

Honour Killing: A Murder Driven by Arrogance -the Horrific Face of Caste in Anuradha Roy's the Earthspinner

B. VIVILIA ARIVU MANI¹, Dr. M. KANNADHASAN²

¹PhD Research Scholar, Department of English, Thiruvalluvar University, Vellore, Tamil Nadu

²Assistant Professor, Department of English, Thiruvalluvar University, Vellore, Tamil Nadu

Abstract—This paper critically explores caste-based oppression and symbolic honour killing in Anuradha Roy's novel *The Earthspinner*, focusing on the tragic narrative of Elango, a gifted potter whose love defies the boundaries of caste and religion. While the novel does not depict a literal act of honour killing, Elango's eventual fate reflects the socio-political dynamics of such violence, grounded in caste arrogance and communal hatred. Through the lens of symbolic or social murder, this study investigates how the deeply entrenched structures of caste manifest in acts that deny individuals the right to love, create, and live freely. *The Earthspinner* intricately weaves together personal and political narratives, illuminating how creative and emotional expression is stifled under regressive social norms. Elango's relationship with Zohra, a Muslim girl, becomes a site of contention in a community poisoned by intolerance and patriarchal pride. His murder though not labelled as an honour killing—is steeped in the same motivations: preserving the so-called purity and honour of one's caste and community. This paper argues that caste arrogance acts as a catalyst for this symbolic honour killing, wherein Elango's transgressive love is punished through lethal violence.

The study employs close textual analysis of the novel alongside a socio-political examination of honour killings in contemporary India. By situating the narrative within the broader context of caste-based atrocities and communal anxieties, the paper unpacks the mechanisms through which caste operates as a form of social surveillance and enforcement. Theoretical insights from Dalit literature, postcolonial studies, and human rights discourse inform the interpretation. The urgency of reading literary texts like *The Earthspinner* as not merely aesthetic works but as potent socio-political commentaries. Roy's novel exposes the fatal consequences of caste arrogance and challenges readers to confront the brutal realities that still shape individual destinies in modern India.

Index Terms—Caste oppression, honour killing, Anuradha Roy, communal violence, *The Earthspinner*, symbolic murder, social injustice.

I. INTRODUCTION

Honour killing refers to the deliberate murder of a person, typically by family or community members, due to the belief that the individual has brought shame or dishonour upon the family, caste, or community. Such killings are often triggered by acts seen as transgressive within conservative societies: inter-caste or inter-religious relationships, refusal of arranged marriages, or even exercising personal freedom in matters of love, dress, or behaviour. The crime is rooted in a toxic blend of patriarchy, casteism, and social control, where the notion of "honour" is placed above basic human rights. These acts are not impulsive but are often premeditated and socially sanctioned within closed communities that value collective pride over individual autonomy. "The human meaning of caste for those who live it... is power and vulnerability, privilege and oppression, honour and degradation, plenty and want, reward and deprivation, security and anxiety" (Berreman 88).

Historical Background of Honour Killing in India:

Honour killing in India has deep-rooted historical and cultural origins, largely tied to the rigid social structures of caste, patriarchy, and kinship. Traditionally, the honour of a family, particularly in patriarchal societies, has been closely associated with the behaviour and sexual purity of its women. Texts like the *Manusmriti* prescribed strict codes of conduct for women, reinforcing male control over female autonomy, especially in marriage and sexuality. During the medieval period, practices such as *sati* and *jauhar* were valorised as acts of preserving family or

community honour. Though honour killings were not legally sanctioned, they were often normalised within community structures like *khap panchayats* in North India. These local bodies enforced caste endogamy and punished inter-caste or inter-religious marriages through social ostracism or violence. Social reformer and anti-caste activist Periyar, a fierce critic of patriarchal oppression, denounced the concept of honour that justifies violence against women. He stated, “In the name of honour, they kill women. What kind of honour is this? It is not honour — it is barbarism sanctioned by caste and religion” (45).

