

Character of a Progressive Woman in Anuradha Roy's *All the Lives*

We Never Lived

Dr. Sanjay Kumar Misra

Professor

Department of English

R.B.S. College, Agra

Dr. Bhimrao Ambedkar University

Agra, Uttar Pradesh, India

Surabhi Shishodia

Research Scholar

Department of English

R.B.S. College, Agra

Dr. Bhimrao Ambedkar University

Agra, Uttar Pradesh, India

surabhisingh270287@gmail.com

Abstract

Anuradha Roy presents Gayatri, the protagonist in *All the Lives We Never Lived*, as a bold progressive woman. The story revolves around her quest for peace and happiness in life. She chooses her dreams over her family to fulfil her desires. In our patriarchal society, a man is usually not questioned as much for dereliction of family duties and responsibilities as a woman is when she happens to shy away from taking care of her family and children. It is perhaps because man dominates society, and woman is relegated to the submissive and subservient position in family and society. Modern-day women writers, such as Anuradha Roy, often take

on issues and social situations where women are assuming new roles to bring about change in the social status of women. In *All the Lives We Never Lived*, Gayatri's revolt against her husband is born out of her husband's domineering nature.

Keywords: Patriarchy, Conservatism, Family, Women's Freedom, Self-Love, Progressive Woman

Anuradha Roy is one of the most substantial Indian women writers in English of the 21st century. *All the Lives We Never Lived* is her fourth novel. Published in 2018, it won India's prestigious literary prize, the Sahitya Academy Award, in 2022. This novel is about a woman named Gayatri Rozario, her life's journey, her struggles, dreams and aspirations. Gayatri is the central focus in this novel. She is an artist. She wants to express herself through art. She is presented as a defiant character who challenges the conservative mindset in Indian society.

The story of Gayatri's life begins in the 1930s. She wants to pursue her dreams. She prioritises her personal choices and aspirations over her family responsibilities. She leaves her nine-year-old son and her family and goes out in her quest to fulfil her wishes. She leaves behind a string of broken hearts and lives.

A hundred years ago, it was an era when women were not typically known for engaging in self-exploration and making bold choices regarding their families, education, and careers. They were limited to doing household chores and taking care of their family, which was typically a joint arrangement rather than the nuclear family structure we have today. Those were times when a woman's engagement in activities outside the home was seen as violating society's rules; she was perceived as depriving her family of social dignity. In an interview about *All the Lives We Never Lived*, Anuradha Roy aptly said the following about the main character in this novel, Gayatri: "She is not modelled on anyone, she came to me as a complete, sparkling, gifted, sometimes abrasive, sometimes contradictory woman who believes she has

something that sets her apart. Many of the characters are fighting for freedom of different kinds, including freedom from colonial rule and Gayatri defies the accepted modes of defiance; what she is fighting for is not personal freedom to paint or picnic (as her husband thinks); she is struggling for the idea that you cannot be caged into giving your life to a version of freedom that belongs to someone else, however worthy that may be. But she knows her kind of freedom comes at a price, including being condemned by society, and that is probably as true today.”

(The Telegraph)

It is interesting to see that in our patriarchal society, a man is usually not questioned as much for dereliction of family duties and responsibilities, like a woman is when she happens to shy away from taking care of her family and children. It is perhaps because man dominates society, and woman is relegated to the submissive and subservient position in family and society. In *All the Lives We Never Lived*, we read that Gayatri's husband leaves his son and family, but he is not called selfish. He is said to have left because he wanted to find mental peace. Others do not question him, and his character is not assailed by society. But when Gayatri does the same, she faces a barrage of disparaging remarks against her character.

Gayatri is a rebel. She breaks away from the traditional and customary practices and behaviour associated with a typical Indian woman. She is admired by some and criticised by others. She prioritises her wishes over those of her son and her family. She is a mother who leaves her son without any explanation. A mother is an image of God on earth, who can do anything for her children and who never leaves her children in trouble. Likewise, a mother is one person who takes care of her children and family more than anyone else. She is questioned for not completing her duties.

