Article

Impure Subjects within Power Structures: Female Subjectivity in Anuradha Roy's *All the Lives We Never Lived*

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Abstract

Anuradha Roy's novel *All the Lives We Never Lived* explores female subjectivity during the Indian independence movement. This article applies Irene Gedalof's feminist theoretical framework, particularly her critique of purity and her emphasis on the mobility and positionality of subjectivity, to examine two female characters from different backgrounds in the novel: the traditional widow, Lipi, and the Westernised nomadic figure, Gayatri. The analysis demonstrates that female agency is not merely defined by acts of resistance, but is produced through complex processes of power, discipline, and negotiation. These processes are often marked by contradictions, sacrifices, and even physical disappearance.

Keywords: *All the Lives We Never Lived*; Indian independence movement; purity; two female characters; female agency; negotiation

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Introduction

Indian English novelist Anuradha Roy is internationally recognised for her five novels: *An Atlas of Impossible Longing* (2008), *The Folded Earth* (2011), *Sleeping on Jupiter* (2015), *All the Lives We Never Lived* (2018), and *The Earthspinner* (2021). Her novels, translated into 18 languages, have received major awards such as the DSC Prize for South Asian Literature (2016) and the Tata Book of the Year Award for Fiction 2018 (2019). However, as Anna M. Horatschek notes, "there is very little critical literature available, except for some reviews and a few essays" (2024, 146), which indicates a gap in scholarly research on Roy's works. Her Sahitya Akademi Award-winning novel *All the Lives We Never Lived* unfolds through the first-person narration of Myshkin. He recalls how his mother, Gayatri—a talented painter—defied patriarchal and nationalist expectations by leaving their home for Dutch-held Bali in the 1930s to pursue artistic and personal freedom. Following her departure, Lipi, a widow who later becomes Myshkin's stepmother, enters the household and navigates patriarchal constraints through quiet endurance. Her restrained agency ultimately erupts into self-destructive defiance when she sets fire to household items and attempts to harm herself. The novel "touches upon transforming lives of women, their idea of freedom and the price they pay for it" (Asha 2021, 20), which provides us with an opportunity to understand the experiences of women during the Indian independence movement.

Existing scholarship on the novel encompasses multiple dimensions, including ecocriticism, gender studies, trauma studies, and postcolonial perspectives on the construction of national identity. Among these, the exploration of female characters has attracted particular academic attention. Most studies focus on the protagonist Gayatri, portraying her as a rebel who challenges traditional gender roles and pursues self-expression. Some scholars emphasise how Gayatri's painting and exile serve as means to break free from patriarchal oppression through a feminist lens (Farooq, Aurangzeb, Khan 2023; Suganya and Selvaraj 2021). Other research situates Gayatri's actions within the historical context of Indian feminism and nation-building, arguing that her rejection of the ideal of the "good woman" reflects a critique and reconstruction of national gender norms (Horatschek 2024). Additionally, some scholars try to enrich the understanding of female experience by employing ecocritical (Arunya and Kumar 2024) and spatial geographic (Mondal 2024) approaches.

Existing research generally tends to categorise Gayatri as either a "victim" or a "resister," yet it is worth further critical reflection whether Gayatri's subjectivity, as portrayed in these studies, truly represents a pure act of free choice, or if her departure and betrayal are, in fact, always situated within negotiations and mediations in structural power networks. In comparison, the secondary female character, Lipi, has received insufficient attention. Scholars seem to assume that only women like Gayatri—who ultimately choose to escape—are genuine rebels, thereby neglecting figures such as Lipi, a "traditional woman" who challenges the very notion of a "pure space" and the "timeless," "stable, unchanging permanent essence" (Gedalof 1999, 41–43).

Irene Gedalof argues for the development of a model of power that gives up on the search for pure, power-free zones and instead analyses how power simultaneously constrains and enables women, and produces them as complex, impure subjects whose agency emerges through negotiation and resistance (1999, 220). Building on Gedalof's insights, this article reconsiders female subjectivity in *All the Lives We Never Lived*. By analysing two distinct types of female figures, Lipi and Gayatri, this study explores how women negotiate their subjectivities within and against intersecting structures of nation and family. Rather than seeking a fixed space of emancipation, these characters challenge binary gender frameworks by engaging in negotiation and resistance that are frequently marked by ambivalence. This analysis moves beyond the traditional feminist dichotomy of resistance versus compliance and proposes a more inclusive theoretical approach of "impure female subjectivity."

