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**EMPOWERING THE FEMININE SPIRIT: A STUDY OF WOMEN'S  
EMPOWERMENT IN ANURADHA ROY'S ALL THE LIVES WE NEVER  
LIVED**

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**Abstract**

Women's empowerment has become an important issue in modern Indian English literature. Indian women writers have used fiction to challenge patriarchy, gender inequality, and the emotional silencing of women in domestic and social spaces. Anuradha Roy, in her novel *All the Lives We Never Lived*, tells a sensitive story of a woman's fight for identity, freedom, and emotional fulfilment. The novel shows how women often have to choose between personal goals and family duties. This choice arises from strict social norms rather than natural necessity. This paper looks at how Roy represents women's empowerment through the character of Gayatri and shows how patriarchal pressure impacts not only women but also their children, especially through the emotional pain of her son, Myshkin. Through a qualitative thematic and textual analysis, the study argues that Roy does not dismiss family or motherhood but calls for a supportive social environment where women can chase their dreams without feeling guilty. The novel ultimately suggests that women's empowerment is vital for emotional balance, healthy relationships, and social progress.

**Keywords:** Women's empowerment, patriarchy, identity, motherhood, social progress**Introduction**

Women's empowerment refers to the process through which, women gain autonomy, self-expression, and the freedom to make meaningful choices in personal and social life. In traditional Indian society, women have long been expected to prioritize family duties over individual desires. Marriage and motherhood are often presented as a woman's ultimate fulfilment, while her personal dreams are treated as secondary or even unnecessary. Such expectations have limited women's opportunities for self-realization and emotional growth. Indian English literature has played a significant role in questioning these deeply rooted

beliefs. Women writers, in particular, have explored the silent suffering of women within families, revealing how emotional neglect can be as damaging as physical oppression.

### **Review of Literature**

Several scholars have examined Anuradha Roy's fiction for its emotional depth, psychological realism, and social awareness. Critics often point out that Roy's novels focus on the inner lives of women who are trapped within restrictive social structures. Her female characters are not loud rebels; they are sensitive individuals who suffer silently.

Studies on *All the Lives We Never Lived* highlight themes of alienation, motherhood, memory, and loss. Some critics interpret Gayatri's departure from home as an act of feminist resistance; others view it as a tragic consequence of emotional neglect. Feminist critics emphasize that the novel questions the traditional image of the self-sacrificing mother and challenges the idea that a woman's identity must be limited to domestic roles.

However, limited attention has been given to the emotional impact of patriarchal decisions on children. Myshkin's suffering is often mentioned but not deeply analyzed in relation to women's empowerment. This paper attempts to bridge this gap by examining how the suppression of a woman's identity leads to emotional trauma for her child, affecting the entire family structure.

### **Research Methodology**

This is a qualitative study that employs thematic and textual analysis. The primary text under discussion is *All the Lives We Never Lived*. Books, articles and scholarly papers on feminism and Indian English literature were used as secondary sources to analyze the text's themes, characterizations and narrative structure.

### **Patriarchy and Emotional Suppression**

Patriarchy is not expressed through cruelty in the novel. Instead it is expressed through emotional silence. Gayatri's husband is not abusive or violent; he is too practical and emotionally distant for that. He does not appreciate Gayatri's artistic interests or emotional needs. Instead of acknowledging her attempts to share her enthusiasm, he dismisses her as invisible in the house. In the novel *All the Lives We Never Lived* by Anuradha Roy patriarchal control is expressed through everyday family conversations. When Gayatri's husband says, **"Painting, singing, dancing, these are wonderful things. Everyone needs hobbies. But there are hobbies and then there are serious matters"** (Roy, p.35). He objectifies her artistic passion and turns it into an activity. Calling an art "a hobby" dismisses her creative spirit and symbolizes the traditional view that a woman's main function is to take care of domestic duties instead of expressing herself. This speech is a form of emotional repression wherein Gayatri's passions are dismissed along with her hopes and ambitions. Her "serious" husband sees her inner being as unimportant compared to societal "serious matters". Through one of their conversations Roy embodies how patriarchy silences women not only with violence but with denigration, trivialization and control over them. The

