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Examining Manifestations of Identity, Belongingness and Homesickness in Sarojini's Mother by Kunal Basu

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Abstract:

Belongingness is a substantial and indispensable facet that helps in the development of an individual. The foremost need to belong entails that human being possesses an innate drive for a minimum number of lasting interpersonal relationships. This relationship generates a sense of security, care, and affection which is based on shared beliefs and values. Lack of interpersonal relationships results in homesickness, longing, and identity crisis which is best showcased in *Sarojini's Mother* by Kunal Basu. Kunal Basu, a modern-day writer, is famous for reinstating one's faith in the imagination through his works written in English and Bengali. Emerging as an influential writer, he validates the glory of culture by juxtaposing the past and the present of the city- Calcutta. *Sarojini's Mother* gyrates around the central character Sarojini, who returns to Calcutta, the city of her birth, to find her biological mother. Her venture to find her mother never fades until life shakes her with the tragedies of life. Through the character of Sarojini, Kunal Basu scrutinizes the need for companionship and

assistance of another individual. The paper examines Sarojini's extensive emotional and agonizing struggle to find answers to questions that haunt her while expounding her quest for identity and belongingness. The paper attempts to highlight the understanding of belongingness and identity crisis through the theories presented by Erik Erikson, Roy Baumeister and Mark Leary.

Keywords: Identity, Belongingness, Homesickness, Interpersonal relationship

An innate desire to belong, to be accepted in society or any social group, refers to *Belonging*. It is an emotional need felt by humans to be accepted as a part of a social group. One can have a sense of belongingness not for a particular group or a person only but rather, and one can have a sense of belonging for many groups or with anyone. *Belongingness* is the base known for the development of an individual. Just like any basic human need, the sense of

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belongingness is an indispensable aspect of our life. We all live in a complex world where the need to belong is natural and extremely essential for our survival. Human being possesses an instinctive drive for a minimum number of lasting interpersonal relationships. As humans, we all feel the need for companionship and association with other individuals in order to lead a healthy life. Human behaviour, human thought processes, motivational developments and sentiments are understood well through our understanding of the concept of belongingness. The sense of belonging and identification comprises of feelings, beliefs and hope that one can fit in the group and has a place there, an emotion of getting approved by the group and a will to sacrifice for the group. (Macmillan & Chavis, 1986 p. 10) Merriam Webster defines “Belonging” as a close or intimate relationship. This intimate relationship that an individual feels helps in the development of one’s identity. For decades, it has been proved that human beings are compelled by a desire to form interpersonal relationships and that the lack of belongingness results in homesickness and identity crisis. An identity makes a person or a group different from others. Identity is denoted as an individual’s notion of who they are or what sort of individual they are, and how they connect with other people. (Hogg and Abrams 1988, 2). The sense of identity is established on social exchanges and connections, which show

our belonging to a specific community through shared opinions, ethics, or practices. [SIRC, 7] Human beings incline to have their own individual identity, and they clasp on that identity to be connected with the society and country. [Devi, 257]. An individual’s identity is the base of the social fabric and plays a pivotal role in the development of an individual. Identity crisis insinuates the loss of the real identity of any individual, and discovering one’s identity is more crucial for those who have been dislocated and disrupted. The uncertainty and confusion in one’s identity are among the most important conflicts people face in their development. In some people, the identity crisis is hardly evident, whereas the crisis is marked off as a critical period. The relationship between belongingness and identity is a very crucial part of human society, which is very well captured in the novel *Sarajini’s Mother* by Kunal Basu.