The Women Question in Colonial India and New Models of Femininity

At the end of the nineteenth century, Indian society faced intense tensions between colonial influence and the project of national self-fashioning. British colonial discourse, which portrayed India as "the dark land of heathens wallowing in a corrosive moral evil" (Varma 2007, 3), positioned British rule as the bearer of science and enlightenment. The Western-educated Indian middle and upper classes internalised this critique, using it as a motivation for self-improvement. Against this backdrop, "the woman question" emerged as a crucial discursive site through which middle- and upper-class men sought to demonstrate the rationality and civility associated with their social position and to promote cultural rejuvenation.

Hindu nationalists like Raja Ram Mohan Roy and Dayananda Saraswati criticised traditional practices such as sati, child marriage, and the prohibition of widow remarriage. They advocated for a progressive approach to revitalise Hindu culture, emphasising women's education as key. The figure of the "chaste upper-caste woman" thus became a symbol of consolidated Hindu identity. Significantly, these reforms were primarily directed towards women of their own class, functioning as a form of "internal regulation" that ultimately reinforced patriarchal structures within the elite circles.

From the history of male-led reforms addressing women's issues in India, "it is this production of women as (impure) subjects—managed, contained, but also valorised, enabled and empowered—that helps to make their subordination so persistent" (Gedalof 1999, 179). Although men's social reforms, especially in education and public participation, were often driven by patriarchal logics serving male-dominated reform agendas and nation-building projects, this process also created "a certain space of autonomy" for women. With the spread of education, more women's organisations emerged in India and gradually penetrated the political sphere (Basu 1995, 154–155). Women who once depended on men began to actively devote themselves to improving their status, fighting not only for political independence but also for their own rights.

Gedalof's theory provides a valuable framework for analysing this history by emphasising the complex and contradictory nature of women's subjectivity within patriarchal and nationalist power structures. Her theoretical engagement begins with a critique of the negative model of power as merely repressive or exclusionary, and the associated notion of women as an "inert or consenting target" of power. She pays particular attention to a phenomenon highlighted by Indian feminist scholarship: the "curious visibility" of women in the construction of national and communal identities (Roy 1995, 10). Women are often inscribed into a notion of "purity" tied to ideas of fixed origins and timeless tradition, in order to sustain the imagined narrative of community identity as natural, stable, and birth-based.

In her writings, Gedalof redefines this language of purity and impurity, which historically stems from Hindu patriarchal discourse where purity signifies female chastity and spiritual elevation, while impurity is associated with transgression, sexuality, and lower-caste pollution. Rather than treating these as mere moral binaries, she reconceptualises them using Michel Foucault's notion of productive power, which understands power as producing "impure subjects" who are simultaneously empowered and constrained. Within this framework, purity and impurity are not static conditions but processes through which power produces, disciplines, and regulates subjects.

Drawing on Foucault's idea that repression and rebellion, passivity and activity, incapacitation and agency cannot be neatly separated, Gedalof transforms the "impure subject" into a theoretical category—one whose agency emerges within, rather than outside of, disciplinary structures. To be "impure" thus signifies inhabiting contradiction: being simultaneously constrained by and enabled through the very systems of power that seek to define and contain womanhood. Purity no longer marks moral elevation but a fantasy of coherence and fixity, while impurity designates the instability, hybridity, and mobility of subjectivity produced under intersecting conditions of gender, race, and nation. Accordingly, in this essay, the terms "pure" and "impure" are used not as moral descriptors but as analytic tools to trace how women's identities are produced through and against the disciplinary mechanisms of nationalism and patriarchy.

Gedalof's theoretical framework further synthesises diverse intellectual resources. She draws on Judith Butler's insight that sex is materialised in order to produce viable subjects within the context of specific productive power relations. Additionally, she draws on Rosi Braidotti's model of the "nomadic subject" to emphasise transition, transformation, and resistance to fixity in rethinking feminist subjectivity. Most significantly, Indian feminist scholarship provides her with crucial empirical and conceptual insights, revealing women's strategic positioning in the construction of communal and national identities, the disciplining of their bodies, and their complex, situated practices of self-making under conditions of constraint.

