

Roots and Routes: Deciphering the Nexus of Cultural-Collective (Memory) and Biophilia Hypothesis in Anuradha Roy's *The Earthspinner*

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Abstract— Anuradha Roy, the wordsmiths of *The Earthspinner*, with the flourish of a maestro, conducts us through a poignant exploration of the tenacious human spirit, navigating the treacherous shoals of societal strictures and the relentless tide of environmental metamorphosis. The paramount objective is to explore how Roy intertwines the past memories of Moti Block with present-day reflections, peering through the multifaceted prism of societal, cultural, and natural dynamics embodied by the characters such as Elango, Sara, Chinna, and Usman Alam, harnessing Astrid Erll's conceptual elucidation of 'cultural memory', Halbwachs' 'collective memory,' and Edward O. Wilson's seminal 'biophilia hypothesis.' Elango, a potter, is a vessel for transmitting 'cultural memory' through his craft. It further examines the concept of 'collective memory' through the contrasting viewpoints of Elango and the calligrapher, Usman Alam, highlighting the dynamic and evolving nature of shared memories. Finally, it examines the interplay between 'cultural memory' and 'biophilia' through Sara's mnemonic journey to Kummaraipet, highlighting how cultural practices and the natural world meticulously intertwine. In a world where tradition erodes and nature becomes distant, this chapter delves into the significance of 'cultural memory,' collective identity, and our innate 'biophilia,' offering a crucial lens for contemporary academic discourse, serving as a stark reminder of the symbiotic bond that sustains not only our collective cultural heritage but also the very essence of our love for life, a love as vital and enduring as the earth itself.

IndexTerms— Cultural Memory, Collective Memory, Biophilia Hypothesis, Culture, Memory, Nature

I. INTRODUCTION

"But *The Earthspinner* is also deeply concerned with ceramics and dogs, both things close to my heart...To me, *The Earthspinner* is not only about rising fanaticism but is also the story of two potters, of adolescent confusions, of our widespread indifference to the animal world." – Anuradha Roy (Mishra, 2022)

Being 'a writer of great subtlety and intelligence' (Shamsie, 2018), Anuradha Roy (b. 1967), a luminary echelons of greatness in the pantheon of Indian writing in English, wields the subtle strokes of intellect with her unparalleled finesse. Adorned with a plethora of prestigious accolades, including the esteemed DSC Prize for Fiction and the Crossword Prize, Roy's literary odyssey has led her to the hallowed shortlists of the International Dublin Literary Award and the esteemed longlists of the Man Booker Prize and the Man Asia Prize, cementing her status as a titan in the literary sphere. Among her literary gems *An Atlas of Impossible Longing* (2008), *The Folded Earth* (2011), *Sleeping on Jupiter* (2015), *All the Lives We Never Lived* (2018), and the latest addition to her illustrious repertoire, *The Earth Spinner* (2021), a literary marvel of 'intricate yet intimate' (Goyal, 2021) proportions, unfurls its socio-cultural memories with blending touch of 'biophilia' under the narrative gaze of Sarayu (Sara), deftly intertwining past memories of Moti Block and its deep-seated affinity for the natural world with present-day reflections from England, seamlessly blending nature, myth, memory, culture, and history to chronicle 'the splintered lives of Sara, Elango, and Chinna over five transformative years' (Srivastava & Singh, 2022).

Elango is a potter by lineage and an autorickshaw driver by circumstance who dares to defy societal norms by embarking on a forbidden romance with Zohra, a Muslim girl in 1980s Kummaraipet, India. From Elango's humble beginnings to his audacious creations— a terracotta horse embodying the unshakable dream of his artistry to a controversial sculpture adorned with Urdu calligraphy expertly engraved by Usman Alam, a blind Muslim calligrapher— and Elango's tenderling fondness for a lost dog, Chinna (initial name 'Tashi')— each stroke of Roy's narrative brush serves to illuminate the indomitable spirit of human resilience where 'the natural, the human, and the animal worlds speak with equal ease' (Uniyal, 2022). The art of pottery in *The Earthspinner*, with its roots deeply embedded in antiquity, serves as a tangible link to the cultural past of the protagonist, Elango. As Usman Alam, a Muslim calligrapher, lends his skill to Elango's vision, the boundaries between art and life blur, echoing the timeless echoes of cultural memories and their traditions and innovations. Illustrating how cultural practices and traditions are transmitted across generations and preserved in cultural and collective memory, Sona Goyal says,