Modern-day women writers, such as Anuradha Roy, often take on issues and social situations where women assume new roles to bring about change in the social status of women. In *All the Lives We Never Lived*, Gayatri's revolt against her husband is born out of her

husband's domineering nature. He commands her, never trying to understand her. It is common to see that a lack of mutual understanding between spouses becomes a reason for broken families. Married life needs a healthy understanding between the spouses. Gayatri and her husband possess quite different personalities. Their view, attitude and approach to life are at significant variance. There is no love and understanding between them. Her husband is a traditional and conservative man who likes to dominate her wife. Their relationship is fraught with conflicts. Peace and harmony are noticeably absent from their domestic life. He criticises and mocks her habits and hobbies, and never tries to care for her feelings. They live together as husband and wife only for the sake of appearances; there is no love or respect in their marital bond.

Much like most women, Gayatri looks for the image of her father in her husband. Seeking psychological comfort, she often compares him to his father in most situations. She wishes that her husband would treat her like her father. She cannot overcome her fixation with his father's persona of being a progressive and great parent. He was different from others. His thoughts were ahead of his time in his relationship with his daughter. He treated Gayatri differently as he saw something special in her. He arranged for tutors to teach her language, painting, dance, and music. In those days, singing and dancing were meant to entertain rich men and women. At that time, dancing and singing for a girl was not considered good. It was not considered dignified for women from respectable families.

Gayatri's life was completely changed after her father's death. Her dance and music tutors were dismissed. Her family decided to get her married as soon as possible. She became a burden to her brothers. Word had spread that Gayatri sang and danced, was clever, and had a sharp tongue. The news about her travelling abroad had also been spread, suggesting negative things about her. Everyone would say there was no need for a girl to go overseas. All these questions were also raised by Gayatri's husband, who, in a bid to prove himself superior to

others, would often brag that he married a girl like Gayatri, whom nobody would on account of her wayward and rebellious nature. Thus, Gayatri was supposed to live according to her husband, who did not like her and did not care for her because her likes and aspirations clashed with his conceited sense of dignity and socially approved practices. Although he appreciated many things that Gayatri liked and loved, he did not want them to be taken seriously. He tried to impose his likes and dislikes upon her. He blackmailed her by using the name and identity of her son, Myshkin. He pressed upon her too much, saying she should think about her son above everything. His social reputation was of the utmost importance to him. His wife's dreams and desires meant nothing to him at all.

Gayatri believed in personal happiness above all else. She was a woman of imagination and happiness. Explaining her move to leave her son behind while she went away exploring the world for her happiness, she says in the novel: "I would have thought imagination or happiness, not dignity. And that was just once. Five years ago, Myshkin was too little to learn anything." (35) It was not Gayatri's fault. Her thoughts were the result of her upbringing. Her father nurtured her in a liberal atmosphere. He never restricted her free and independent spirit. He gave her a chance to bloom. That was the reason she could never escape that situation. After her marriage, she was physically bound, but her spirit was still free. Her husband could not understand that side of her. She wanted him to understand her feelings. She was a woman who wanted to enjoy every moment of life. Her soul was free from any bondage. She did not believe in living a traditional life. She wished to live a life without limitations and boundaries. She wanted her son to follow her. She wanted to cultivate and nurture in her son similar interests and passions for life. Life was an art for her that could only be experienced fully through art. Gayatri's decision to leave her son and her family and run away affected the whole family badly. She left her home and family to realise her dreams. But as per the norms of the patriarchal society, her decision was considered a disgraceful act on her part. As a child, her

son, Myshkin, always thought his father controlled her mother. Other women of her time did not have the liberty to do things that her mother did. She was free to do whatever she wanted. She could go anywhere. She could live as she wanted. That is why she was able to take such a bold step of leaving his nine-year-old son.