Born in Calcutta, Kunal Basu is a well-known Indian writer of English fiction who is widely known for writing fiction in English and Bengali. The writer is known to have travelled to numerous places, and the experiences he gathered as a traveller have resulted in his beautiful writings. He is recognized as one of the few practitioners of historical fiction who refuses to stick to Indian history alone. “A ceaseless, dissatisfied search for the unfamiliar within oneself is a rarity among contemporary

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creative artists, especially authors. Which makes Kunal Basu somewhat of an outlier.” Chanda, 1] Kunal Basu is a versatile writer known for writing novels, short stories, and visual narratives. The author is famous for writing five novels which are: *The Opium Clerk* (2001), *The Miniaturist* (2003), *Racists* (2006), *The Yellow Emperor's Cure* (2011) *Kalkatta* (2015), and *Sarojini's Mother* (2020). Basu is not only famous for writing Indian novels but also for writing four Bengali novels: *Rabi-Shankar* (2016), *BairerDorja* (2017), *Tejoswini O Shabnam* (2018), and *Angel*(2020). Apart from his novels, he has written a short story named *The Japanese Wife*, which was made into a film by an Indian filmmaker. He currently lives at Oxford and teaches at Said Business School. Dotted with love, tenderness, and conviviality, Kunal Basu is known to reestablish one's faith in imagination, magic, and fantastic history [Banerjee, 1].

His novel *Sarojini's Mother* gyrates around Sarojini or Saz, who sets out in search of her biological mother. Sarojini is an ordinary young and cheerful lady keen to find the missing piece in the jigsaw of her life. Through the character of Sarojini, Kunal Basu reconnoiters the lanes of Kolkata. Sarojini commences her difficult journey to save herself from falling into a never-ending pit of misery. [Soumini, 2020] The author is epitomized as a master gyrator of stories who have used Sarojini as a repetitive motif against the background of

his favourite city, Kolkata. [Doctor, 2020] The love and loss in Sarojini's mother are exquisitely captured by him. Through *Sarojini's Mother*, Kunal Basu tends to capture a gratifying truth whose reality troubles the City of Joy.[Sharif, 1] The protagonist was adopted and taken to England by her hippie mother Lucy at an early age. This heart-warming and gut-wrenching story is set in Calcutta where Sarojini meets Chiru Sen or Elvis, her guide who helps her find her mother. Besides Chiru, Suleiman, the master bookie of the racecourse and the band members also helped Sarojini search for her lost mother. The quest for searching for her biological mother brings before her numerous challenges, the biggest of all being the dilemma of choosing between the two women who claim to be her mother. The novel begins as a captivating story and turns farcical and loses its warmth, but not once it's fun—the characters are pleasant.[Gulab, 2020] In this fast-paced novel, Sarojini is caught between two mothers who claim to be her biological mother. Through the character of ChiruSen, Basu brings out the vibrant scenery of the multifaceted city, which is Kolkata. In the quest of finding her mother, Sarojini meets Jamuna, a slum resident who claims that she gave up Sarojini to save her from the tidal wave of Hindu Muslim riots. Despite having a husband in jail and two troubled boys, Jamuna is represented as an extraordinary and hardworking lady. Also,

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Jamuna accepts Saz as her lost daughter, claiming to have given her up at an orphanage 27 years ago. Through the character of Jamuna, Kunal Basu portrays the image of slum life and the hardships people face.

On the other hand, Saz meets Urvasi, a wealthy socialite who expresses that Sarojini was her daughter. Urvasi is presented like a dolphin, smilingly winsome at times and inclined to bite at others. [Doctor, 2020] Since her daughter was born out of marriage, she was snatched away from her at birth. Now, Saz is caught between two mothers, and the only solution to determine her real mother was a DNA test. The novel boons a deep sense of nostalgia since Kunal Basu revisits his favourite places through the character of ChiruSen, and he also tends to divide his time between Oxford and Kolkata. [Doctor, 2020] The story brings out the simple and pure moments of motherhood though the portrayal of the two women.

