

Freedom and Identity in Anuradha Roy's *All the Lives We Never Lived*

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Abstract

Anuradha Roy's *All the Lives We Never Lived* (2018) is a compelling exploration of the complex relationship between freedom and identity within the socio-political and cultural landscape of colonial India. Through the intertwined experiences of Gayatri, Nirmal, and their son Myshkin, Roy investigates the tension between individual aspirations and the restrictive forces of patriarchy, nationalism, family obligations, and colonial power. The novel presents freedom not merely as political liberation but as an existential pursuit involving selfhood, artistic expression, emotional autonomy, and personal choice. Identity, likewise, emerges as a dynamic construct shaped by memory, history, gender, cultural traditions, and interpersonal relationships.

This paper examines the interconnected themes of freedom and identity from feminist and postcolonial perspectives while drawing upon theories of identity formation, cultural memory, and gender studies. It argues that Roy challenges conventional narratives of nationalism by foregrounding personal freedom, particularly women's agency, as equally significant to collective liberation. Gayatri's struggle for self-realization demonstrates the limitations imposed upon women within patriarchal structures, whereas Myshkin's narration illustrates the enduring influence of memory in reconstructing fragmented identities. The novel ultimately suggests that identity remains fluid, continually negotiated through experiences of displacement, art, memory, and historical trauma. Roy's narrative expands contemporary Indian English fiction by integrating private histories with national history and by emphasizing the importance of emotional and intellectual freedom in the formation of human identity.

Keywords: Freedom, Identity, Feminism, Memory, Gender, Colonial India

Introduction

Contemporary Indian English literature has increasingly shifted its attention from grand political narratives toward intimate explorations of memory, identity, gender, and individual freedom. Rather than presenting history solely through the perspectives of political leaders or historical events, contemporary novelists often examine how ordinary individuals negotiate historical transformations within domestic and emotional spaces. Among these writers, Anuradha Roy occupies a significant position because of her ability to combine historical realities with deeply psychological narratives. Her fiction consistently investigates the relationship between personal lives and political structures, emphasizing how identity develops within complex intersections of history, family, culture, and memory. Published in 2018, *All the Lives We Never Lived* represents one of Roy's most accomplished novels. Set primarily during the final decades of British colonial rule in India, the narrative intertwines personal experiences with global historical developments, including the rise of fascism in Europe, anti-colonial nationalism, and the cultural movements that transformed twentieth-century societies. However, unlike conventional historical novels that foreground political events, Roy concentrates on emotional histories—the hidden experiences, unrealized ambitions, and silenced voices that rarely enter official historical records.

The novel is narrated by Myshkin Chand Rozario, who reflects upon his childhood and the disappearance of his mother, Gayatri. Through his memories, the narrative reconstructs a family marked by emotional distance, artistic aspirations, patriarchal expectations, and historical uncertainty. Gayatri's departure from her family forms the emotional center of the novel. Rather than portraying her simply as a negligent mother, Roy presents her as an individual struggling to preserve her intellectual curiosity, artistic freedom, and personal identity within a rigid patriarchal household. Her decision challenges traditional assumptions regarding motherhood, domesticity, and feminine responsibility.

"In my childhood, I was known as the boy whose mother had run off with an Englishman." (Roy 2)

Freedom functions as one of the novel's central philosophical concerns. Roy repeatedly demonstrates that freedom cannot be reduced to political independence alone. Although India's anti-colonial movement forms the historical background of the narrative, the novel simultaneously questions whether political liberation necessarily guarantees individual freedom. Characters continue to experience various forms of emotional, psychological, cultural, and gendered oppression even while nationalist ideals promise collective emancipation. Consequently, the narrative distinguishes between external freedom

and internal freedom, suggesting that genuine liberation requires both social transformation and personal self-realization.

The concept of identity occupies an equally important place within the novel. Identity is not portrayed as a fixed or stable category but as an evolving process shaped by memory, relationships, displacement, artistic expression, and historical experience. Myshkin reconstructs his understanding of himself through fragmented memories of his childhood and his mother's absence. Similarly, Gayatri's identity continually evolves as she negotiates conflicting expectations imposed by family, society, and her own intellectual desires. Roy therefore rejects essentialist notions of identity and instead portrays selfhood as fluid, relational, and historically situated.

The novel also offers a powerful feminist critique of patriarchal institutions. Traditional Indian society often defines women primarily through domestic roles such as wifehood and motherhood. Roy challenges these assumptions by presenting Gayatri as a woman whose aspirations extend beyond domestic obligations. Her attraction to literature, art, and intellectual freedom reflects a broader desire for self-definition. Although her decisions generate suffering for those around her, the novel refuses simplistic moral judgments. Instead, Roy encourages readers to recognize the psychological violence produced by systems that deny women opportunities for personal fulfillment.