Building on the aforementioned critiques and theoretical incorporations, Gedalof articulates her central theoretical framework: an advocacy against purity. She calls for working with the instabilities power produces as it both enables and constrains women (Gedalof 1999, 169), arguing that "sites of resistance come not just from where women have been excluded but also from where they have been made central" (Gedalof 1999, 189). "Given the ways in which the stability of national, racialised and other community identities seem to depend on a conflation of 'Woman/women' with community, and on the disallowing of a specifically female self, it seems important that feminists insist on holding on to some concept of the individual self for women" (Gedalof 1999, 62). One way to achieve this is to "insist that women have access to this complex, mobile and 'impure' subject-position, rather than remain fixed in/as the pure space of community identities" (Gedalof 1999, 63).

Drawing on Gedalof's theoretical framework, enriched by empirical and conceptual insights from Indian feminist scholarship as well as critical engagements with Western feminist thought, this article undertakes a close analysis of *All the Lives We Never Lived*. It examines two representative female characters from different social backgrounds and class positions: Lipi, who embodies a more traditional feminine figure; and Gayatri, who is perceived as a Westernised woman. They exemplify what Gedalof terms impure subjects, those who are produced and disciplined by power while simultaneously resisting their reduction to symbolic or instrumental roles.

Performative Resistance and the Withdrawal of Consent: Lipi as an Impure Subject within the Discourse of Chastity

Lipi, the new mother of Myshkin, is "rescued" by his father Nek from a large Indian family in the Kumaon region. As the youngest son's widow—a woman branded with misfortune due to her husband's early death—she is regarded by the family as inauspicious. Furthermore, because she has only a daughter rather than a son, they treat her with contempt, forcing her to work "all day around the house, slaving" (Roy 2018, 145). Lipi's precarious existence as a widow is not merely an individual plight but is embedded in the specific socio-historical context of Kumaon. In pre-colonial Kumaoni society, kinship structures retained traces of matrilineal order; therefore, the social norms "permitted not only divorce and remarriage, but also granted the widow the right to remarry" (Pande 2015, 29). However, as the colonial rule was strengthened, Brahmin elites who gained privileged access to colonial education gradually assumed control over the discourse of social reform. These indigenous intellectuals sought to transform Kumaon into a more "civilised" and "moral" society, but the civilisational ideals they upheld drew heavily on Brahmanical ethics, upper-caste conceptions of chastity, and Victorian gender norms brought by the English colonists. They rejected the practice of bride-price as a "sale of women," undermined the prevalent custom of widow remarriage, and valorised sati as the ultimate expression of moral womanhood (Pande 1996, 113–114). Separate instances of sati in 1918, 1921, and even in 1950 were

invariably reported in local journals as the pious act of *pativratas* or women devoted to their husbands (Pande 1996, 115).

Gabriele Dietrich argues that "as women are crucial in the organisation of the home and the socialization of children, cultural control over them is fundamental to the continuity, not only of the race, but of tradition and communal identity itself" (1994, 44). The male reformers' valorisation of widow chastity in fact locates the widow in a fixed, eternal, and purely domestic position. Lipi, however, does not commit sati. Her body and her desire, no longer protected by the normative institution of marriage, become a perceived threat to social order and are themselves coded as misfortune—"it is the female body's capacity for birth that makes women crucial to the preservation of a particular community's integrity and purity" (Gedalof 1999, 34). Yet Lipi has not borne a son, and thus cannot provide the pure bloodline needed to continue the family lineage. She is therefore denied the legitimate role of a mother and disqualified as a "useful body." Moreover, she does not remarry in a conventionally acceptable way but runs away with Nek in his so-called "rescue" act to escape her suffering and becomes his new wife.

In this sense, Lipi exists outside the culturally idealised construct of the chaste widow, and as such becomes an impure subject. Although the novel is narrated from Myshkin's perspective and offers little detail on her resistance, her very existence constitutes a silent rebellion against the moral codes of widow chastity. She embodies neither purity, obedience nor self-sacrifice, but instead challenges the myth of female virtue through her quiet, embodied defiance of dominant gender norms. What appears to be a passive "rescue" is in fact a survival strategy under harsh moral discipline. Foucault critiques the view of power as merely repressive and exclusionary, insisting instead that power produces reality and subjects themselves (1977, 194). From this perspective, Lipi is not simply a passive product of gendered disciplinary regimes, but a subject who is continually constituted, regulated, and who simultaneously escapes through the dialectic of obedience and resistance.