Erik Erikson is a German-American psychologist and psychoanalyst whose works have had a profound influence on psychoanalysis and placed a greater emphasis on the concept of an identity crisis. He has recognized the impact of the crisis in his own life as well. He coined the term 'identity crisis' in *Childhood and Society*. According to Erik Erikson, human growth comprises several personal conflicts or struggles. [Schultz & Schultz, 164] He

presents eight different stages of psychosocial development, which create, change, and loses one's identity. Intimacy vs Isolation by Erik Erikson in "Eight Ages of Man" have noted the strong effect of intimacy and obtainable that intimacy was not limited to a sexual relationship but also comprehended feelings of caring and commitment. If people are not capable of establishing such intimacies in young adulthood, they incline to develop feelings of isolation, resulting in an identity crisis. The most important human virtue is considered to be love which emerges during the young adult years. Kunal Basu's Kolkata novels refer to a novel of exploration [Gupta, 4]. The novel *Sarojini's Mother* brings out the aspect of identity crisis faced by Saz or Sarojini. However, it is not that only this is the work that has delineated the problem. Works ranging from, Kiran Desai's *Hullabaloo* in the *Guava Orchard*, Rupa Bajwa's *The Sari shop*, Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*, and several more have portrayed this. Self-identity can be demarcated as a process of self-development that helps in the formulation of a distinctive sense of ourselves and our relationship to the world around us. [Giddens, 29,30] In the novel, from the very beginning, Sarojini is not able to relate to herself. The problem begins with her name, where she shortens her name to Saz. The protagonist's name is significant, and by shortening her name, she was trying to betray her foreignness. Names

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are known to advocate one's identity; they insinuate religion, creed, and also gender. [Bajwa, 270] The name 'Saz' made sense for the western tongue since it was a short name without a meaning. This problem of not being comfortable with the name can also be portrayed in Rupa Bajwa's *The Sale Shop*, where the protagonist is not comfortable being called by his name. [Bajwa, 269]

Saz comprehends that her mother, Lucy was a 'hippie' who wanted to change Saz's identity by imposing her sense of proprietary over her. Lucy didn't live like normal people and Saz was always her cosmic warrior. [Basu, 29] Saz always wanted to be a mathematician, whereas Lucy wanted her to get a decent job and get married. She showed this emotion that Saz was betraying her and tried to impose her ideas on Saz. The relationship between the two got worse to the point that Lucy would run away from home to her commune, and therefore, Saz was left alone to question her relationship. The author propagates that after Lucy got a stroke, Saz would sit beside her without talking to anyone with just the blankness of the surrounding. [Basu, 63] But there was this voice, the voice of a nurse who wanted Saz to find something powerful and something extraordinary in her life. Sarojini could no longer identify with her surroundings and was posed to find her real mother. Lucy was in a coma for two years before she

died, and her condition forced Sarojini to question her belongingness. Lucy was the only mother Saz knew, but when she was slipping away Saz would be left alone. Plus there was an incident in which Saz needed a mother. [Basu, 17,18] This emotion of lack of belongingness made Sarojini question her identity. Losing Lucy was tough for Saz, she lost the only person in her life that mattered. After losing her, Saz wanted a mother in her life who could give her a reason to go on living. [Basu,22]. A sense of loneliness and rootlessness made Sarojini question her identity, which is the primary concern in the novel. She struggles hard throughout the novel to find out her own true self i.e. her own identity.

In search of a stable and interpersonal relationship, Sarojini travels to Kolkata. The desire for a sense of belongingness and to form attachment forced Sarojini to find her mother. The craving to formulate and uphold interpersonal connections is not new. Every individual craves a personal and interactive connection. In "The Need to Belong: Desire for Interpersonal Attachments as a Fundamental Human Motivation" Roy F. Baumeister and Mark R. Leary, remarks that a need to belong is a need to form and continue a minimum amount of interpersonal relationship which is naturally equipped amongst human beings.[Baumeister& Leary, 499] Baumeister and Leary contend that there is a

