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Clay against Caste: The Potter's Revolt and the Struggle for Recognition in Anuradha Roy's The Earthspinner

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Abstract

This paper aims to explore how the novel *The Earthspinner* stages an artistic and social rebellion against caste hierarchies through the life of Elango, a potter whose creative vision challenges entrenched structures of power. This paper situates Roy's narrative within the framework of Postcolonial Theory to analyse how caste, community, and cultural expression intersect in the protagonist's struggle. The study examines the potter's act of shaping clay as both a literal craft and a metaphorical defiance, representing the possibility of transformation and the remoulding of social identity. Through a close reading of the text, the paper argues that Elango's devotion to his art destabilises casteist prescriptions that relegate him to subservient roles. His clay creations become a mode of resistance and self-assertion, exposing the hypocrisies of a society that marginalises its artisans while consuming their labour. The rebellion of the potter is not only personal but also collective, symbolising the demand for recognition, dignity, and justice within a rigidly stratified order. By foregrounding the politics of art, Roy critiques caste oppression and illuminates the resilience of subaltern voices. The paper concludes that clay, as a medium, embodies fluidity and transformation, offering a counterpoint to the fixity of caste. Roy's narrative ultimately presents art as a radical space of resistance where silenced communities reclaim visibility and recognition.

Keywords: Anuradha Roy, *The Earthspinner*, caste hierarchy, potter's rebellion, art as resistance, Postcolonial Theory, dignity, subaltern voices.

Introduction

Anuradha Roy, one of the most acclaimed contemporary Indian English novelists, is known for weaving together intimate human stories with larger questions of history, politics, and culture. Her works, including *An Atlas of Impossible Longing* (2008), *The Folded Earth* (2011), *Sleeping on Jupiter* (2015), and *All the Lives We Never Lived* (2018), have received international recognition for their lyrical prose and nuanced engagement with issues of memory, displacement, and social injustice. *The Earthspinner* (2021), her fifth novel, extends this trajectory by turning to the life of Elango, a potter,

whose creative pursuit collides with the rigid boundaries of caste and tradition. Set against the backdrop of a South Indian town, the novel explores themes of art, forbidden love, and resistance, blending realism with allegory. Critics have praised the novel for its evocative portrayal of clay as both a material and a metaphor, while also noting its sharp critique of caste oppression and cultural orthodoxy. Through this work, Roy not only foregrounds the struggles of marginalised artisans but also reimagines art as a medium of resilience and rebellion.

Research Problem: Articulating Caste Resistance through the Potter

Anuradha Roy's *The Earthspinner* situates the figure of Elango, the potter, at the intersection of creativity and social marginalisation. In a society where caste dictates occupation and social status, Elango's devotion to his craft becomes both a mode of survival and a site of resistance. The novel raises a critical problem: how can an artist belonging to a marginalised caste assert individuality and dignity through an art form traditionally devalued by dominant social structures? This research explores how Roy uses the potter's life and artistry to expose the deep entanglement of caste with cultural production and to question the very hierarchies that deny recognition to subaltern creativity.

Research Questions: Resistance, Creativity, and Caste

This study is guided by three interrelated questions: How does the potter's craft become a form of rebellion against social marginalization? What role does caste play in both silencing and shaping creative expression in the novel? How does Roy, through her narrative strategies, challenge hegemonic narratives of caste oppression and cultural hierarchy? These questions frame the inquiry into the symbolic and political dimensions of clay as a medium,

the societal constraints imposed upon artisans, and the possibilities of art as a radical space for subaltern assertion.

Thesis Statement: Clay as a Metaphor of Resistance

This paper argues that in *The Earthspinner*, Roy transforms clay into a metaphor of resistance and resilience, using the figure of the potter to critique caste hierarchies and reimagine art as a space of liberation. Elango's struggle demonstrates how creativity, though constrained by caste, can also serve as a radical act of defiance, challenging the fixity of social stratification. By foregrounding the politics of craft, Roy not only interrogates the exclusions of caste but also positions art as a transformative force capable of remoulding identity and asserting dignity for marginalised communities. This study draws on Axel Honneth's idea of recognition as central to human dignity and Charles Taylor's emphasis on identity's dependence on acknowledgement by others. Both frameworks illuminate how Elango's struggle in the novel reflects a quest for cultural validation against caste-based misrecognition.

Literature Review

Works by Anuradha Roy have largely focused on her lyrical prose, exploration of memory, and engagement with themes of displacement and social change. Studies of novels such as *Sleeping on Jupiter* and *All the Lives We Never Lived* highlight her sensitivity to trauma, gender, and historical upheavals. Critics have praised her nuanced ability to blend personal stories with broader cultural critique, but much of this scholarship tends to foreground questions of identity, history, and aesthetics rather than caste. *The Earthspinner*, though acknowledged for its symbolic use of clay and exploration of forbidden love, has not yet received sustained critical attention in terms of its interrogation of caste hierarchies and the politics of craft.