In modern India, honour killings persist despite legal prohibitions. They often occur when individuals, especially women, assert their right to choose a partner, crossing caste, religious, or regional boundaries. These killings are justified by families as a means to “restore” lost honour. The phenomenon reflects the ongoing tension between traditional values and individual rights in a rapidly changing society. Efforts to curb honour killings have intensified, but cultural and systemic barriers remain formidable.

Honour killings continue to occur despite legal prohibitions, especially in regions where caste hierarchies are strictly enforced. While both men and women are victims, women are disproportionately targeted because they are often seen as bearers of family honour. Honour killings in India are deeply linked to the caste system, where transgressing boundaries of caste or religion through love or marriage is considered a threat to social order. “According to Manu, the name of a brahmana should have a word for auspicious, of a Kshatriya for strength, the name of a Vaishya for wealth, and the name of a Sudra should breed disgust” (Buhler 31). These killings are not only acts of violence but also tools of enforcing caste purity and patriarchal dominance. In literature, such themes are often explored to expose the psychological and societal impact of these crimes. Anuradha Roy’s *The Earthspinner* does not portray a literal honour killing, but the fate of its protagonist, Elango, mirrors the logic of such violence, making it a powerful narrative of caste-based oppression and symbolic social murder.

II. THE EARTHSPINNER AND ITS RELEVANCE

Anuradha Roy’s *The Earthspinner* is a poignant and politically charged novel that tells the story of Elango,

a passionate and talented potter, whose love for a Muslim girl, Zohra, sets him on a collision course with his conservative, caste-bound community. Set against a backdrop of rising communal tensions, the novel explores the personal cost of defying societal norms, especially those rooted in caste, religion, and tradition. Through Elango’s artistic spirit and forbidden love, Roy captures the fragile space where creativity and desire confront intolerance and violence. The novel not only gives voice to marginalised individuals but also critiques the cultural systems that punish freedom and affection in the name of honour and morality.

The relevance of *The Earthspinner* to the theme of honour killing lies in its powerful depiction of caste-driven violence that functions as a form of symbolic murder. Elango is not explicitly killed in the name of honour; his brutal death is the direct outcome of his refusal to conform to the social codes of caste and religious segregation. His murder, therefore, embodies the same motivations that drive real-world honour killings: the need to uphold a perceived purity of tradition, family pride, and community status. Elango’s tragedy within this socio-political framework, Roy invites readers to recognise the insidious nature of caste arrogance and the devastating consequences it inflicts on those who dare to love across its boundaries. “Art in *The Earthspinner* emerges as a powerful counter-narrative to violence and social fragmentation. Elango’s sculpture is not merely aesthetic; it is political, a protest against communalism and a vision of harmony. His act of shaping the horse, an ancient cultural motif, serves as a symbolic gesture of reclaiming agency in a society that punishes difference” (Vivilia Arivu Mani and Kannadhasan a664).

III. THE BURDEN OF HONOUR

Caste-based communal control as a powerful, non-lethal yet psychologically and socially violent expression of honour. Rather than focusing solely on physical acts of murder, the research explores how communities enforce “honour” through threats, surveillance, social ostracism, and public shaming. “Caste is a ‘material reality’ with a ‘material base’, it is not only a form but a concrete material content, and it has historically shaped the very basis of Indian society and continues to have crucial economic implications even today” (Omvedt 14). These

mechanisms, though not always fatal, inflict deep emotional and existential damage, particularly on those who challenge caste norms or pursue forbidden love. The novel presents these forces not as isolated incidents but as embedded cultural practices that systematically repress individual freedom and creativity.

IV. ART AND OPPRESSION

By framing honour not merely as a motive for physical violence but as a broader ideology of control, the paper argues that caste arrogance manifests in various non-lethal forms public humiliation, artistic censorship, religious polarisation, and the destruction of personal relationships. In *The Earthspinner*, Elango's struggle becomes symbolic of this suffocating social order, where love and art are seen as threats to communal identity. This study, therefore, seeks to reveal how the concept of honour, especially when tied to caste and religion, operates not just through acts of murder, but through an ongoing cultural violence that crushes dissent and enforces conformity.