Myshkin finds a paper written down by Gayatri after a lapse of several years. Confirming her decision not to come back, Gayatri wrote to her husband, "I am not coming back. I am telling you this only so you don't worry about me. Please do not try to find me or stop me. I am twenty-six, and life is running away from me. I wanted more! There are things in us that we cannot fight, however hard we try. I have failed you and failed my child. Forgive me if you can." (142) She wanted to lead a different life. She was unable to live there as she had chosen. Some battles in a person's mind cannot be won, no matter how hard they try. The same thing happened with Gayatri. She could not stop herself from deciding to leave her family. She was strong in her mind and heart, yet she could not take her son with her. It is clear from her letters to Lisa that she did not want her son to leave alone; however, her desire to live on her terms was stronger. She wrote down almost every minute detail about her choices and decisions in those letters. She wanted her son to know everything about her. When he got letters from Lisa after Gayatri's death and read them, he felt like he was with his mother. He felt like he was living every moment and struggle of her mother with every word of her letters. Her letters make it clear that she missed her son like anything.

There is a great contradiction and turmoil in Gayatri's character regarding her relationship with her son. She has a liberal and progressive outlook. She wants to live life freely. But she has a family. She has a small son. He needs her care. Like most women, Gayatri knew well that she was not made for her family, children, and husband. She knew that she was different from others. She also knew that society would ask questions about her. It was true that her husband did not beat her; she did not have to do household chores; her husband was

not a drunk; he did not have an affair outside the home. What was the reason that she had to leave her home? Why did she run away? She answers that a bird was trapped inside her, beating its aspirational wings. She thought of running away with her son, but it could not be. She was not happy with her decision to leave her son alone. After leaving her son and family, Gayatri was not at rest. She was torn into two pieces. Half of her mind and heart were still in Muntazir. She wanted to be at home with her family and son. She made that decision with a heavy heart. One part of her soul was dying inside her. She did not want to kill that part of her soul. She could not forget her son even for a moment. It felt like her heart was beating only for her son. She accepted that she had done wrong to her son. He did not deserve that. He deserved better in his life. It was a mother's cry for his son. However, it was useless to repent for one's deeds. She had done wrong to her son. She should have thought all this through before leaving him alone. As a mother, she cannot be forgiven for her decision. When she went home for good, her past life chased her. She wanted to be happy, but something made her sad. Later, she accepted the truth. To quote her, "I refuse to be miserable, I won't be sick again or have headaches, this is adventure, not abandonment. I want to eat life, grab everything new and taste it." (224).

Gayatri's journey of self-love is a challenging one. She accepts that good things take place when something bad occurs. She is a kind of vagabond who wants to roam worldwide. Gayatri is content but unhappy after leaving her son, family, and home. She feels empty without her son and her surroundings. She shows that women can break free from the traditional expectations placed on them. She demonstrates that women can create their own lives and define their own identities. Women's struggle for freedom and equal rights is significant for marginalised women, who face additional challenges and barriers. These women may be living in poverty, in war zones, or in countries under repressive regimes, where they are denied fundamental human rights, such as the right to education, the right to work, or the right to vote.

They may be activists, organisers, and leaders. Such women are working to create a more just and equitable world for all women.

Today's women novelists are portraying their female characters in new forms to bring change in the situation of women. Anuradha Roy is one such writer, and in *All the Lives We Never Lived*, Roy presents Gayatri as a woman who challenges the patriarchal setup of society. To quote a critic, "Feminist literary theory has begun to invade our consciousness in the wake of post-structuralism...In any case, several post-structuralists are feminists. Naturally, therefore, they are busy creating feminist aesthetics, a feminist literary theory which, out of politeness, is supposed to illuminate past texts but will be fulfilled only in expressly-written texts for theory." (Jaidev 50) Gayatri struggled to find her happiness. She wanted a new world for herself. She was possessed of modern thinking and progressive ideas. She tried to live life at its best. Anuradha Roy attempts to portray a modern, progressive, and liberated woman through the character of Gayatri.

Anuradha Roy's focus is on depicting women's struggle, survival and success in a male-dominated society. In this novel, she has presented a woman who rebels for herself. Gayatri finds her liberty at the cost of her happiness. Gayatri is a progressive woman who breaks the norms set for women in society. A woman is nurtured from the beginning of her life to conform to social norms and rules. She faces criticism and opposition when she dares to listen to her inner voice and follow her passions, leaving everything behind. Gayatri finds satisfaction, but permanent happiness eludes her. The character of Gayatri in *All the Lives We Never Lived* demonstrates that a woman cannot ignore her instincts, regardless of her surroundings or actions.

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