

Research Article

Quest for Self in the novel *All the Lives We Never Lived* by Anuradha Roy

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Abstract

This paper discusses the concept of culture and tradition in Anuradha Roy's novel *All the lives we never lived*. Culture and tradition play important roles in contemporary society. It is evident from the analysis that women are restricted from living their lives according to their wish because of societal norms. The novel *All the lives we never lived* focuses on the sufferings of women and their craving for freedom. The protagonist of the novel is Gayatri, an artist who marries Neck Chand. She loves to dance and paint but her husband Neck does not appreciate her passion. Gayatri's desire is neglected by her husband. He wants Gayatri to give up her aspirations and look after the family. The likes and dislikes of Neck and Gayatri lead to a temperamental disparity between them. Gayatri wants to break the patriarchal mindset of her husband. So she has chosen her passion, freedom and identity over her family in order to pursue her passion for art so she leaves her husband and her son Myshkin to pursue her passion of art. This paper explores the struggles of Indian women in the family and focuses on how Gayatri rebels against the social norms to establish her Self identity.

Key words: Culture, Tradition, Patriarchy, Identity, Freedom.

Introduction

Anuradha Roy is a prolific writer who proved her caliber in various fields as a novelist, journalist and editor. She has written four novels, *An atlas of impossible longing*, *The Folded Earth*, *Sleeping on Jupiter* and *All the lives we never lived*. Roy worked at the Oxford University Press in New Delhi. Anuradha Roy works as a designer at Permanent Black publishing company. She and her husband Advani founded Permanent Black, a publishing company in 2000. Roy's novel *All the lives we never lived* won the TATA LITERATURE LIVE book of the year award in 2018. Anuradha Roy is among India's best known writers in English. Her portrayal of characters stays with us long after one has read them. Each of her novels is in different ways like a search for freedom from fear, pain, rejection, brutal reality and violence against women

This paper focuses on the novel *All the lives we never lived* which explores the struggles of Indian women in contemporary family settings. For many years, women have been struggling to gain self identity, nurturing the desire to live an independent life and wanting their voices to be heard in the predominantly patriarchal society. This paper examines the feminist perspective of

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Anuradha Roy's *All the lives we never lived*. Roy realistically depicts the conflicts in the family and the quest for self identity of the protagonist Gayatri.

Longing for freedom and Identity

Gayatri, the protagonist of the novel, is an artist who loves to dance and paint. Her father Agni Sen is a professor who believed in the empowerment of women. He likes his daughter more than his son. He thought that education and wider knowledge of the world would help Gayatri to lead an independent life. He is an extraordinarily enlightened man but at the same time Gayatri's mother holds views extremely contrary to that of her husband.

Both Agni Sen and his wife are two contradictory characters. She is a typical traditional Indian woman who wants her daughter to remain at home and learn household chores. She does not encourage her daughter to go after her passion for art. For Agni Sen, a daughter is meant to have talents and he recognizes her penchant for art. So Agni Sen decided to educate his daughter against his wife's wish. He got tutors for Gayatri to learn language, painting, dancing and classical music. He took her to various places to see artistic works and to visit many historical monuments.

Agni Sen decided to take his daughter to Bali and Java when she was seventeen years old. For Agni Sen it would be a great opportunity for Gayatri to learn many nuances about art. The mindset of Agni Sen is ready for a joyful adventurous trip with his daughter but his health condition is too vulnerable to travel this far. Gayatri's mother is frustrated at the decision of her husband. She says "what a dangerous, fanciful, expensive plan" (Roy27).

Both Gayatri and her father started the journey to Bali in 1927. There they meet a man called Walter Spies. He is a German artist and musician and for the next few weeks he took Gayatri and her father to attend several dance performances, concerts and to painting schools. Later they planned to go to Java in July 1927. But unfortunately the journey to Bali would be Gayatri's last one with her father. Agni Sen collapses during the journey and he dies. Gayatri is shocked and she does not speak to anyone. Her father made everything possible for her which she had rejected. Agni Sen had made her accomplished in fine arts, educated her and made her aware of her gifts. He wanted her daughter to be empowered. He played a huge part in his daughter's education and her passion for art. He encouraged her to pursue her passion for art against all odds.

