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Born Without a Caste: Walls, Gates, and Borders of Belonging in *An Atlas of Impossible Longing*

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Abstract

In *An Atlas of Impossible Longing*, Anuradha Roy investigates the subject of caste as a system of exclusion and its influence on identity, space and belonging. This paper will explore the ambiguity of Mukunda's caste identity by drawing on some of the writings of B.R. Ambedkar, Sukhadeo Thorat, Anand Teltumbde and others. It examines how Mukunda has not been privileged despite his education with the help of Pierre Bourdieu's social capital theory. His statelessness is emphasized by Hannah Arendt's statelessness concept and his exclusion in the feast is brought about by KanchaIlaiah Shepherd's critique on the food rituals of the caste. The research highlights the continued importance of caste differences to access and identity in literature and modern society.

keywords: Dalit literature, caste exclusion, social capital, statelessness, identity and belonging.

I. Introduction

In *An Atlas of Impossible Longing* (2008), Anuradha Roy examines the profound nature of caste, identity, exclusion and displacement in both colonial and post-colonial India. The story is centered on Mukunda, who is an orphan raised by a Brahmin family and thus exists in a liminal space. Although he has grown up in an upper-caste family, caste itself stands in his way, and he continues to be an outcast. The novel offers not just a description of caste but of an entrenched system of power that manifests itself through geographical segregation, restricting where people live, learn, can work and even get married. Mukunda's story highlights the visible and invisible nature of caste, and how it reinforces his marginalisation and ultimately leads to displacement and statelessness.

Caste is symbolically represented in the novel by walls, gates and thresholds of exclusion and belonging throughout. Despite his intelligence and ambition, Mukunda is gradually denied a series of privileges that make up social and economic mobility. Because he lacks a caste identity, he has no right to inherit, to be educated or even loved, and this reinforces his position in the society as determined by his caste (Guru & Sarukkai, 2012). The novel emphasizes this inequality in terms of Mukunda's access to education:

His school was a shed, he said, and his classroom a blackboard that was shared by boys from 4 to 15 years old. The only teacher that caned them was the one who was in the mood for it, and then went to the shop around the corner for a cup of tea.

This is a reminder of the difference between Mukunda's and Bakul's education; and how social stratification creates difference in access to knowledge. Bakul, a member of a privileged caste, is able to receive formal education, tutoring, while Mukunda must fend for himself. His reluctance to go for extra support further shows the caste nature of his internalisation of exclusion; he is aware that to demand equality in access to education would challenge the rigid caste order. This is consistent with B. R. Ambedkar's (1936) idea of 'graded inequality' in *Annihilation of Caste* which posits that the lower castes are intentionally deprived of opportunities of advancement. The fact that Mukunda has not

managed to get the proper education, even though he is living in an upper-caste family is an example of how the caste system works.

The education is not the only aspect by which Mukunda's indeterminate caste status corresponds to Hannah Arendt's (1951) notion of statelessness. According to Arendt, stateless people are physically located in a country but lack fundamental rights and are not allowed to belong to a country. A similar situation prevails with Mukunda – his lack of a defined caste makes him socially "stateless" with no stable home in any community. He is first thrown out of his Brahmin family, then placed in an orphanage, and finally pushed around in nooks and corners that never completely embrace him. He was excluded as a testament to the nature of caste as a social citizenship: those who do not have a clearly defined caste are effectively deprived of rights, recognition and belonging.

Another important mode of caste oppression is economic exclusion. Sukhdeo Thorat (2009) states that caste is still playing an important role in determining land access, wealth, and economic opportunity and that Dalits and other marginalized communities are still being denied opportunities to build up their capital. This is clear in the story of Mukunda, as he was denied his due inheritance, living in a family that otherwise could have looked after him. The Brahmin caste family in which he was born and brought up renders him economically dependent and marginalised, as was common in history. Despite its success later in life, Mukunda's early experiences show how caste creates economic barriers that are hard to overcome.