From a postcolonial perspective, the novel expands conventional understandings of colonialism by illustrating how imperial domination intersects with indigenous structures of authority. Patriarchy, class hierarchy, cultural conservatism, and familial expectations often restrict individual autonomy as profoundly as colonial governance itself. Roy thereby demonstrates that decolonization cannot remain merely political; it must also involve the dismantling of oppressive social institutions that continue to regulate identity and freedom after colonial rule.

Memory constitutes another major dimension through which freedom and identity are explored. Myshkin's narration reveals that remembering is never a neutral process. Memory reconstructs the past through emotion, imagination, and personal interpretation. His recollections transform individual experiences into broader reflections upon history, belonging, and loss. The fragmented nature of memory also reflects the fragmented nature of identity itself, suggesting that human beings continually recreate themselves through acts of remembrance.

Freedom and Identity

The concepts of freedom and identity have occupied a central position in literary, philosophical, and cultural studies. In postcolonial literature, these concepts acquire

additional complexity because individual lives are shaped by the intersecting forces of colonial domination, nationalism, patriarchy, and cultural traditions. Anuradha Roy's *All the Lives We Never Lived* examines these intersections by presenting characters whose identities are constantly negotiated between personal aspirations and social expectations. A comprehensive analysis of the novel therefore requires a theoretical framework that incorporates postcolonial theory, feminist criticism, and cultural theories of identity.

Stuart Hall argues that identity is never fixed or complete; rather, it is a continuous process of becoming. Individuals construct their identities through history, memory, language, and cultural experiences instead of inheriting a permanent and stable self.

"Identity is a 'production,' which is never complete, always in process." (Hall 222)

Hall's understanding of identity is particularly relevant to Roy's novel because the identities of Gayatri and Myshkin evolve through experiences of displacement, emotional conflict, and historical change. Their identities are neither predetermined nor static but remain open to reinterpretation throughout the narrative.

Similarly, Homi K. Bhabha emphasizes that colonial societies generate hybrid identities rather than pure or homogeneous cultural identities.

"It is in the emergence of the interstices—the overlap and displacement of domains of difference—that the intersubjective and collective experiences of nationness are negotiated." (Bhabha 2)

Colonial encounters create spaces where multiple cultures interact, producing new forms of selfhood. Roy's fictional world reflects this hybridity through its engagement with Indian traditions, European artistic influences, colonial institutions, and global political events. The novel suggests that identity develops through cultural interaction rather than cultural isolation.

From a feminist perspective, Simone de Beauvoir's observation that women are socially constructed through patriarchal expectations provides another significant framework for understanding Gayatri's experiences.

"One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman." (Beauvoir 283)

Patriarchal society frequently defines women according to their domestic roles while discouraging intellectual independence and creative self-expression. Roy challenges this social construction by portraying Gayatri as an individual whose aspirations cannot be contained within conventional definitions of wifehood and motherhood.

Identity and the Search for Selfhood

Identity constitutes the emotional core of *All the Lives We Never Lived*. Rather than presenting identity as fixed, Roy portrays it as an evolving negotiation between memory,

family, culture, and individual choice. Every principal character struggles to reconcile private desires with public expectations.

Gayatri's identity remains divided between competing roles. Society expects her to perform the duties of an ideal wife and mother, yet her intellectual imagination continually urges her toward artistic exploration and personal autonomy. This internal conflict produces emotional alienation that ultimately transforms her life.

Roy refuses to interpret Gayatri's search for selfhood as selfish individualism. Instead, her journey exposes the limitations of social systems that deny women opportunities for self-definition. The novel encourages readers to understand identity as an ethical necessity rather than a luxury available only to privileged individuals.

Myshkin's identity develops through memory. As the narrator reconstructs his childhood, he simultaneously reconstructs himself. His narration illustrates that personal identity depends not only upon lived experience but also upon the meanings individuals assign to those experiences. Memory therefore becomes an active process of identity formation rather than passive recollection.

"I am of a temperament that needs the written word. For anything to have meaning, it has to be set down, it must live on paper before it is fully alive in my head. It has to be a series of words in a sequence in order to reveal a meaning and pattern." (Roy 47)

Roy's narrative structure reinforces this idea. The fragmented chronology reflects the fragmented nature of identity itself. Past and present continually intersect, suggesting that human beings never completely escape their histories. Identity remains unfinished because memory continually reshapes the significance of earlier experiences.