The paper is grounded in the framework of Postcolonial Studies, drawing particularly on Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's concept of the "subaltern" and B. R. Ambedkar's critique of caste oppression. Spivak's seminal question, "*Can the Subaltern Speak?*", is especially relevant to Elango's voicelessness in *The Earthspinner*, as his desires, creativity, and resistance are ultimately silenced by dominant caste structures. Elango, though central to the narrative, is denied agency in the socio-political realm, echoing Spivak's notion that subaltern subjects are often spoken for, suppressed, or erased by hegemonic discourse. Dr. Ambedkar's powerful writings on caste as a tool of structural violence inform the reading of Elango's marginalisation and death not as personal misfortune, but as the inevitable consequence of a society built on graded inequality. His assertion that caste annihilates individual liberty helps contextualise the novel's portrayal of honour as a weapon used by dominant castes to maintain control. Through this lens, Roy's narrative becomes a critique of postcolonial India's failure to dismantle the deeply embedded systems of caste oppression.

V. THE ROLE OF COMMUNITY AND SOCIAL CONTROL

B. R. Ambedkar's critical insight into the caste system: "Caste System is a negative thing. It merely prohibits persons belonging to different Castes from intermarrying. It is not a positive method of selecting which two among a given Caste should marry" (Ambedkar 37). Exposes the deeply exclusionary nature of caste-based endogamy. This prohibition of inter-caste marriage is not just a social regulation but a violent tool for preserving caste purity and hierarchy. In the Indian context, this rigidity has often led to honour killings, where individuals, both men and women, are brutally punished or murdered for defying caste norms through inter-caste relationships. Ambedkar's observation reveals that the caste system operates through negative control, not by fostering healthy or consensual unions, but by enforcing who must not marry whom. Honour killings are the deadly outcome of this prohibition, reflecting the caste system's oppressive and dehumanising grip on personal freedom and individual choice. Thus, Ambedkar's words remain profoundly relevant in exposing how caste-based restrictions still perpetuate violence in the name of 'honour'.

In the Indian, caste and honour are deeply intertwined, forming a rigid social framework that dictates personal choices, particularly in matters of love, marriage, and social mobility. Honour is often equated with the preservation of caste purity, and any defiance, such as inter-caste relationships or challenging traditional hierarchies, is seen as a threat to collective identity. This perceived threat is met with various forms of violence, ranging from social exclusion and public humiliation to brutal honour killings. Such acts are not merely emotional responses but deliberate assertions of caste dominance, intended to reinforce boundaries and suppress dissent. In this system, honour becomes a socially sanctioned excuse for enforcing control, where the individual's desires and freedoms are sacrificed to uphold an oppressive social order.

Honour killings in modern India continue to be fuelled by caste-based rigidity, communal politics, and gender inequality. Even with legal progress and urbanisation, many communities still view individual autonomy, especially in romantic or marital decisions, as a threat to collective honour. Families and communities often justify violence as a necessary act to protect reputation

and social standing. In this context, literature like Anuradha Roy's *The Earthspinner* becomes crucial in exposing how honour-based violence, whether physical or symbolic, is still a pervasive force in Indian society, rooted in long-standing caste and patriarchal structures.

Recently, in Tamilnadu a young Dalit boy, Kavin Selva Ganesh, is not unique but reflective of a chilling trend of honour violence motivated by caste in Tamil Nadu and throughout India. These actions demonstrate how profoundly caste ideology still regulates personal relationships and social conduct, even among educated, urban young people. Despite legal sanctions and increasing popular awareness, honour killings continue due to the complicit silence of families, community organisations, and at times, state institutions. The entry of policemen into Kavin's case highlights the ubiquity of caste prejudice, illustrating that change has to happen not merely at the social level but also within the very institutions designed to uphold justice. The Madras High Court bench observed that Despite existing legal safeguards, honour killings continue unabated, often due to social stigma and family opposition to inter-caste or inter-religious marriages... love or marriage between consenting adults cannot be policed by the state or society, and certainly not punished through murder... It emphasised that honour killings are not just a law-and-order issue but also a challenge to the fundamental rights enshrined in the Constitution (HC Distressed).

