

Belonging and Selfhood in a Married Woman and An Atlas of Impossible Longing

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Abstract: *Belonging is an important part of human identity. Family, home and social relationships can provide security and emotional support, but they can also create expectations that restrict individual freedom. This paper examines the relationship between belonging and selfhood in Manju Kapur's A Married Woman (2002) and Anuradha Roy's An Atlas of Impossible Longing (2008). Although the novels differ in setting and narrative structure, both explore characters who struggle to find a meaningful place within family and society. Kapur's novel focuses on Astha, a married woman whose search for emotional and personal fulfilment leads her to question the identity assigned to her through marriage and family. Roy's novel explores belonging through family history, home, memory, caste and displacement. The paper argues that belonging in both novels is not a fixed condition. It is continuously shaped and questioned through relationships, social expectations and personal desires. Through a comparative reading, the paper shows that selfhood develops when individuals begin to question the conditions under which they are expected to belong.*

Keywords: Belonging, Selfhood, Family, Gender, Identity, Home

I. INTRODUCTION

Contemporary Indian English fiction frequently examines the relationship between the individual and society. Family, marriage, home, gender and social traditions play an important role in shaping characters and their identities. These structures can provide individuals with emotional security, but they can also place limitations on personal choice. Therefore, belonging has a double meaning. It can provide a sense of identity and acceptance, while at the same time demanding conformity.

This tension becomes particularly important in the representation of women. A woman's identity has traditionally been associated with her roles as daughter, wife and mother. These roles provide social recognition, but they can also make individual desires secondary to family expectations. The struggle for selfhood begins when a woman starts questioning whether these socially defined roles fully express who she is.

Manju Kapur's *A Married Woman* explores this conflict through the life of Astha. She is educated, married and a mother, and from an outside perspective her life appears socially secure. However, her personal dissatisfaction gradually makes her question the boundaries of her identity. Her journey is not simply a rejection of marriage or family. Rather, it is a search for a space where she can recognise herself as an individual.

Anuradha Roy's *An Atlas of Impossible Longing* approaches belonging differently. The novel follows several generations of a family in Songarh and explores relationships between home, memory, family history and social position. The family house becomes an important symbol of attachment and memory, while characters such as Mukunda and Bakul experience belonging in different ways. Mukunda, in particular, is emotionally connected with the household but does not enjoy the same social position as other members of the family.

The two novels therefore provide useful but different perspectives on belonging. *A Married Woman* focuses mainly on the relationship between gender, marriage and individual identity, while *An Atlas of Impossible Longing* connects belonging with family, place, memory and social hierarchy. This paper examines how the characters negotiate these



pressures and argues that the search for selfhood is closely connected with the desire to belong without losing one's individuality.

II. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Existing scholarship on *A Married Woman* has examined women's identity, autonomy, patriarchy and self-discovery. Studies of Astha's character have particularly focused on the conflict between social expectations and her desire for individual expression. Scholarship also discusses her relationship with Pipee and its role in her emotional and personal development. These studies establish that Astha's identity cannot be understood separately from marriage, family and gender expectations.

Research on *An Atlas of Impossible Longing* has focused on identity, isolation, memory, displacement and belonging. Scholars have examined how the characters' relationships with Songarh and the family house influence their understanding of themselves. The novel has also been discussed in relation to social divisions, displacement and the emotional meaning of home.

These studies provide a useful foundation for the present discussion. However, this paper focuses specifically on the connection between belonging and selfhood. It examines how family and home can provide a sense of belonging while simultaneously creating restrictions on individual identity.

III. METHODOLOGY

The study uses a qualitative and comparative textual approach. The primary texts are Manju Kapur's *A Married Woman* and Anuradha Roy's *An Atlas of Impossible Longing*. Close reading is used to examine character development, family relationships, domestic spaces, gender expectations, memory and displacement. A feminist perspective is useful in understanding Astha's struggle with the roles expected from her as a woman, wife and mother. The study also considers belonging as a broader social and emotional concept in order to compare the experiences of the characters in both novels. Secondary critical sources are used to support the interpretation.