KanchaIlaiah Shepherd (1996) also mentions the importance of food and ritual, in sustaining caste segregation. The "feast in the open" scene is an excellent illustration of this in "An Atlas of Impossible Longing", where the social divisions are stated in the rituals of food. Sharing or refusing food is a metaphor for the caste hierarchy, and who is considered worthy of inclusion. The scene also shows the objectification of the tribal women, because some upper caste men treat them as mere sex objects, which not only causes caste oppression but also gender oppression.

While caste and gender are distinct categories, they are so intertwined with the experience that social exclusion of women from lower caste is not only on the basis of their caste, but also on the basis of patriarchy (Sharmila Rege 2006). This can be seen in the novel in the character of the unidentified tribal girl, like Mukunda, who lives outside of the dominant caste system. Her absence from the feast symbolizes the interplay between caste and gender determining social value. The marginalisation of the tribal girl is indicative of the general problem of discrimination against Dalit and Adivasi women which have been both economically deprived and sexually exploited throughout history.

The novel thus depicts caste exclusion as a multi-layered phenomenon, where it takes place through social, economic and spatial processes. Mukunda's tale is the story of those who do not neatly fit into caste boxes and how the caste system puts insurmountable barriers in the path of those who are considered outsiders. He has no caste, so he is socially unrecognized, economically disadvantaged and emotionally isolated.

The authors believe that Mukunda's ambiguous caste, which creates the sense of his being an outsider, is also an exclusion by both literal and symbolic means, signaling caste oppression in India. In "An Atlas of Impossible Longing," Thorat investigates the systemic, spatial and psychological aspects of caste discrimination, based on Ambedkar's understanding of caste as a rigid social structure, Rege's intersectional analysis of caste and gender, and Arendt's theory of statelessness, when he reflects in Mukunda's journey. But the novel ultimately undermines the idea that caste is simply a social category and shows how caste is a dynamic force of exclusion which affects every facet of life.

II. Social Exclusion as a Wall: The Caste System in the context of Mukunda.

In his “Annihilation of Caste” (1936), B.R. Ambedkar critically analyzes caste as a “graded inequality”, which implies that not only that people are graded in a rigid hierarchy but also that they are structurally prevented from rising out of their assigned caste level. While caste was inherited and immutable, allowing for some economic mobility as compared to class, and race was rooted in visible physical characteristics, caste's position at the bottom of the hierarchy was permanent and ensured the marginalization of those at the bottom of society (Ambedkar, 1936). Ambedkar also claims that caste is not just a social classification but a system which imposes caste-based exclusion through spatial, economic and social barriers to access, restricting where people can live, learn and interact in society. His criticism of caste as an impenetrable structure has found a home in “An Atlas of Impossible Longing” where Mukunda's uncertain caste status makes him an outsider, an outsider who has been raised in a Brahmin household yet who cannot achieve fullness of belongingness.

The ambiguous caste origin of Mukunda is a perpetual stigma, suggesting that caste is a fixed hierarchy and that it is stronger than a person's merit, upbringing, or character. Although he is from a family of high caste, he is always considered an interloper, as if he is different. He was separated from his family by being given second-hand clothes, served on a side plate, and offered a room outside the main house, but all of these subtleties indicate his distance. The novel tells of his place in the house:

Now, Amulya's baby, who was left in the missionary orphanage, was thirteen years old, Mukunda. However, Amulya was dead and there was no memory of who Mukunda's father was. He was a "scuzzy" figure in the family.

He was given food on a separate plate, he was placed in their house, but in a room out in the courtyard, he was given clothes but hand-me-downs, he was given homework, but household chores as well. He was a thin, excitable awkward fellow. Sometimes he felt all edges, each edge sore.