Lipi demonstrates her survival wisdom through calculated domestic strategies within the new family, such as pleasing her stepson Myshkin and attending to her father-in-law, by which she carves out a small space for herself. Upon entering Myshkin's household, she compares it to a "new school" and asks him to guide her to the bathroom and kitchen, thereby asserting a minimal form of agency to secure a place for herself. Myshkin reflects that for the first time in his life he had a sense of his own power (Roy 2018, 147). However, what he perceives as a newfound importance is in fact an emotional empowerment granted by Lipi. Her seemingly pitiful behaviour should be understood as a form of performativity in Judith Butler's sense. Through exaggerated emotional gestures, Lipi occupies the symbolic position of "mother." She lays out fresh clothes on his bed before Myshkin gets back from school (146), and prepares delicious poori, tomato-red aloo, and cake for him. Lipi's performance of motherhood oscillates between submission and manipulation. Rather than directly confronting gender norms,

she destabilises them through mimicry, exerting her influence and gaining a sense of presence from her marginalised domestic role.

As Butler argues, because "norms need to be continuously reiterated and rearticulated, because bodies need to be materialized, there is always the possibility for rearticulations that call into question the hegemonic force of that very regulatory law" (Butler 1993, 2). It is precisely through such reiterations and rearticulations that Lipi creates small yet tangible fractures in the gender regime. One moment of collapse in her performance of motherhood occurs when she hurriedly devours the leftover cake after Myshkin leaves the table. She claims that the cake was bought especially for him, but as soon as he rises, before he even fully exits the room, she reaches out for the rest of the cake. Myshkin observes and narrates the scene: "She took a bite, such a big bite that her mouth was stuffed to bursting … she moved her swollen cheek as if she were a frog … She sniffed hard as she chewed, even so, her nose dripped" (147). Lipi's act of wolfing down the cake, together with her physiological responses, serves as a bodily, instinctive release of suppressed desire and shatters the ideal image of a restrained and sacrificial mother. This moment constitutes a temporary departure from the mother role, which allows her to fleetingly occupy a space that belongs to herself.

After being "rescued," Lipi is endowed by Nek with a form of "curious visibility." He buys her "five white khadi saris with borders in green, saffron, and white, the colors of the Congress Party's independence flag" (149), and insists that "she wears only handspun saris." The khadi is the hand-spun cloth advocated by Gandhi as a symbol of anti-colonial resistance. According to Partha Chatterjee, Indian nationalists separate the social space into *ghar* and *bāhir*, the home and the world, with woman as the core of the Indian national spirit (Chatterjee 1989, 624). Lipi's khadi sari after her "rescue" functions as a symbolic manifestation of this nationalist ideology, situating her within the domestic space as an embodiment of purity and self-restraint. The identical khadi saris bearing the colours of the national flag erase Lipi's individuality under the weight of collective symbolism. However, Kumkum Sangari argues that "women's consent may itself be one of the nodes of the condensed articulation of patriarchies with other social structures in specific historical conjunctures" (1993, 869). This perspective suggests a space in which women's productive implications in constituting these different categories of social identity can be considered (Gedalof 1999, 52). Lipi's consent is neither wholly voluntary nor entirely passive. It reflects a complex process of negotiation overdetermined by the need for survival, aspirations for a better life, and strategic adaptation to the existing power structures in Nek's household.

When Nek prevents Lipi and Ila from attending the music concert, thereby denying Lipi's attempt to reclaim agency through adornment and once again excluding them from the public sphere, Lipi responds by setting everything ablaze, including herself. While this act might initially appear as a dramatic or heroic assertion of agency, a closer reading reveals a more complex negotiation with the intersecting systems of patriarchal and classed power that shape her life:

> The sequins on her sari glinted in the firelight … Lipi has something in her hand—my mother's notebook. She has flung it into the fire before he can stop her … I can see saris on fire: my mother's. Her blouses, her shawls. My father's papers and books, his clothes, his chair, his typewriter, even his pillow. My mother's framed portrait, its glass shattered … People said later that Lipi fought those trying to pull her away from the flames with the strength of four horses … "I want to die," she repeated in a high-pitched howl. "I want to die." (Roy 2018, 163–164)