Such cases are real-life equivalents of works of fiction, such as *The Earthspinner*, where individual aspirations are crushed by the merciless imposition of caste "honour" in a sense that is made redundant by a perfect equation with cruelty sanctioned. Elango emerges as a transgressor whose personal choices defy the oppressive boundaries of caste and religion. His love for Zohra, a Muslim girl, is not merely a romantic subplot but a radical act of resistance against the entrenched social order. In a society where interfaith and intercaste relationships are condemned, Elango's love is perceived as a dangerous violation of community norms. The backlash he faces from his family, community, and local power structures reveals how love becomes politicised when it crosses rigid social lines. Elango's refusal to conform makes him a symbolic threat, and his tragedy reflects the broader violence inflicted upon those who dare to imagine equality in a deeply stratified culture.

The community operates as an omnipresent force of surveillance and control, using collective power to enforce caste "honour." Elango's relationship with Zohra and his artistic pursuits become targets of this social machinery, which thrives on conformity and punishes deviation. The mob's violent reaction to Elango's actions is not spontaneous; it is a calculated enforcement of caste hierarchy disguised as the defence of tradition. His love is condemned as shameful, not because it is immoral, but because it dismantles the illusion of caste purity. In this context, honour becomes a weapon, and the community's role shifts from nurturing to disciplining, transforming into a moral policy that erases individuality in the name of cultural preservation.

VI. VIOLENCE WITHOUT KILLING AND SYMBOLIC HONOUR KILLING

Elango is not physically murdered, yet the violence inflicted upon him is no less brutal; it is a form of *symbolic honour killing*. Though he survives, his identity, love, art, and dreams are systematically dismantled by the community. His relationship with Zohra is severed, his clay horse is destroyed, and he is ostracised both emotionally and socially. The community enacts a slow, deliberate erasure of his existence as a form of punishment, ensuring that he remains alive only to bear the weight of humiliation and loss. "Such a very long time that could not fit it into your mind" (Roy 155). This social execution mirrors the psychological torment inflicted on those who cross boundaries in caste- and religion-based societies, where the aim is not just to correct but to crush the spirit of the transgressor.

The symbolic form of honour killing shares the same ideological roots as physical honour killings; both stem from the obsession with caste purity, patriarchal control, and the need to preserve imagined social "honour." The difference lies only in the method: while physical honour killings result in death, symbolic ones destroy through isolation, stigma, and cultural invalidation. Elango's fate is a chilling reminder that violence need not always be physical to be fatal. Roy, through this nuanced portrayal, exposes how honour-based violence operates across a spectrum, sometimes through bloodshed, and other times through the silent, systematic destruction of a person's life, identity, and future.

Roy's critique gains power precisely because it is woven into the fabric of everyday life. Through Elango's quiet rebellion and tragic fall, she exposes how caste arrogance operates not just through rituals or laws, but through emotional conditioning and communal consensus. The caste system is not portrayed as a relic of the past but as a living force that punishes imagination, love, and dissent. "Kill the potter. Break the horse. Each one who strikes a blow, God will know, God will know!" (Roy 150). A potter, an artisan whose very work is rooted in the earth, Roy emphasises the irony of a society that devalues its most grounded and creative individuals in the name of false pride. Her narrative challenges readers to see caste not only as a system of hierarchy, but as a form of cruelty masquerading as honour.