He knew that he was from close by, and he may have been a Santhal boy. Of course, he had high cheekbones and tea-dark skin and he thought about all the Indians he had seen, but he could not know. Would one day someone from the woods come up to him and take him for their own? ((Roy, 2008, p95)”

This passage focuses on the ways in which everyday practices help to reinforce boundaries between casted and uncasted individuals. His plate is marked off from the rest of the house, his is a separate dwelling place, and his confusion over his parents' identity is only indicative of how caste is enforced and how it becomes internalized. The connection made by Mukunda between his features and the Santhal community's features is a sign of his sensitivity to caste identity, which is not merely social but racially charged and which is manifested as physical and spatial difference. In his Brahmin household, he is not secure and as soon as he becomes an inconvenience, he is sent away—taken to an orphanage, just as Dalits and the other marginalised communities are sent away from privileges, to the margins, historically and systemically (Thorat, 2009).

Mukunda's omission isn't alone, but typical of the situation of caste discrimination in India in general. However, the situation of Dalit orphans in upper-caste homes has not been free from rejection, instead caste anxieties often emerge when these children grow up and demand space in the family or broader community (Rawat, 2011). This dynamic plays out in the novel when the family is considering whether Mukunda should stay in the family: “The argument

over whether or not to keep Mukunda had continued for two or three days. Nirmal had refused to give in. The boy was too good for the orphanage; they taught them very little, fed them even less and beat them if they disobeyed. After all, our father wanted him looked after. He must be given a place, a life. (169)”

Nirmal advocates for Mukunda's access to a better life, but in his speech there is an underlying assumption that caste is an organizing principle and one that dictates access to care and who does not have access. The family's reluctance is rooted in the fear and insecurity that comes with being born in a strange caste. The family's reluctance is a result of the fear and insecurity one has regarding being born in an unfamiliar caste.

Mukunda's displacement is also a symptom of the “tyranny of caste”, as Ambedkar (1936) calls it, which determines social inclusion or exclusion solely on the basis of birth. Historically, Dalits have been restricted to segregated areas and have been denied access to the residences, temples and institutions of upper-caste classes as noted by scholars (Deshpande, 2013). Mukunda's eviction from his home is a representation of the actual situation of Dalits, who are forced to move out after facing discrimination in the name of caste, and it calls into mind the notion that caste is an invisible wall that can never be overcome.

In “An Atlas of Impossible Longing”, Mukunda's story highlights the way in which caste is an institution of exclusion that shapes not only social relations but also space. He is never a part of any community fully, his ambiguous status as a 'Chinglishman' leaves him always an outsider, and despite his intelligence and capabilities, he remains marked as an outsider. Roy's character challenges the institutionalization of caste injustice, revealing how systems of structural barriers are entrenched in seemingly insignificant but significant ways of social and spatial segregation.

III. Gates of Privilege: Mukunda's Denied Access to Social and Economic Capital

Social capital theory, developed by Pierre Bourdieu (1986), emphasizes that privilege and power is not just a result of economic resources but also the influence of social networks, recognized legitimacy, and cultural capital. This is especially true of the issue of caste-based exclusion where social acceptance and belonging are as vital as economic progress. However, despite having gained education or economic capital, marginalized people are still not accepted in the higher echelons of society because they lack the social capital of the upper classes. An Atlas of Impossible Longing is a portrait of Mukunda, who is intellectually brilliant and well-educated but a man of mixed caste who can never be truly a part of the upper-caste world. He has no known caste lineage, which is one way caste acts as an invisible, but nevertheless powerful, gatekeeping mechanism.

The fact that Mukunda is unable to inherit shows the economic consequences of caste-based marginalization, as Sukhadeo Thorat puts it, arbitrary exclusion of Dalits and those who are not tied to a caste from property ownership, stable jobs and economic security (Thorat, 2009). Mukunda is born in a rich Brahmin family, but is not born into the family and does not inherit their wealth or rank. He is in the family only on the condition that he keep his distance from the caste's wealth, and that he cannot be said to have the caste's legitimacy. His sense of exclusion is clearly reflected in his statement:

You are not my god, you haven't done anything for me,” Mukunda was saying. But yet, I am going to be better than all of them, one day, I will not need them. One day it will be me who shelters them. (96)

At this instance, the defiant Mukunda and his ambition to success on his own terms are brought into focus, as are the systemic nature of caste barriers. In his desire to get to the top,

he does not have enough caste legitimacy. His eventual displacement from the Brahmin household is not only a reality in the world but also represents real-life examples of how caste-based economic inequalities persist even when Dalits become economically successful, as they are often denied access to inherited wealth and the right to property (Thorat & Newman, 2010).