Cases of self-immolation are not uncommon in Indian society. Some women have openly poured kerosene over themselves to provoke a sense of responsibility in their husbands (Daruwalla et al. 2014, 5). Others, particularly housewives, have suffered emotional abuse and harassment from family members, which leads them to commit self-immolation (Pai and Chandra 2021, 64–65). Distinct from these cases, Lipi enacts violent self-destruction that functions as a rejection of and protest against both her household and the broader symbolic systems that oppress her. The saris, notebooks, and portrait of Gayatri represent middle-class ideals of beauty, fashion, and artistic accomplishment, while Nek's papers, books, and typewriter materialise the patriarchal authority embedded in the household, sustained through knowledge, regulation, and domestic governance. By destroying these objects, Lipi simultaneously rejects the middle-class ideal that excludes her as a widow from a poor rural background and challenges the patriarchal authority structuring her daily life. As Sumanta Banerjee observes, middle-class cultural identity has often been constructed in contrast to women from lower economic strata, who are systematically excluded from the "ideal womanhood" promoted through middle-class practices (Sangari and Vaid 1990, 12). In this sense, Lipi's act constitutes both a personal assertion of defiance and a symbolic refusal of intersecting patriarchal and classed structures.

Her destruction of middle-class symbols and patriarchal artefacts also sets the stage for understanding her post-fire withdrawal as a challenge to the disciplinary power that seeks to contain her. Lipi's body and actions are shaped by intersecting systems of patriarchal, classed, and nationalist power, yet they simultaneously exceed and unsettle these systems. In the post-fire episode, her husband anxiously tends to her by feeding her, reading to her, and performing gestures of atonement; as Myshkin notes, he reads the Hindi newspaper, buys a joke book, and urges, "Now, that's funny, Lipi, isn't it?" (Roy 2018, 165). These gestures are not merely expressions of affection or remorse but constitute a performance of modern patriarchy. As a male intellectual and nationalist reformer, Nek embodies paternalistic authority that defines itself through benevolent control. By transforming domination into protection, his actions strategically reassert the moral legitimacy of the domestic order and contain Lipi's defiance within the safe bounds of paternal care. Lipi's silence, refusal to eat, and lack of response disrupt this disciplinary circuit. By withdrawing from the reciprocal relations that sustain the household's moral and affective economy, she enacts what Gedalof frames as a form of "impurity": an embodied act that neither fully resists nor complies but destabilises patriarchal order from within. Even her apparent helplessness functions as agency, exposing the dependence of patriarchal power on feminine consent and affective labour.

Even as Myshkin observes that "Lipi spoke less and less, watchful, timid, retreating into her own inner world" (152), this retreat can be read not simply as a loss of agency but as a strategic withdrawal from the compliance that her role in the household requires. Her silence, refusal to eat, and gradual deterioration constitute an embodied negotiation within patriarchal and classed constraints, demonstrating that resistance can manifest internally rather than in overt acts. Lipi's self-destruction exemplifies the ambivalent, often hidden forms of political and personal resistance available to women in such contexts.

Nomadic Subjectivity and the Politics of Location: The Dissipating Gayatri

Gayatri is notorious in town for being sharp-tongued and clever, and she has also learned to dance and sing. In that era, women were often derided for performing to entertain wealthy men (19). She is known as the woman who "runs off with an Englishman" and is labelled as evil for not caring for her own child (178). She is a late riser, summer or winter (6), does not fast for the welfare of her family, and never prays (7). Unlike Lipi, who embodies a more traditional feminine ideal, Gayatri better fits Chatterjee's definition of the "Westernised woman" in the nationalist thought: She enjoys luxury, neglects household duties, and is perceived as brazen, avaricious, irreligious, and sexually promiscuous (Chatterjee 1989, 625, 630). From the nationalists' perspective, although she is a wife and mother, her rejection of family obligations and religion, along with her elopement with a white man, marks her as a "Westernised woman" who falls outside socially sanctioned norms.

As an evil, "Westernised woman," Gayatri may seem rebellious; however, such an understanding mistakenly assumes a fixed female identity that stands entirely outside patriarchal power. Conversely, power produces that which it subordinates, and is only able to subordinate what it has made useful (Gedalof 1999, 187). Gayatri's subjectivity thus develops within patriarchy through resistance and negotiation. When girls' talents were often seen as "a bait to catch a husband," Gayatri's father recognised her potential and arranged for her to study languages, painting, dance, and classical music, hoping that she might realise her potential and "light up whole cities" (Roy 2018, 19). Their travels across Asia introduced her to a broader cultural world beyond colonial influence. This upbringing provides her with resources and interests that enable her to transcend traditional marital roles and later fight against patriarchal norms.