Feminist Perspective: Gayatri's Quest for Freedom

A feminist reading identifies Gayatri as one of the most intellectually complex female protagonists in contemporary Indian English fiction. Rather than representing idealized motherhood, Roy presents a woman whose emotional, intellectual, and artistic aspirations challenge patriarchal definitions of femininity.

"Sometimes I take my glasses off to see differently from other people . Colours and words swim into each other, meanings change on the page. In the distance, everything becomes a pastel blur. There is a kind of restfulness in not seeing well that the clear-sighted will never know" (Roy 132)

Traditional patriarchal ideology frequently celebrates female sacrifice as the highest moral virtue. Women are expected to subordinate their ambitions to family responsibilities, often at the expense of personal fulfilment. Roy interrogates this expectation by asking whether self-sacrifice necessarily produces justice or happiness.

Gayatri's fascination with literature, painting, and intellectual life reflects her desire for an identity independent of domestic expectations. Her attraction toward artistic communities symbolizes the possibility of alternative forms of existence beyond rigid family structures. Although her decisions generate emotional consequences, the novel consistently resists reducing her character to moral stereotypes.

"Everyone needs hobbies. Especially women, who are so bound up in the home." (Roy 169)

Roy demonstrates that patriarchal institutions frequently produce impossible choices for women. Gayatri must choose between social acceptance and personal authenticity because society refuses to accommodate both simultaneously. Her departure therefore becomes a symbolic rejection of systems that deny women intellectual freedom. Roy also avoids romanticizing freedom. Gayatri's pursuit of autonomy involves loneliness, uncertainty, and emotional loss. Freedom requires difficult choices and personal responsibility. The novel thus portrays liberation as an ongoing process rather than a permanent achievement.

By centring Gayatri's experiences, Roy challenges literary traditions that privilege male political struggles while marginalizing women's emotional histories. She argues that women's search for identity deserves the same historical and ethical significance as nationalist movements themselves.

This feminist perspective ultimately broadens the novel's understanding of freedom. True liberation cannot exist while half of society remains confined by restrictive gender expectations. Roy therefore links individual emancipation with broader social transformation, suggesting that democracy and equality remain incomplete unless they include women's intellectual, emotional, and creative autonomy.

Conclusion

Anuradha Roy's *All the Lives We Never Lived* is a profound exploration of freedom, identity, memory, and human relationships within the historical context of colonial India. The novel moves beyond the conventional framework of political history by foregrounding the emotional and psychological struggles of individuals whose lives remain largely absent from official historical narratives. Through the experiences of Gayatri, Myshkin, and Nirmal, Roy demonstrates that the search for freedom is not limited to national independence but extends to intellectual autonomy, emotional fulfilment, artistic expression, and the right to self-definition.

This study has argued that freedom and identity are inseparable concepts throughout the novel. Freedom enables individuals to construct authentic identities, while identity provides the foundation for meaningful freedom. Roy rejects simplistic definitions of

liberation by illustrating that external political change cannot automatically eliminate internal forms of oppression embedded within patriarchal families, cultural traditions, and social expectations. The narrative therefore challenges readers to reconsider the relationship between public history and private experience.

A feminist reading reveals Gayatri as one of the most complex female protagonists in contemporary Indian English fiction. Rather than presenting her as either an ideal mother or a rebellious individual, Roy portrays her as a woman negotiating conflicting responsibilities, desires, and aspirations. Her search for intellectual and artistic freedom exposes the limitations imposed by patriarchal society and raises fundamental questions about women's agency, autonomy, and identity. Roy does not romanticize freedom but portrays it as a difficult process involving sacrifice, uncertainty, and emotional consequences.

The theoretical perspectives of Stuart Hall, Homi K. Bhabha, Simone de Beauvoir, and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak further illuminate the novel's engagement with identity, hybridity, gender, and marginality. Roy's fiction demonstrates that these theoretical concerns are not abstract philosophical ideas but lived realities experienced within ordinary families and everyday relationships.

All the Lives We Never Lived affirms that every individual possesses unrealized possibilities shaped by historical circumstances, personal choices, and social structures. Roy's novel reminds readers that true freedom requires more than political independence; it demands recognition of individual dignity, respect for personal autonomy, and the courage to imagine lives beyond inherited limitations. By integrating history, memory, feminism, and postcolonial consciousness, Roy has produced a significant contribution to contemporary Indian English literature that continues to resonate with modern discussions of identity, gender, and freedom.

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