Furthermore, Mukunda's experience shows that "education" does not secure social acceptance. In the current day, the education system is generally seen as a mechanism for social mobility, but Thorat (2010) suggests that caste discrimination in the school and elsewhere continues to hinder the progress of Dalits. Mukunda's education gives him knowledge and skills but it does not give him caste recognition and it is not complete. This conflict is reflected in the family's discussion about his presence:

What in our bedrooms again?" Manjula was in a rage. Is there any information available about the caste he belongs to? He can be from any caste, even a Muslim, I can't take it. Hari, Hari!"

Nirmal had said that he was not sending him back. "He is welcome to stay in my room."

"Your room! Now that's in the middle of the house. I am not going to allow it in the middle of the house. I will not."

There was a compromise. The boy would stay there but in the outhouse. Would he be scared? He had been asked by Nirmal and had given a dazzling smile. "Me scared? I don't fear anything!" (Roy, 2008, p169)

The passage shows how caste determines not just the material wealth but also the physical space. The thought of Mukunda remaining in the inner sanctum sanctorum of the house brings an anxiety into Manjula's mind, the fear of contamination, and the presence of someone in a space where purity is of the utmost concern. The compromise is his relegation, like in the past, to an outhouse, where the marginalized are denied access to central parts of homes, temples, and institutions. He is not only ideologically excluded, but also spatially.

Mukunda's struggle, therefore, serves as an illustration of how caste is used as an effective tool of gatekeeping, denying access to economic and social benefit to talented and ambitious people. The experiences align with Thorat's premise that caste is not just a symbolic hierarchy but an economic structure that aims to perpetuate systemic inequality and exclusion (Shah et al., 2006). Though a clever kid and formidable fighter, Mukunda is caught out of the privileged circle, just in the same way as many historically oppressed communities in India are. His journey highlights the ongoing fact that in a society that views legitimacy as inherited and not earned, individual merit is not enough to gain access to spaces of power and prosperity: spaces where he is allowed to enter.

IV. When Mukunda is a Stateless Figure: Borders of Belonging

Hannah Arendt's theory of statelessness proclaims that without an identity the people have no "right to have rights" (Arendt, 1951). Stateless people can live in a country but not be able to access every aspect of its social, legal and political systems. In Mukunda's 'Atlas of Impossible Longing', he is forced into various spaces, within the Brahmin household, the orphanage and finally the city, and yet is never truly at home in any of them. As a result of his ambiguous membership of a caste he is socially invisible and Arendt argued that belonging is essential for rights and recognition. When not even religious places recognize him, it is clear that he is excluded:

The boy who swabbed the floor just now lives here as well. He has exams coming so he needs Saraswathi's blessings! She smiled and looked out towards Mukunda's silhouette on the terrace.

“Caste?”

“I’m not sure.”

“Not sure?”

“He’s just a child! Does it matter? He is an orphan we ...”

“Someone you shelter?” The priest shut his book and went for his bag. So why allow him to be in the puja room? Charity is all very well, but can it change his caste?” ((Roy, 2008, p94)

This moment is a snapshot of Mukunda's situation: tolerated but never fully legitimized. By stressing the need for an individual to belong to a particular caste in order to participate in religious practices, the priest illustrates the importance of caste in determining the social recognition of an individual. In doing so, AnandTeltumbde builds on Arendt's argument, arguing that the caste system is an exclusionary mechanism which robs lower castes of their full citizenship and national belonging (Teltumbde, 2018). As Mukunda is not a part of the household, but uncertain of his status, his non-inclusion in the household's walls is a reminder of the systemic exclusion of caste-less people.