"The art of pottery is one of the most ancient human inventions, handed down from generation to generation. *The Earthspinner* also advocates for a gift: a harmonious sense of humanity when forged with fire, both stand the test of time." (Goyal, 2021)

II. METHODOLOGY

This research uses qualitative interpretive methodology to explore the relationship between cultural and collective memories of people as well as their connection to nature by examining Anuradha Roy's *The Earthspinner*. A close reading method was used to conduct textual analysis of *The Earthspinner*, and an interdisciplinary approach that draws from ecocriticism and memory studies provided both the primary basis for conducting this study and its theoretical underpinning. In particular, the research utilizes Astrid Erll's understanding of cultural memory, Maurice Halbwachs' conception of collective memory, and Edward O. Wilson's concept of Biophilia, which means that humans share an innate bond with all forms of life. These three concepts will be utilized to analyze the symbolism, themes, and characters within the narrative structure of *The Earthspinner*.

III. UNDERSTANDING 'CULTURAL MEMORY' AND 'COLLECTIVE MEMORY':

The term 'cultural memory,' as Astrid Erll defines it in the chapter "Towards a Conceptual Foundation for Cultural Memory Studies," is "the interplay of present and past in a socio-cultural context" (Erll & Nünning, 2010, p. 2). Shimmering with manifold interpretations, the multifaceted term "cultural memory" carries a plethora of meanings that incorporate "[m]edia, practices, and structures as diverse as myth, monuments, historiography, rituals, conventional remembering, and the configuration of cultural knowledge..." (Erll & Nünning, 2010, p. 1). Scholars like Maurice Halbwachs, an eminent sociologist, in his groundbreaking work *The Social Frameworks of Memory (Les Cadres sociaux de la mémoire, 1925)*, have extensively scrutinised the concept of 'memory' and provided a foundational understanding of how memory functions within socio-cultural contexts. Alongside Halbwachs' 'collective memory,' the art historian Aby Warburg developed theories of a 'social memory,' laying the groundwork for understanding how memory operates within social frameworks. Cultural memory can be understood in two ways: (a) first, it's a shared concept that encompasses all the knowledge that shapes behaviour and experiences within a society; and (b) second, it's a dynamic phenomenon that is passed down through generations through repeated social practices and traditions, i.e., a central aspect of 'collective memory.' As Halbwachs aptly expressed, "collective memory" is "a current of continuous thought" (Olick et al., 2011, p. 142), as "it retains from the past only what still lives or is capable of living in the consciousness of the groups keeping the memory alive" (Olick et al., 2011, p. 142-143). In the words of Astrid Erll, "the notions of 'cultural' and 'collective' memory proceed from an operative metaphor as the concept 'remembering' is metaphorically transferred to the level of culture" (Erll & Nünning, 2010, p. 4).

IV. THE BIOPHILIA HYPOTHESIS: CONCEPT AND RELEVANCE:

The term "biophilia" has its origins in ancient Greek, where "bio" signifies 'life' and "philia" denotes 'love,' and its etymology literally translates to "love of life" (Barbiero & Berto, 2021). The concept of 'biophilia,' first introduced by German philosopher and psychologist Erich Fromm (1973, p. 406) as "the passionate love of life and of all that is alive," was later popularised by biologist Edward O. Wilson in his seminal work, *Biophilia* (1984), suggesting an innate human tendency towards connection with the natural world, encompassing the realm of flora and fauna. The concept of 'biophilia,' as explored by Wilson, refers to the innate emotional connection humans have with other living organisms (Kellert & Wilson, 1993). This inherent affinity for the natural world is hypothesised to be a fundamental aspect of human nature, manifesting as an inclination "to focus on and affiliate with life forms and life-like processes" (Joye & De Block, 2011). Furthermore, the 'biophilia hypothesis' transcends the realm of individual preference as it posits an intricate link between our emotional connection to nature and the symbolic constructs embedded within our cultures. As Wilson aptly conveyed, the biophilia hypothesis extends to the multifaceted emotional responses woven into the symbolic tapestries that constitute a significant portion of culture (Kellert & Wilson, 1993). Wilson also remarks, "[T]he biophilic rules are not replaced by modern versions equally well adapted to artifacts" (Kellert & Wilson, 1993), which highlights the irreplaceable role of nature in fulfilling our innate biophilic tendencies and suggests that efforts to reconnect with the natural world are crucial for our well-being and cultural harmony.

