words: "Ride your wild runaway mind/All the way to heaven" (191).

3. Conclusion - **"Fill in the gaps. Work with whatever earth you get"** (Roy 2021:192)

Anuradha Roy's *The Earthspinner* invites to different readings: it can be a story of love, or one about a potter, or about Sara, or even Chinna the dog. Or it can be about stigmatized identities, change, the self and the world. Or about art defying time. For the present article, we have opted for the centrality of perpetual transformation, of the act of creation and the different facets of the Artist's identity; the ending of the novel reinforces the impression of a continuous path to walk on, no resolve offered for the reader, but a narrative situated in that "open space where it has room to grow" as Anuradha Roy shares with her readers in the interview with Archana Pai Kulkarni. Room to grow into the kind of story/ending we imagine for Roy's *Earthspinner*.

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