Gayatri's mother is a traditional woman and she is not a liberal minded mother. She thought that her husband was investing a lot of money in Gayatri's education. She considers it is not shrewd to invest a lot of money for a daughter's education rather than the son. After the death of her husband, she blames Gayatri for her husband's death who took him for many trips to various places. Gayatri's mother stops all her classes and arranged marriage for Gayatri with Neck Chand. She expects Gayatri to give up all her ambitions and marry Neck Chand.

Neck Chand is the former student of Agni Sen and is very close to Agni Sen's family. Everyone thought that he would be a good match for Gayatri and Neck also liked Gayatri. Both of them got married and they had a son, Myshkin. Neck is a patriotic person. Neck shows himself as a liberal minded person on the outside but inside he feels insecure about Gayatri's passion for art. Neck talks about freedom for women and their rights but on the other hand he

behaves like a traditional husband in a typical patriarchal society. He wants his wife to be at home and look after the family rather than pursue her passion for art. Betty Friedan in her work *The Feminine Mystique* talks about women's freedom. This work comes relatively close to the novel *All the lives we never lived*. This book *The Feminine Mystique* encourages women to seek their own identity and make choices of their own in life. Betty Friedan says, "The women who adjust as housewives, who grew up wanting to be "just a housewife", are in as much danger as the millions who walked to their own death in the concentration camps..." (Friedan 325). Women should find their passion to seek their own identity. Anuradha Roy's *All the lives we never lived* depicts the same idea of women's identity.

Neck does not appreciate Gayatri's passion for art. He says "Painting, singing, dancing, are wonderful things. Everyone needs hobbies and there are serious matters. Try and read something other than novels –I've given you so many books and ...what about the history of India?"(Roy35). At this an argument breaks out between them. He says, "Think of your son Myshkin. He looks at you as a role model. Now what kind of example are you setting for him, dancing like that in the garden?"(Roy35). Gayatri bursts out of anger and retorts I have not been dancing in the garden. I have stopped everything. "I don't sing. I don't dance. I hardly ever paint. What more do you want?" (Roy35).

Neck is a nationalist. He speaks about India's independence movement and the need for freedom for women but in reality he does not want his wife to have a passion of her own. He wants her to remain at home as other traditional Indian women. When it comes to his family, he behaves as a husband with a patriarchal mindset. He even takes away the paints and throws them away. Anuradha Roy herself comments on the delusive nature of patriarchy in an interview, "Patriarchy is the peculiar thing: even well meaning men can be deluded into thinking they know what is better for a woman"(Interview)

The point of view of Neck is that Gayatri should be a self-effacing mother and she should remain as an epitome of sacrifice and she should show concern for everyone in the family. For Neck a mother should sacrifice all her aspirations and look after the family. She should be ideal for wifehood and motherhood. Gayatri refuses to be a puppet in the hands of her patriarchal husband. She could not bear his patriarchal attitude, so she burst out, "So my freedom is something you can store in a locked iron safe? To dole out when you see fit" (Roy36).

The aspirations of Gayatri are neglected by her husband in the patriarchal world. Her husband wants her to give up her aspirations for the sake of family. One day Gayatri went off with the visitors to Tonga with Walter Spies to learn more about dance. Neck's friend Arjun Chacha asks, "What is there to study in dance?"(Roy73). According to him, dance was invented for men to look at women, not for women to look at women. He also advises him to keep an eye on his wife. Not only Neck but also his friend told him to prohibit his wife's behavior. Every man wants to suppress the desire of a woman. They don't even value their passions.

Mukhti Devi, a Gandhian freedom fighter, seems to be the ideal woman for Neck Chand. He adores her and he wishes everyone to be like her who lives a life of self-sacrifice, austerity and devotion for the nation. He is very much influenced by her. Neck thinks everyone should participate in the freedom struggle. Gayatri finds her freedom in art and questions the significance of the freedom struggle for women, especially when they are still tied down by patriarchal society. In her view, freedom would not bring any changes in the male dominated

society. Gayatri finds that Mukhti Devi does not empower women. For Gayatri, Mukhti Devi remains like an ordinary woman who does not have a choice in life other than sacrificing her life for the nation. She did not inspire ordinary women who have aspirations in life. She does not empower women to make their choices freely. Roy says in an interview, “Gayatri does not want to sacrifice for the nation; she wants the freedom that is individualistic and personal” (Interview).