Faced with the patriarchal system embodied by her husband Nek, Gayatri begins to understand and shape herself through compromise and resistance. She writes to Lisa that Nek makes her feel guilty about every expense. In Myshkin's recollections, Nek repeatedly indoctrinates Gayatri with his ideas of motherhood and maturity, dismissing her artistic talents as mere hobbies and urging her to focus on more serious matters. He always uses their son Myshkin to discipline her, reducing her status as a mother to a tool for this purpose. He urges, "he looks to you as an example," "what sort of example are

you setting," "What will he learn?" (26–27). As Jasodhara Bagchi notes, Bengali male reformers praised abstract motherhood as a foundation for national identity, casting the home as a cultural stronghold and women as educators of a nationalist future (1990, WS65). However, far from improving women's status, this praise confined them in a more secret way to traditional gender roles.

Meanwhile, Gayatri often sits through Nek's lengthy speeches about his nationalist cause. He urges her to attend meetings with him and listen to Mukti Devi, to open her eyes to something new, and join the fight for freedom. When Gayatri questions the falsehood of this freedom, Nek accuses her of having a superficial understanding, unable to distinguish between personal and national freedoms. In his view, while he and his comrades struggle against foreign oppression, Gayatri cares only about hairstyles and singing songs. After Gayatri leaves, Nek imagines that her arrest and imprisonment as a political activist would serve as proof of his success in instilling patriotic ideals in her. As Asha observes, Nek dreams of liberating India but is indifferent to the status of the woman in his own house (2021, 23). Sangari and Vaid further note that "the recovery of tradition … was always the recovery of the 'traditional' woman—her various shapes continuously readapt the 'eternal' past to the needs of the contingent present" (1990, 10), in this way fixing women as symbols of historical continuity and harmony.

Nek attempts to shape Gayatri into a symbol of the ideal woman who sacrifices everything for the freedom of the nation, renounces her own desires, and embodies the traditional feminine virtue of selflessness rooted in an imagined eternal past. He cannot tolerate the changes Gayatri represents, for they threaten this ideal of stability. In fact, Nek seeks to mould Gayatri according to the standards of the "new woman," a figure constructed by modern patriarchal discourse in the early twentieth century to meet the requirements of the changing political atmosphere and the needs of a modern patriarchy (Sreenivas 2013, 167). The "new woman" should be "superior to western women, traditional Indian women and low class women" (Chatterjee 1989, 622); she is educated, ventures into the public sphere, and enjoys a certain degree of freedom without challenging familial authority and class hierarchy (quoted in Chatterjee 1993, 167). Within this ideological frame, Nek expects Gayatri to exemplify thrift and propriety at home while participating, under his guidance, in the nationalist struggle.

As she navigates the patriarchal dynamics embodied by Nek, Gayatri increasingly realises that what she desires is a freedom that does not require consent. "Propriety, sobriety, obedience"—these are precisely the virtues she has devoted her life to annihilating (Roy 2018, 30). Her pursuit resonates with Rosi Braidotti's "nomadic subject" model, which relinquishes "all idea, desire, or nostalgia for fixity" and envisions identity as a process of "transitions, successive shifts, and coordinated changes" (1994, 22). Drawing on Deleuze and Guattari's concept of the "rhizome," Braidotti conceives subjectivity as emerging through "deterritorialisation" and "lines of flight" within multiplicity, interconnectedness, and constant change. Gayatri persistently moves away from fixed social roles and refuses to be the place upon which

identities are constituted (Gedalof 1999, 211). Dancing, music, and painting constitute her lines of flight. Crucially, it is her elite, privileged social background that affords her the mobility and protection necessary for such transgressions. Enabled by this privilege, Gayatri traverses non-normative spaces, disrupting domestic order by visiting the stigmatised red-light area with foreign friends to find a Kathak teacher, painting in distant hillsides, and connecting with unconventional figures like the singer Akhtari Bai, who lives on her own terms, throws tantrums, and uses her own talents to earn fame and money.