IV. BELONGING AND SELFHOOD IN A MARRIED WOMAN

Manju Kapur's *A Married Woman* presents belonging as both a source of security and a source of pressure. Astha belongs to a middle-class family and later becomes a wife and mother. These roles give her a socially recognised identity. However, the novel gradually reveals that social recognition does not always mean personal fulfilment.

Astha's identity is initially shaped by the expectations of others. As a daughter, she is expected to behave according to family values. After marriage, she enters another set of expectations. She is expected to become a good wife and mother and to adjust herself to the needs of her family.

The problem is not that Astha rejects these relationships completely. Rather, she begins to realise that these roles cannot represent her entire personality. She has emotional and intellectual needs that are not always acknowledged within the domestic structure. Her dissatisfaction therefore becomes a form of self-awareness.

Marriage gives Astha a place in society, but it also limits the ways in which she can express herself. This creates an important distinction between social belonging and personal belonging. She belongs to her family socially, but she does not always feel fully understood within it.

Education contributes to Astha's development. It enables her to think beyond the narrow boundaries of domestic responsibility. She becomes increasingly aware that being a wife and mother does not have to be the complete definition of her identity.

Her relationship with Pipee becomes an important part of this process. Pipee provides Astha with an emotional connection that allows her to experience herself beyond her conventional social roles. Their relationship becomes significant because Astha feels recognised as an individual. The relationship therefore contributes to her questioning of the identity that has been assigned to her.



However, the novel does not present this relationship as a simple solution. Astha continues to experience conflict because she is connected to her family, children and responsibilities. Her struggle is therefore more complex than a simple choice between family and freedom.

This complexity is central to the novel. Astha wants to belong, but she also wants to remain an individual. She does not necessarily want to destroy the relationships that define her life. She wants those relationships to recognise her individuality.

The novel therefore suggests that family becomes restrictive when belonging requires the disappearance of the individual. Astha's development can be understood as a process of negotiation between these two needs.

Her involvement in activities outside the domestic sphere also expands her understanding of herself. The political and social world gives her opportunities to see herself as more than a wife and mother. Her identity begins to move between the private and public spheres.

This movement is significant because traditional gender roles often associate women primarily with domestic life. Astha's growing awareness of the outside world allows her to question this division.

Her journey ultimately shows that selfhood is not something that exists separately from relationships. Instead, it develops through relationships, conflict and reflection. Astha becomes more conscious of herself because she begins to recognise the difference between the identity expected from her and the identity she wishes to develop.

Thus, *A Married Woman* presents belonging as an ongoing negotiation. Astha does not simply leave one identity and adopt another. She moves through uncertainty, responsibility and desire in an attempt to create a more complete understanding of herself.

V. BELONGING AND HOME IN *AN ATLAS OF IMPOSSIBLE LONGING*

Anuradha Roy's *An Atlas of Impossible Longing* presents belonging through family history, home, memory and social position. Unlike Kapur's more focused treatment of one woman's experience, Roy creates a larger family narrative in which different characters experience belonging and displacement in different ways.

The house in Songarh is central to this process. It is more than a physical structure. It contains memories of childhood, family relationships and loss. For the characters, the house becomes connected with their understanding of the past.

Mukunda's experience is particularly important. He grows up within the family environment but does not have the same social position as the members of the household. His emotional connection with the family contrasts with his uncertain social status.

His experience shows that living in a place does not necessarily mean belonging to it. A person may develop strong emotional ties to a home while still being excluded by social structures. In Mukunda's case, family status and social hierarchy influence the extent to which he can be accepted.

His relationship with Bakul further complicates the question of belonging. Their emotional connection develops within the family environment, but social boundaries interfere with their relationship. Their story shows how family and social structures can determine who is allowed to belong together.

The novel also connects belonging with memory. When characters move away from Songarh, they carry their memories of the place with them. Physical distance does not completely remove emotional attachment. This makes belonging a psychological as well as a geographical experience.