Parallel to this, research on caste in con-

temporary Indian fiction has emphasised how writers use narrative to expose entrenched inequalities and articulate subaltern resistance. Dalit literature, in particular, has foregrounded caste oppression while also reclaiming voice and dignity through cultural expression. Scholars have also examined how art, craft, and storytelling function as sites of resistance, allowing marginalised groups to reshape narratives imposed upon them. However, while studies of caste resistance and cultural production are well established, little attention has been given to how Roy specifically situates the potter's craft within a framework of rebellion. This gap indicates the need for an analysis of *The Earthspinner* that foregrounds caste resistance through the metaphor of clay, positioning the novel within broader debates on recognition, dignity, and subaltern assertion.

Clay as Symbol of Creation and Resistance

Clay in the novel functions not only as raw material for craft but as a metaphor for transformation, creation, and resilience. Elango's shaping of clay on the potter's wheel becomes symbolic of the possibility of remoulding identity and resisting social fixity. Homi Bhabha notes that "culture only emerges as a problem... at the point at which there is a loss of meaning in the contestation of authority" (Bhabha 34). By turning his inherited caste occupation into an act of artistry, Elango contests authority and generates new cultural meaning through creation itself.

The potter's wheel, traditionally associated with hereditary caste-bound labour, becomes in Roy's narrative a site of rebellion where agency is reclaimed. The circular, regenerative motion of the wheel mirrors the cycles of resistance, constantly challenging oppression with new forms of creativity. As Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak observes, "the subaltern must always be spoken for, even when she resists" (Spivak 285). Elango's wheel becomes his voice, a

silent yet eloquent form of resistance that transforms an imposed occupation into a chosen expression of artistry. Clay embodies fluidity and possibility in contrast to the rigid hierarchies of caste. The act of moulding clay signifies a struggle to shape not only art but also selfhood against social constraints. Axel Honneth reminds us that "recognition is not merely a courtesy we owe people: it is a vital human need" (Honneth 131). Elango's devotion to clay thus represents both a search for recognition and an assertion of dignity, where creation itself becomes an act of defiance against structures that deny him oppression. "He came from a line of potters, earth-caked, sweat-stained until his father forsook the unforgiving family trade for education and a clerical job" (Roy 26).

The Potter's Revolt: Struggle for Dignity

Elango's artistic journey in *The Earthspinner* dramatises a revolt against caste-imposed boundaries that seek to reduce his labour to mere servitude. His attempt to create beauty out of clay embodies a refusal to remain confined within the limits prescribed by his birth. Axel Honneth emphasises that "only those who receive recognition from others can be said to possess the integrity of being a person" (Honneth 174). Elango's struggle for recognition is not just personal but symbolic of subaltern groups historically denied dignity. His clay work, therefore, becomes a site where artistic vision confronts social stigma, a tension that reflects broader caste struggles in Indian society.

Recognition and the Potter Voice

The difficulty of having the potter's artistic voice acknowledged recalls Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's provocative question: "Can the subaltern speak?" (Spivak 271). In Roy's narrative, Elango "speaks" through his craft, yet the societal refusal to accept his art as legitimate echoes the si-

lencing mechanisms of caste oppression. Homi Bhabha's notion that resistance is a "process of reinscription, the act of survival itself" (Bhabha 122) is crucial here, as Elango's art resists erasure by reconfiguring his caste-linked occupation into a form of aesthetic and cultural assertion. The subaltern voice, though constrained, emerges through clay as both testimony and protest.

A horse was in flames. It roamed beneath the ocean, breathing fire, and when it shook its mane the flames coloured the waves red, and when it erupted from the water it was as tall as a tree and the fire made the crackling sound of paper. It towered above the low-roofed house Elango lived in. The flames were at the hooves, the long solid cannons, and as they reached the muzzle, he worried that the horse would burst from the heat. Had he remembered to leave an outlet? Anxiety forced its way through his troubled sleep, and all at once, his eyes were open (Roy 35-36).

Intersection of Art, Spirituality, and Social Change

Roy also situates clay within a spiritual and ethical dimension, transforming the potter's work into a metaphor for social reconstruction. Elango's creations embody a vision of community and justice that transcends rigid hierarchies. Charles Taylor argues that "our identity is shaped in part by recognition or its absence, often by the misrecognition of others" (Taylor 25). Elango's artistic spirituality attempts to correct this misrecognition, asserting a dignity denied by caste society. By linking art with transcendence, Roy presents creative expression as a critique of oppression and as a vehicle for imagining a more egalitarian social order.

Anuradha Roy's *The Earthspinner* redefines the act of pottery from a caste-bound occupation into a site of resistance and creative self-assertion. Through the figure of

Elango, Roy demonstrates how clay, traditionally associated with servitude, becomes a metaphor for dignity, transformation, and rebellion. His artistic struggle reflects not only personal defiance but also the collective desire of marginalised communities to transcend social hierarchies. The novel thus transforms art into a language of resistance that questions inherited structures of oppression.

The broader implications of *The Earthspinner* lie in its capacity to reshape cultural memory, identity, and recognition in contemporary India. Elango's rebellion exemplifies how marginalised voices use art to assert their presence in collective memory, resisting erasure and misrecognition. As Axel Honneth and Charles Taylor argue, recognition is essential to human identity, and Roy's narrative dramatises this truth in the Indian caste context. The intersection of art, spirituality, and resistance, *The Earthspinner* not only critiques social injustice but also envisions a cultural future where creativity can catalyse equality and recognition.

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