His exclusion is accentuated when the anxieties of caste are expressed through direct antagonism:

“Oho, what do we have here? “A true fiery chilli! Yeah look at the mouth of the priest, he's getting annoyed, now he says, 'if you don't keep these people in their place, soon they'll be in yours! But that depends on you, just give him a distance from me as well as this puja room.” He quietly hissed, “He almost touched me once before.” (p94, Roy, 2008)

This response of the priest exemplifies the use of physical and symbolic boundaries to cement caste. The mere presence of a Mukunda near an upper caste person is considered a violation, and this is to be expected in a society where caste is not only societal but a given condition as well. The outsider status is not only a perception but is also manifested in tangible social rejections that make a point of not letting Dalits or other marginalized sections into the full range of social integration.

Mukunda's ban is not limited to religious and domestic contexts; it also reaches into the realm of marriage, which is an important institution for the maintenance of castes. The maintenance of caste lines and the reproduction of caste as Uma Chakravarti suggests, are the primary mechanisms of the caste in Indian society as marriage (Chakravarti, 2003). The ambiguity of Mukunda's caste identity means he is not able to marry into a 'respectable' caste, an invisible yet ironclad obstacle to social and familial inclusion that defines caste:

“Proves what I'm saying,” Barabasu said, boasting. It is time for you to become a householder now, to have a wife, children. Are you going to wait till you have dentures?”

“Children,” I said. I don't even have a bride in mind. And I don't have any parents to find a bride for me.

“I admit it will be difficult getting a bride for you – you have a good upbringing, and yet nobody knows your caste,” Barababu said. (Roy, 2008, p206)

Mukunda fails to get a socially acceptable marriage, highlighting the need for caste to be a precondition of being included in familial and social structures. His love for Bakul, which is not allowed by social norms, is also directing him to be an outlier, as he is unable to be a part of caste society.

Mukunda's experience is reflective of the overall situation of Dalits, who are stateless in their own country. Though the constitution provides protection, caste oppression is still present in landlessness, households exclusion, economic exclusion etc. (Deshpande, 2013). This systemic marginalisation is reflected in his displacement from Nirmal's household; that is, he

can be present as long as it is convenient. When he is perceived as a threat to social order, he is thrown away:

“In bringing Mukunda to the house, he had been whimsical, Nirmal thought. Now it was he who was to be a hunter, and would turn him out with the same arbitrariness. Of course he'd disguise it. For the excuse of sending him to a good school in Calcutta. He would take care of his needs and comforts. He would tell Mukunda it was for his future, to enlarge his world, provide him with new opportunities.

However, Nirmal was not able to lie to himself. When it was convenient he had taken the kid in, and when Bakul was growing up, that was no longer convenient.” (Roy, 2008, p170)

Mukunda's banishment from the family family is indicative of the marginalized groups being accepted conditionally but being banished when they threaten the social hierarchy. The quest for belonging turns into a quest for recognition in a society that will not recognize him as equal. This is in line with Arendt's idea that Social and political inclusion is essential for true freedom and dignity. If there is no recognition, Mukunda is not just stateless, he is also in a sense stateless, of social, deeply existential nature, stateless in that he has never had a right to belong.

V. The Gaze of Power: Upper-Caste Men and the Dehumanization of Tribal Women

The food rituals consolidate the caste oppression, not only in terms of what is eaten, but also in terms of who can eat with others and when (Shepherd 1996). The feast scene in *An Atlas of Impossible Longing* is a place of exclusion based on caste, such that Adivasi and lower caste people are allowed to be there but only in a non-human and subordinate role. The dominant caste men enjoy privileges, while caste women are sexualized and treated like an object of desire and fun. Caste women are further marginalized by caste and gender through the enjoyment of privileges of dominant caste men.

In the context of Dalit women and sexual exploitation, the case of Sharmila Rege's scholarship on caste and gender reveals that Dalit and Adivasi women face a double oppression as they are not only oppressed by caste but are also sexually exploited by upper caste men (2006). In the feast scene the upper caste men make crude and objectifying comments about the tribal women, dehumanising them as sex objects and not as humans with dignity and power. This gaze and language contributes to the historical aspect of sexual violence amongst caste – the dominant caste men make themselves superior by harassing, coaxing and exploiting the marginalised women (Teltumbde, 2018).