Mukunda's displacement is especially significant because his attachment to Songarh continues even after he is separated from it. His memory of home becomes part of his identity. In this sense, losing a place can sometimes make a person's attachment to it stronger.

The novel therefore presents home as an ambivalent space. It can offer protection, familiarity and emotional connection, but it can also contain hierarchy and exclusion. The same house may represent security for one person and limitation for another.



This is also connected with the changing nature of the family. As time passes, the old social structure begins to change. The house and family history become symbols of a world that is gradually disappearing. Belonging is therefore connected with historical change as well as personal memory.

Roy's treatment of belonging also demonstrates that identity is influenced by social position. Caste, family background and economic status affect the relationships between characters. Unlike Astha, whose struggle is strongly shaped by gender and marriage, Mukunda's struggle is shaped more by social exclusion and uncertain family status.

Yet the two experiences share an important feature. Both characters seek recognition. Astha wants recognition as an individual within her family, while Mukunda desires recognition as someone who genuinely belongs to the home he loves.

The novel therefore presents selfhood as something shaped by both attachment and displacement. A person may understand themselves through a place they belong to, but they may also understand themselves more deeply after losing that place.

VI. COMPARATIVE DISCUSSION

The most important connection between the two novels is that both shows belonging as a process rather than a fixed condition.

Astha belongs to her family through marriage and motherhood, but her emotional needs are not completely satisfied by this belonging. Mukunda, on the other hand, is emotionally attached to his family home but does not receive complete social acceptance. Their situations are different, yet both demonstrate that belonging requires more than physical presence.

Astha experiences a conflict between social identity and personal identity. She is recognised as a wife and mother, but she gradually seeks recognition as an individual. Mukunda experiences a conflict between emotional attachment and social acceptance. He feels connected to the house, but social structures question his right to belong.

The novels also present home in complex ways. In *A Married Woman*, the domestic space represents marriage, responsibility and family expectations. In *An Atlas of Impossible Longing*, the family house represents memory, history and social hierarchy. In both cases, home is not simply a peaceful place. It can provide security while also creating limitations.

Family also has a double role. It gives characters relationships and emotional connections, but it can also control personal choices. Neither Kapur nor Roy presents family as entirely negative. Instead, both writers show the complicated relationship between individual desire and collective expectations.

The major difference is that Kapur gives greater emphasis to gender, while Roy expands the idea of belonging through family history, caste, place and memory. This difference makes the comparison valuable.

Both novels finally suggest that selfhood does not necessarily require complete separation from family. The more important need is the freedom to negotiate one's place within relationships. A person can remain connected to others while still developing an independent identity.

Thus, the central tension in both novels can be expressed as the difference between belonging to others and belonging to oneself. The characters seek relationships and places that recognise them without completely controlling them.

VII. CONCLUSION

A Married Woman and *An Atlas of Impossible Longing* present belonging as a complex emotional and social experience. Both novels show that family and home can provide identity, security and memory, but they can also create expectations and boundaries that restrict individual selfhood.

Astha's journey demonstrates the struggle of a woman who wants to move beyond an identity defined entirely by marriage and family. Her search for selfhood is not a simple rejection of belonging; it is an attempt to redefine what belonging can mean for an individual woman.



Mukunda's experience in Roy's novel shows a different form of struggle. He develops a deep emotional connection with a family and its home but remains socially uncertain within that space. His story demonstrates that emotional belonging and social acceptance do not always coincide.

The comparison therefore reveals that belonging is meaningful only when it allows space for individuality. Family, home and relationships contribute to identity, but they should not completely determine it.

Both Kapur and Roy ultimately present selfhood as an ongoing process of negotiation. Their characters attempt to understand where they belong while also asking who they are. The struggle is not simply between belonging and freedom. It is between belonging without losing oneself and belonging at the cost of oneself.

In this sense, both novels offer an important understanding of identity in contemporary Indian fiction: a meaningful sense of self develops when individuals are able to participate in relationships and communities without surrendering their individuality.

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