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need for belongingness more than the need for social contact. The need is for optimistic and satisfying social contacts or connections within the context of desired relationships with people other than strangers.[Baumeister& Leary, 500] Kunal Basu's character, Sarojini looks for a mother to form an interpersonal relationship. Basu refuses to emotionalize the orphan's tale and keeps a sharp focus on Sarojini's split identity and her own desperate need to 'belong' something that has surfaced at the age of 27 and not before. [Lal] Her luck leads her to a slum where Jamuna presents herself as Sarojini's mother. Jamuna was forced to give up her daughter due to riots and she was in search of her daughter until she met Sarojini. Jamuna is presented as a hardworking and stubborn lady who takes care of her family all by herself. The lack of identity and rootlessness forced Sarojini to look at other candidates as well. She wasn't stuck only on Jamuna; rather, she wanted to look for a connection which felt real, something that would clear the fog that has settled over the twenty-seven years of her life.[Basu, 63]

It wasn't long that Sarojini met another lady, Urvasi, who claimed Sarojini to be her daughter. Urvasi on the other hand asserted that her baby daughter was forcibly taken away from her because she wasn't married to the father who died in a terrible crash. Sarojini was tossed between two mothers where she was trying to find her roots and her belongingness. The protagonist needed

to search for her biological mother so that she could share her deepest secrets with her and when she came to India looking for her she found two of them. Sarojini started dressing up according to her destination, a saree or salwar with a bun meant Jamuna, whereas wearing high fashion meant Urvasi. Lucy's death brought changes in Sarojini's life and her self-concept. Less impactful events are known to bring changes in one's self-concept. Due to those changes, Sarojini felt a connection with both Jamuna and Urvasi. She started forming an interpersonal and interactive relationship with both of them. The feeling of belongingness is distinguished by the necessity to create close and safe connections, producing a sense of safety, care, and love. [Peter, Peter & Catapan, 95] Sarojini found a sense of belonging in both the slum life of Jamuna and the high-class society in which Urvasi lives. However, to comprehend her own true identity, she had to find out the truth about her real roots. Moreover, given the circumstances of having to choose between two mothers, the only option was to proceed towards a DNA test.

Stuck between two mothers Sarojini met another 'motherly' prototype who was Elvis's mother. His mother is a nurse and a widow with whom Sarojini felt safe and happy. Sarojini wanted to do the usual mother-daughter things when she would meet her mother, but she could eventually

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do all those things with Elvis's mother. Sarojini needed a mother who would've empathised with her, shared her feelings with her, and all these things she could do with Elvis's mother. She would share her feelings about being lonely as a child, about her growing up as a little girl in England. [Basu, 136] His mother became a caring nurse for Sarojini, who would learn the English custard recipe from Sarojini. The two could emotionally connect, which brought happiness and pleasant effects for the protagonist.

Kunal Basu mingles the city's colonial past with the current era and revolves the story around Sarojini. The struggle for identity is the real fabric of life. In Sarojini's Mother, there is the tangibility of finding her mother, but there is also a profound psychological quest that could teach her how to live a life despite the trauma of loss. [Dundoo, 2020] While *Sarojini's Mother* may give an account of the protagonist's personal struggle and her struggle with rootlessness, it is important to note that her varied experiences produce a sense of belonging that she desired for a long time. Sarojini's connectedness with other characters presents her emotional bonding and connectivity. Belongingness helps explain a variety of human behaviour, and if there is a failure in understanding the notion of belongingness, then the situation might lead to alienation, social separation and

seclusion. Hence, a sense of belongingness is an originator to socially connectedness. Identities are basically steady; they help us in understanding the role and belief or views about self (Wendt 1992, 397). Therefore, it can be said that there is interdependency between finding one's identity and survival. In order to survive, one is supposed to comprehend their identity. By critically analysing the novel, we understand how Sarojini stresses on her essential requirement to belong. Through exploring the experiences of rootlessness and the sense of loss, the novel delves into the complexities faced by the protagonist. The protagonist in the novel has her life entirely overturned by her visit to Kolkata, the City of Joy. Tracing Sarojini's physical journey across the country, we get to observe her relationship with other women characters. Basu also beautifully captures the relationship between the mental, physical surroundings of the protagonist. He brilliantly presents the incessant struggle and inner psyche of the protagonist in her quest of identity and belongingness.

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