“The brown-suited, toadlike figure sitting on a stool next to him nudged him in the ribs. ‘Something about these tribal girls, eh, Amulya Babu? Allows long married men to fall into unholy thoughts! Do you know, they'll sleep with any amount of men they want to sleep with! He poured his cup of toddy into his mouth and licked his lips, "Strong stuff!". I should put it up in my store! (Roy, 2008, p14)

The scene speaks to deep-seated caste and gender ideologies which continue in the post-novella world. The history and the current report highlights the sexual violence inflicted upon Dalit and Adivasi women by the dominant castes. The economic exclusion of caste is far from being the only sphere of caste-based discrimination, and caste-based discrimination operates through other mechanisms, such as bodily and social control of Dalit and tribal women and their ability to represent and protect themselves, as argued by Thorat and Lee (2005). In this scene, the upper-caste men further solidify this hierarchy by de-personalizing tribal women and reducing them to a source of amusement and entertainment to themselves, and to others.

As the feast is increasingly turning into a platform for unabated caste and gendered violence, the degradation of tribal women persists:

But why the two holes of a woman smell different even if they are geographically close, 'Amulya sat again, annoyed and reluctant, could barely bring himself to make a strained smile at the laughs that were yodelled by one of Cowasjee's friends: 'Just like the difference between Darjeeling tea and Assam! Both the hills of eastern India, and yet their aromas worlds apart! The third replied, 'You bugger! More like the difference between stink of a sewage nullah and a water drain! They nudged and pointed to the girls dancing by the fire. 'She's for you, how about taking her home and confirming the Assam–Darjeeling hypothesis? (Roy, 2008, p17)

This moment is a specific example of the ways in which caste can be thought of as an economic or religious system, but also as a system of body control. The men's degrading talk turns into a joke and is meant to make it seem like tribal women are for the men to eat – both physically and metaphorically. The rhetoric is not just individual misogyny, but a performative expression of caste power – the right to lower-caste women's bodies – with no costs.

This scene shows the close relationship that caste has with gender-based oppression, while discussions on caste usually revolve around either economic or ritual exclusion. Rege (2006) and Chakravarti (2003) contend that upper-caste masculinity has always been characterised by the capacity to control and violate the lower caste women without any fear of consequences. The feast is not only about ritual consumption, it is also an awful display of power wherein upper-caste men eat not only food, but also the dignity of the lower-caste women. In this way, *An Atlas of Impossible Longing* challenges the institutions of caste culture that have long permitted upper-caste men to freely impregnate Dalit and Adivasi women, thus perpetuating caste and gender-based violence.

VI. Conclusion

An Atlas of Impossible Longing uses walls, gates and borders as a metaphor of a system of exclusion and belonging called caste. Mukunda's life is without caste identity, leaving him stateless in his society. His experiences provide examples of the way in which caste acts as a physical and social barrier that divides and separates people, and excludes them from the mainstream.

The novel also attends to the spatial aspects of caste, as Mukunda is not only homeless, but socially and culturally homeless. He is constantly disenfranchised and unaccepted, regardless of any environment he moves from, highlighting the fact that caste-based exclusion continues beyond economic and legal systems. His story is a reflection of the reality of the other caste victims, who even after the law passes on them, are subjected to segregation in the field of education, employment, and housing (Deshpande, 2013; Thorat, 2010).

Is there any form of caste-based exclusion in contemporary times? Although caste discrimination has come down in some places, caste barriers in higher education institutions and in the economy, together with segregation in urban areas, continue to sustain the caste divide (Jodhka & Shah, 2010). The themes of the novel are still current, in that the caste system is evolving to modernity and new means are being found to uphold old inequalities.

In the end, Mukunda's tale shows that the meaning of belonging is not just geographic, but social, recognized and accepted, with a claim to rights. As he journeys, he makes us look at the "suspicious" people in today's Indian society who are not allowed to enter and who stay outside.

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