V. ANALYSIS OF "CULTURAL" AND "COLLECTIVE" MEMORY IN *THE EARTHSPINNER*:

As the novel's perspective narrator, Sara unfolds her mnemonic words through the evocative character, Elango, the potter, whose lineage, characterised by 'earth-caked' hands, constitutes a palimpsest upon which he inscribes his own artistic expression, embodies the cultural sedimentation of memory that has been passed down. Though Elango's father's escape from the "unforgiving family trade" (Roy, 2021, p. 20) for the "clerical-job" represents a disruption in the established cultural narrative, Elango's return to the potter's wheel signifies a reinscription of the ancestral cultural memory, albeit with a contemporary twist. On the other hand, Elango's act of teaching pottery to Sara becomes a symbolic act of cultural transmission, imparting not just technical skills but also a connection to a lineage and a way of life. In England, the basement studio of "opulent university" (Roy, 2021, p. 22) with its "efficient wooden and metal tools" (Roy, 2021, p. 22) and "electric wheels that hum softly" (Roy, 2021, p. 22), despite its stark difference from Elango's workplace at Kummaraipet, India, can be seen as a site of cultural negotiation where Sara attempts to reconcile the inherited memory of Elango's craft with the dominant cultural narrative of the West.

Erll posits that 'cultural memory' is shaped by shared experiences and tradition, while 'collective memory' is a more dynamic process, constantly evolving through individual interpretations and condensations, which is justified by Usman Alam's struggle to reconcile his fading cultural identity as a revered calligrapher with the evolving artistic landscape embodied by Elango, the potter. Usman clings to a more rigid, curated version of the past (cultural memory), while Elango embraces a more subjective and evolving understanding (collective memory). Embodying the dynamism of collective memory, Elango's proposal to Usman to carve Urdu script onto a clay horse, an object traditionally associated with Hinduism, subverts established cultural norms. This act of defiance can be seen as a contestation of collective memory, a push to redefine the boundaries of artistic expression. Though "his fingertips, longing for the familiar calm flatness of paper and the precision of his quill" (Roy, 2021, p. 123), ultimately, Usman Alam's artistic triumph over the medium of clay, culminating in the completion of the calligraphic terracotta horse, represents Erll's notion of memory as a transformative process:

"It was as if the calligrapher had transferred the certainty of sight to his hands, which moved without hesitation over the surface of the horse, stroking and carving lines that followed its curves and hollows." (Roy, 2021, p. 135)

Usman's initial resistance to Elango's ideas reflects a fear of losing the purity of cultural roots and memory, but his eventual acceptance suggests a potential for both tradition and change to coexist.

VI. EXPLORATION OF BIOPHILIA IN THE EARTHSPINNER:

In the verdant tableau painted by the author, Elango's encounter with the lost dog, Chinna, in the twilight of the wood embodies the biophilic awe inspired by the unexpected. Elango's initial act of violence against the caterpillars clinging to the moringa tree, a creature teeming with life, stands in stark contrast to his later hesitance to abandon the lost puppy. This juxtaposition encapsulates the inherent conflict within the human condition—the primal urge to connect with nature (biophilia) while warring against its destructive tendencies. Evoking an innate human propensity for connection with the natural world, a proclivity shaped by millennia of evolutionary selection, Wilson (2002) defines 'biophilia' as our inherent tendency to focus on life and life-like forms, and in some cases, to develop an emotional affiliation with them. Elango's initial resistance to leaving the forest, his almost trance-like immersion in the symphony of crickets and mournful bird calls, hints at this biophilic inclination. After that, Elango's internal debate—to keep the dog or abandon it—reflects the ongoing struggle between human intervention and the natural order:

"How can I leave it here? It'll be dead in a day.

So what? That's a dog's life.

This is not a dog, it's a puppy.