In a culture where legitimate knowledge and methods of acquiring it are constructed rationally, scientifically, logically or patrilineally, the entire realm of art becomes an "other" voice. It is a voice that is deemed as exotic, magical, liminal, dangerous and subversive (Rao 1990, WS-32). Gayatri's immersion in art, her entry into spaces marked as impure, and her associations with marginal figures who embody these "other voices," such as the Kathak dancer and Akhtari Bai, together constitute an act of resistance and subversion. As Kapila Vatsyayan observes, "The aim of the Indian artists, in the field of literature, sculpture, painting, music and dance, has been the evocation of a state of mind (often termed 'sentiment'—Rasa)" (1963, 33). Through artistic practices, Gayatri explores and expresses her own complex emotional world by channelling her energy into experiences excluded by patriarchal systems of knowledge.

Furthermore, Gayatri's extramarital relationship with Brijen constitutes another form of escape. Brijen, an aesthete drifting through smoke, rum, stories, and songs, embodies the non-fixity of the nomadic figure. Passionately devoted to singing Thumri, Brijen's voice often reaches Myshkin from the rooftop next door, "singing a slow, meandering thumri" (Roy 2018, 82). As a genre historically sung by courtesans to entertain elite male audiences (Rao 1990, WS-31), thumri traditionally catered to men. Yet in Gayatri and Brijen's relationship, this dynamic is inverted: Brijen becomes the expressive performer, while Gayatri listens with interpretive intent. This reversal subverts normative gender hierarchies, positioning the woman as the active perceiver of emotion. Their affective exchange constitutes a profound act of deterritorialisation. Upon sensing Brijen's gaze on her body, she chooses to reclaim it through the act of painting herself. Standing naked before the mirror, she gazes at her body with admiration:

> I scanned my legs, my hips, my shoulders—all of me—as calmly as I might examine a stone sculpture on a wall … My body had been nothing but a thing for a lifetime, like a disregarded, uncared-for, unloved house I had lived in so long I hardly noticed it. To see for myself what a man had seen and desired! I don't know how long I was in front of the mirror that day. I locked myself in for many days after that, sitting before the mirror, drawing my own body. Every stroke of my pencil on the paper made me feel his touch. (Roy 2018, 214)

Painting becomes a means through which Gayatri reclaims her subjectivity and rematerialises her body. Once "a disregarded, uncared-for, unloved house," her body had been reduced to a functional object defined by the roles of mother and wife.

However, when she stands naked before the mirror, tracing her own contours through self-gaze and artistic delineation, her body begins to detach from patriarchal regimes of naming and becomes the central site for self-perception. Her act of rewriting the body marks an inward nomadic process—an unfinished becoming where painting, sensation, and erotic desire converge into a micro-political act of rebellion. Ultimately, her decision to leave everything behind, including Brijen with whom she shares deep emotional resonance, stems from her resistance to fixity. She "wants nobody, but to be absolutely free" (215).

Gayatri's departure from India with Walter and Beryl to Bali materialises her geographic nomadism. Outwardly, it appears to be a radical departure from the nation, family, and gendered norms that once tightly bound her. Yet this spatial transgression raises crucial questions: Where does this nomadism ultimately lead her? Has she truly attained freedom or the identity she longed for? In a letter to Lisa, Gayatri confesses: "I was sad & longing for Myshkin, longing for home, longing even for Banno & Dinu & Brijen—in some strange way, I am missing the very place where I felt a prisoner" (183). Contrary to Braidotti's ideal of the nomadic subject, she does not relinquish nostalgia for fixity. She murmurs in Bengali in her sleep and ends every letter to Lisa with a desperate plea for news: "Give me all the news, about yourself, Myshkin, Arjun, Brijen: everyone. So that I feel I am with you all" (185). These affective traces underscore the inescapable imprint of place that haunts her pursuit of deterritorialisation.

Gayatri's nomadic life is characterised by profound loneliness and alienation. Even after she becomes habituated to island life and mesmerised by its surroundings, she still feels like an onlooker: "I cannot think I am here to stay, it cannot be. When will I stop feeling like Cinderella at the ball?" (193). As Gedalof critiques, Braidotti's model of the nomadic subject privileges "going" and "transgressing of boundaries," while overlooking how race, origin, and history shape mobility (1999, 125). Gayatri's presence in Bali, the core of the colonial Dutch East Indies, highlights this tension. Walter and Beryl both engage in forms of nomadism rooted in personal choice and aesthetic freedom. Gayatri, by contrast, carries the weight of her gendered and colonial subject position. Unable to disclose her past, she hides the truth of her departure even from the Indian family she befriends. She is aware that, were she to reveal "the way she left home," she would likely be condemned as "a fallen woman" (Roy 2018, 189–190).