single line reveals the power of patriarchy to suppress not only a woman's self according to her will but also the very essence of her existence. It shows how under the guise of fulfilling her material needs she is denied emotional support. Gayatri's inner ego is diminished and entrenched into the role of wife and mother. Roy emphasizes the damage of such denigration because it destroys the ego inside a woman under the pretense of maintaining a normal family.

### **Women's Identity and the Desire of Selfhood**

Anuradha Roy constructs Gayatri as a passionate creative soul and a person with an inquiring mind. She looks forward to a fruitful young life before her marriage with a lot of art, freedom and self, expression. Before her marriage Gayatri encounters Rabindra nath Tagore on a boat trip where she demonstrates her innate artistic sensibility and an autonomous way of thinking in her adolescence. Tagore equates the sound of the Sea with the symbol of grief and lamentation and Gayatri answers, **"I'm not sad, I'm not thinking of tears, The water is blue and beautiful, I want to paint it"** (Roy, p.30) This proves to be an allegorical moment for Gayatri's artistic integrity in her pre, marital life. On the other hand, her lifestyle changes profoundly to the extent that her childhood expressions of free and invulnerable spirit are transformed into the emotional bondage, repression and grim monopoly of her silenced life. Though her passion for art is never dulled, it is maintained internally in the restricted world of marriage and family, defining her as a woman whose recognition as an identity has not been entirely abolished but for whom her selfhood is frustrated.

### **Women's Empowerment as a Human Right**

Women's empowerment in the novel is one of self, realization rather than of rebellion. Roy does not seem to be romanticising Gayatri's decision to leave home but he is sensitive in showing reasons for her decision. Roy recognizes Gayatri's decision as one that is rooted in desperation and not selfishness. Her decision is based on years of being ignored and misunderstood. Roy argues in the strongest terms that Gayatri would not have had to be in a dilemma between her dreams and Motherhood if the members of her family had supported her in her aspirations. Roy questions the society that traps women in such idealise choices where men are free to pursue their ambitions as well as family life. **"I can never go back now; the doors are shut forever... It is as if a giant black mouth of a volcano is before me and I am about to fall into it, no idea what's at the bottom"** (Roy, P.218). In this passage Roy depicts the emotional state of Gayatri as one with moments of extreme fear and imprisonment. The image of permanently closed doors signifies a life where choice and freedom have been taken away. Gayatri's state of panic does not occur suddenly, but Roy shows that it is a gradual silencing, of her voice, her wants and her creative self. By showing the climax of the inner breakdown of Gayatri, Roy brings out the human toll of denying women their basic human rights. Gender empowerment does not mean rebellion or dissent in the novel, Roy is able to convincingly show that it is in essence about the basic human right to dignity, to be able to talk and to control the life that one lives. When such rights are

taken away from women, the novel reveals that women carry their lives in emotional terms and as a broken being.

### **Motherhood and Social Expectations**

Motherhood is a hailed concept in Indian society and women are presumed to sacrifice their personal happiness and lives for their children. According to “good motherhood” a woman is supposed to forget herself entirely. Gayatri violates the principles of “good motherhood” and thus is rejected by the society. Roy criticizes this definition of motherhood and seeks to redefine it. ‘Motherhood should not imply the negative concept of obliteration of a woman’. A woman without mental peace cannot guarantee emotional security to her children. So the concept of women’s empowerment becomes important in motherhood.