Are you going to keep it at home? A big sahib with a pet dog, is that what you are? Take it away from this forest and drop it near a rich house. It can live or die." (Roy, 2021, p. 46)

While a part of him considers abandoning the dog, mirroring the city folk's callous disregard for nature, his ultimate decision to keep Chinna with him might be influenced by a biophilic urge to nurture and co-exist, as evidenced in Elango's words, "Chinna, this is your home now. I'll look after you" (Roy, 2021, p. 50); "Nothing bad will happen to you again. I'll keep you safe. I'll do whatever I have to" (Roy, 2021, p. 59). This struggle lies at the heart of the Biophilia Hypothesis—Elango's relationship with Chinna and the natural world, a deeper biophilic impulse despite the challenges it presents, is marked by an undeniable connection, a testament to our inherent affinity for the wild.

Within the mnemonic narrative, Sara and Tia's immediate affection for the dog, Chinna, and, in a similar vein, their father's recovery with Chinna's companionship as "Chinna was the best possible heart medicine" (Roy, 2021, p. 114) for him further buttresses how Chinna, a living being, becomes an agent of emotional and physical well-being, substantiating the biophilia hypothesis.

VII. INTERPLAY BETWEEN 'CULTURAL MEMORY' AND 'BIOPHILIA HYPOTHESIS':

The interplay between 'cultural memory' and the 'biophilia hypothesis' is evident in Sara's sensory journey through the summer heat to Kummarapet. "Mrs Khambatta in a sleeveless dress, watering plants" (Roy, 2021, p. 101), "[o]pen-beaked birds hopped around me, giving themselves baths in a shallow bowl [they] kept filled with water" (Roy, 2021, p. 101), and her encounter with the natural world, characterised by the presence of a crow, a butterfly, and the imagery of a moringa tree: "A fiery breath of air blew a shower of small dry leaves from the moringa tree onto my wet clay" (Roy, 2021, p. 106), serves as a canvas upon which cultural and biophilic instincts converge. Fromm (1973) conceptualised 'biophilia' as a fundamental human orientation characterised by a desire to nurture growth, encompassing not only living things like plants and people but also intangible entities like 'ideas' and 'social groups.' This inherent love for life, as Fromm (1994) further elaborated, manifests as a deep affection for both humanity and the natural world. Highlighting the interconnection and how cultural memories are often steeped in nature, shaping our affinity for the natural world is irrefragably apodictic in Sara's unequivocal memories of Elango's courtyard:

"I thought of the fiery afternoon in Elango's courtyard, where I made my first real cup. I recalled each detail: the red chillies drying on the roof of his shed, the butterfly that rested briefly on my cheek... I tried to imagine [...] the heat of my hometown in the summer when we were like parched birds in search of shade and water." (Roy, 2021, p. 209)

VIII. CONCLUSION:

Anuradha Roy's *The Earthspinner* intricately weaves together the threads of 'cultural memory' and the 'biophilia hypothesis,' illuminating the nexus between humanity's innate affinity for life and its deep-rooted connection to cultural traditions. From Elango's journey as a potter, whose hands bear the imprint of ancestral memory, to Sara's sensory exploration of Kummarapet's natural world, Roy masterfully juxtaposes the human spirit's resilience with its intrinsic bond with nature. Through Elango's artistic defiance and Usman Alam's struggle to reconcile tradition with innovation, Roy portrays the dynamic interplay between cultural memory and collective reinterpretation. The completion of the calligraphic terracotta horse symbolises not only the triumph of artistic collaboration but also the evolving nature of 'collective memory.' Moreover, Roy's portrayal of Elango's relationship with Chinna embodies the 'biophilia hypothesis,' showcasing humanity's primal urge to nurture and co-exist with the natural world. Sara's sensory journey through Kummarapet further highlights the intertwined nature of 'cultural memory' and 'biophilia,' underscoring how memories of Elango's courtyard are inseparable from the sights and sounds of nature. Roy deftly illustrates how cultural traditions are often steeped in the natural world, shaping humanity's affinity for life. In essence, *The Earthspinner* serves as a poignant reminder of humanity's intricate relationship with nature and culture. The multilayered novel, as Sonia Faleiro observes, "It is Roy's ability to create perfectly formed characters – human, animal or terracotta – that gives this novel its unique quality (*The*

Earthspinner by Anuradha Roy Book Review | *the TLS*, (2022), inviting us to explore the depths of our biophilic instincts and cultural memories, acknowledging the symbiotic bond that sustains both our collective heritage and our love for life.

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