Neck is deeply involved in the freedom struggle for India. Even though India got freedom, women like Gayatri could not get freedom from the male domination and they are still tied by the patriarchal society. Women did not have a freedom of choice to choose whatever they aspired to do. A woman did not have freedom of choice and she did not have individuality. For women like Gayatri the rulers are not British but their own husbands. Hence Gayatri tells Neck,

“What good will great nation freedoms do for me? Tell me that! Will it make me free? Will I be able to choose how to live? Could I go off and be alone in a village as Walter has been doing? Could I be there and paint as well? Or walk down the street and sing a song? Could I be spend a night out under the stars from the town as your father did the other day? Even Myshkin is freer than I am! Don’t talk to me about freedom” (Roy 90).

Gayatri chooses to pursue her desire for art, dance and music. She does not want to remain as a voiceless woman. She wants to pursue her passion for arts and she decides to start her journey with Walter Spies who is a homosexual to Bali. Here, Roy breaks the general assumption that a woman would leave her only husband for another man but here she leaves with a homosexual. Roy depicts a woman who courageously leaves her husband not for another man but for her passion. She leaves her nine year old son Myshkin and her husband Neck Chand. Everyone in the town weaves a scandal that Gayatri had eloped with the German painter Walter Spies. Gayatri decided to leave when she had the feeling of “a bird trapped inside beating its wings” (Roy223). She puts herself first, over and above her husband and son and her family responsibility. She rebelled against the traditional pattern of the society and embarked upon her journey to Bali to live her passions and to fulfill her artistic aspirations.

Brijen, the neighbor of Gayatri, shared her artistic sensibility; he understands her struggles and supports her emotionally. Both are attracted to each other. Gayatri in one of her letters to her friend Lisa makes it clear that she could have gone with Brijen, who promises her a new life. Later she realizes, “I did not love him, I have come to understand, I merely loved his addiction to me. I am not made for love. I want nobody. I need to be absolutely free” (Roy262). She sees her journey to Bali as “a chance at another life” (263). Gayatri feels it is a daunting task for leaving her home and her son Myshkin and to chase her passion. At the same time she wants to be free and says, “Anyway, no room for self-pity, none! I am here. I came because I chose to, I will not mope and moan, I will work” (Roy 243).

The plight of Gayatri is similar to the one found in Shashi Deshpande’s *That Long Silence*. In this novel the protagonist Jaya is the representation of the modern women. She is a graduate in English Literature and she wants to be a writer. She is married to Mohan who is having a similar mindset like Neck Chand. Mohan does not appreciate her passion for writing. Before marriage her father encouraged her for her passions. After the death of her father Jaya’s mother does not support her. Mohan wants Jaya to remain as a traditional wife. But at the end she breaks her silence and stands for her identity in the family.

Quest for Self in the novel *All the Lives We Never Lived* by Anuradha Roy

The novel *All the lives we never lived*, the protagonist shows the courage of Gayatri to give up her feminine role as a wife and mother in order to preserve her Self identity. This novel shows two contradictory characters, Agni Sen and Neck Chand. Agni Sen wants his daughter to have education and he encourages her to follow her passion. He takes her to many places to make her acquire wider knowledge about the world and different cultures. But Neck Chand's character is totally contrary to Agni Sen. He talks about freedom of women but when it comes to his own family he behaves like a patriarchal husband. He dislikes Gayatri's desire. He does not want his wife to have a career of her own. He wants her to remain a typical, traditional family woman.

Gayatri's heart is in the biggest turmoil while she leaves her son but still she chooses to leave him. Everyone scandalized her after she had left the town but she wore that scar with courage. To stand on her own feet and to live with dignity everyone needs one essential thing and that is their identity. Gayatri finds her courage to lead an independent life.

Conclusion

Anuradha Roy portrays her female protagonist Gayatri, in a strong and courageous way; Gayatri does not want to remain a voiceless woman; she wants to establish her own identity. Roy shows the anti-imperial activities of Neck Chand who seeks freedom from being ruled while behaving like a tyrant in his own home. She chooses her own individual path to get personal freedom and to follow her own vision for the fulfillment of her passion. She wants to be free like a bird and she bravely takes the decision to leave all her feminine roles behind. In this novel the character Gayatri represents the plight of married women in the Indian family. Gayatri is not ready to accept her fate; rather she wants to fight against her patriarchal husband for her freedom and identity. Gayatri is represented as a strong female personality and as an independent spirit.

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