### **Myth of the Self, Sacrificing Woman**

This novel attempts to expose the myth that women are biologically inclined to sacrifice. The suffering that Gayatri undergoes unveils that the type of sacrifice asked from the woman born out of government also flattens her, reduces her to an emotional wreck. What Roy questions is that why life sacrifices of women are celebrated and their dreams shut in darkness. Through the depiction of Gayatri’s pain, the novel aims to challenge and redefine the norms of gender roles. According to Roy, empowerment involves the sharing of duties in equal terms and not the jettisoning of them.

### **Impact on the Child: Myshkin’s Emotional Trauma**

The emotional pain experienced by Myshkin is one of the most poignant parts of the novel. He is only nine when he cannot understand why his mother has gone away. The opening lines of the novel, when Roy speaks of Gayatri’s leaving, depict the emotional pain felt by Myshkin. He tells us, **“In my childhood, I was known as the boy whose mother had run off with an Englishman. The man was in fact German, but in small, town India in those days all white foreigners were thought of as British”**(Roy, p. 1). Myshkin, by revealing his feelings, demonstrates how grounded he is in societal opinion and how much blame is deflected onto the girl. The phrase ‘I was known as the boy’, positions Myshkin as one of silence and categorization. In terms of his emotional well, being, the past tense of the phrase can be seen as the pain, induced replacement of a human being with a singular predetermined idea. This suggests emotional damage and the pain thereof. These feelings of confusion and shame remain with him throughout his childhood as he is brought up in a conservative environment with much misunderstandings and misanthropic attitudes about such things. Roy conveys how the imbalance of patriarchal ideology and post, colonial arrogance impacts on the emotional life of a nine year old. Myshkin narrates feeling of loneliness, parents seeming intellectually absent and “emotional darkness”. Roy emphasizes how Myshkin’s difficult upbringing, along with the moral failings of his family and the social condemnation creates a deep sense of guilt in him.

### **Silence, Memory, and Loss**

The novel is told through memory. It explores an exploration of how silence impacts people’s lives. Myshkin, from a very tender age, keeps silent questions with regard to his

own mother. Memory is where his feeling, pain, longing and knowledge meet. Roy uses silence as a potent way of story, telling. The unspeakable feelings in the family reveal that lack of communication breaks family bonds. Hence, women empowerment is associated with release of silence.

### **Social Pressure and Collective Responsibility**

Roy criticizes society for blaming the woman for the broken family and expecting her to bear the whole burden of family unity. Gayatri is accused of destroying the family while the lack of compassion in her attempt to deal with it all is ignored. The book demonstrates that it is not an individual but a collective failure and hoping to show up the imbalance makes an appeal for change. Families and society need to take equal responsibility in providing for woman's emotional and creative needs.

### **Roy's Vision of Social Change**

Anuradha Roy is no call for radical rebellion. Her image of empowerment is moderate and humane. She argues that families can flourish when women are living full and happy lives. Roy's reading is that empowerment strengthens families, rather than tears them apart. Women are potentially better wives and Parents. The novel thus advocates understanding, empathy, and equality within family structures.

### **Relevance of the Novel to Today to Society**

The themes explored in *All the Lives We Never Lived* are still relevant in our modern society. How many women suffer emotionally regardless of the advancement of society? There are still many who struggle between living their dreams and sacrificing them for a family. The book should challenge the reader to change old values and be more open to life and gender equality. It advocates for empowerment over the fear of losing one's culture while bringing harmony to society.

### **Conclusion**

*All the Lives We Never Lived* offers a poignant attack on patriarchal forces, which often suppress the lives of women. The book through the character of Gayatri, demonstrates the psychological toll it takes when one's identity and aspirations are negated by gender. Similarly, one sees how the rigid expectations of society and the lack of emotional expression harm children like Myshkin. This paper ultimately argues for the importance of empowering women to achieve sound families and a well, functioning society. Roy's book encourages the reader to construct a nurturing environment for women such that they do not have to forfeit their fulfilment to their families. Empowerment, as portrayed by the book, is not rebellion, rather understanding and humanity and finding one's balance.

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