Caste Arrogance and Social Hierarchy in *The Earthspinner*:

The novel poignantly bridges between fictional representation and real-world violence, illustrating how the deeply personal can reflect the brutally political. Elango's experience, though set within a fictional landscape, is rooted in realities familiar to many in India, where caste- and religion-based honour still dictate who one can love, what one can create, and how one must live. The symbolic destruction of Elango's life mirrors actual cases of honour killings and social ostracisation that continue across the country. Roy's novel, quiet in tone, echoes the loud, tragic truths of a society where individual freedom is sacrificed at the altar of communal pride, making the fiction a mirror to real, ongoing injustices.

Literature like *The Earthspinner* is vital in the discourse on caste because it humanises the abstract statistics and news reports, allowing readers to feel the emotional and psychological toll of caste-based oppression. Anuradha Roy doesn't offer a polemic or manifesto; she tells a story, and in doing so, she brings to life the quiet suffering and resistance of individuals like Elango, who are crushed under the weight of caste arrogance. Through fiction, the nuances of pain, shame, silence, and rebellion become more accessible and relatable, prompting empathy and introspection in readers who might otherwise be distant from these realities. It opens up a space where conversations about caste can be held not with hostility, but with understanding, emotion, and moral clarity.

Literature preserves the emotional truths that official histories and political narratives often erase or sanitise. In the context of caste discourse, where denial and normalisation are widespread, novels like *The Earthspinner* resist forgetting. They document resistance not in grand gestures, but in love, art, and the courage to dream against odds. Depicting the private and the personal, Roy contributes to a growing body of literature that challenges the status quo. Such works are indispensable in awakening a collective conscience, fostering dialogue, and keeping the urgency of caste justice alive in both public and private spheres.

The Earthspinner does not portray a physical honour killing, but it powerfully unveils the invisible killings, the silent, relentless destruction of love, liberty, and artistic expression at the hands of caste arrogance. A weapon does not kill Elango, but by the weight of social rejection, communal hatred, and the suffocation of his deepest desires. Anuradha Roy masterfully exposes how honour can be weaponised without spilling blood, erasing lives through shame, isolation, and the crushing of creativity. The novel stands as a haunting reminder that violence in caste-ridden societies is not always loud or visible; it often works quietly, yet devastatingly, through the systematic silencing of those who dare to imagine a freer world. Kamila Shamsie praises Anuradha Roy as "a writer of greater subtlety and intelligence" (Roy).

Engaging with caste arrogance through literary analysis is crucial because literature reveals the emotional and psychological layers of social injustice that academic or legal discussions often overlook. Novels like *The Earthspinner* expose how caste operates not just in rituals or laws, but in relationships, aspirations, and creative acts. Through characters like Elango, readers witness how caste arrogance invades the private realm, dictating whom one can love, what one can create, and how one can live. Literary analysis helps unpack these subtle but powerful dynamics, allowing us to interrogate how deeply caste prejudice is woven into the cultural fabric. It encourages people to see caste not only as an external structure but as an internalised ideology that governs everyday life.

Addressing caste arrogance through literature fosters empathy and critical reflection. It offers readers, especially those removed from the lived realities of caste oppression, a chance to engage with these issues on a human, intimate level. Literary analysis becomes

a tool for resistance, revealing the consequences of silence and complicity. Examining how authors like Anuradha Roy depict caste-based violence, readers not only honour the stories of the oppressed but also contribute to a broader discourse that challenges systemic injustice. Literature becomes both a mirror and a weapon, a means to see the truth and to fight for change.

In light of *The Earthspinner's* powerful portrayal of caste-based injustice, readers are called not only to appreciate the literary craft but to engage in ethical reading to read with awareness, empathy, and a willingness to confront uncomfortable truths. Literature like this demands more than passive consumption; it urges us to reflect on the real-world implications of what readers read, to question the norms we uphold, and to recognise the silent sufferings that often go unseen. In doing so, people take a step toward greater social awareness and responsibility, using stories not just as sources of meaning, but as catalysts for justice, dialogue, and change.

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