Although Bali shares a common Oriental cultural heritage with India, Gayatri experiences it as "both familiar & quite unknown" (199). The villages resemble those of Bengal, yet unlike India's wretched poverty, each village in Bali is alive with dance and drama. Gayatri delights in this vitality, but when she attempts to depict it in her art, she cannot render the same intricate detail as local painters, admitting that "her mind doesn't work that way" (199). As Gedalof notes, "One cannot simply forget about 'roots' and take to the road" (1999, 125). Due to her race and ethnicity, Gayatri continues to feel like an outsider in the new space she inhabits. And yet, when the thought of leaving arises, she finds herself trapped: "I am in a beautiful prison too, am I not—no way of

leaving. No money. No friends" (242); "where will I go? My mother is not going to garland me with roses for coming back & NC won't let me in through the door" (244). Boundary-crossing thus tears her apart, reducing her to "a torn-up fragment" (185). Her nomadism is not "flying endlessly over undifferentiated space" (quoted in Gedalof 1999, 127), but a difficult navigation through spaces marked by cultural and identity-based differences.

The novel also depicts Gayatri's efforts to situate herself within this nomadic space through embodied artistic practices. Her paintings—such as a map charting her journey from India to Bali and depictions of "villages, dances, medicine men, rain forests, mountains, strange flowers" (Roy 2018, 123)—register her attempts to internalise and rearticulate the new environment. However, the pressure to earn money for Myshkin renders her works stilted, forced, and imitative (194–195). Her nomadic life in Bali collapses with the outbreak of World War II; Walter's internment cuts off her income, and threats of Japanese invasion force her departure. According to Gedalof, "the subject cannot jettison the limitations and structures that define it and simply take to the road" (1999, 192). Gayatri's pursuit of nomadism, intended as an escape from patriarchal and colonial constraints, is ultimately curtailed by the very structures that constitute her subjectivity.

Gayatri's painting "Still Life with Missing Woman," housed in a museum, serves as both a symbol of her complex life and a prediction of her eventual fate. The "still life" may metaphorically signify the fixed positions and normative frameworks she has relinquished, while "the missing woman" evokes her nomadic subjectivity and gestures towards her final disappearance. Myshkin once described his mother standing on the rooftop at night, whispering to the moon with closed eyes, as "an amphibious creature—of earth as well as air, yet not wholly of any one element. She might have taken flight and become a night bird, or her limbs might have turned into roots and branches, her torso the trunk of a tree" (Roy 2018, 266). This image of the "amphibious creature" encapsulates Gayatri's condition: Suspended between fixed social roles and physical spaces, she never fully belongs to any single realm but remains in a state of transition and becoming. She may have become a night bird, or perhaps merged with the trees, absorbed into a larger life-form. Her ultimate disappearance is both a success for her as a nomadic subject, culminating in an existence irreducible to fixity, and a failure, as within her historical context she could not re-establish a stable subject position.

Conclusion

All the Lives We Never Lived, through the vivid portrayals of Lipi and Gayatri, offers a rich literary case for understanding the complexity of female subjectivity. Each woman, situated within distinct social contexts and positions, challenges in her own way the patriarchal and nationalist impositions of fixity and purity. Lipi's body and identity are sanctified as symbols of purity and as embodiments of the maternal nation, yet in reality, she bears the burdens of marginalisation and disciplinary control. However, Lipi's subjectivity emerges through embodied performance, negotiated forms of consent, and

symbolic acts of resistance such as self-immolation and non-cooperation. Her story reveals the tragic depth of a subject who, spatially confined within an oppressive system, struggles to assert agency at great personal cost. Gayatri seeks absolute freedom and a nomadic subject position through lines of flight such as art, an extramarital affair, and physical displacement. In doing so, she attempts to deterritorialise herself from traditional norms and established social structures. Nevertheless, her nomadic movement ultimately leads to an uncertain fate, perhaps because although she escapes fixity, she is unable to establish a new, stable subject position and is eventually torn apart. Regardless of the ultimate fate of these women, Anuradha Roy's novel powerfully illustrates that female subjectivity is fluid, embodied, and irreducible to fixed or pure forms, instead tenaciously forging its existence within the complexities of history and power.

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