

Memory and Loss in Anuradha Roy's 'All the Lives We Never Lived'

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Abstract

Anuradha Roy's *All the Lives We Never Lived* deals with Myshkin whose mother runs away to Bali abandoning him when he is nine years old. The mature Myshkin reminisces about his mother to portray the then state of women in the early twentieth century India. The saga of "loss" that Roy portrays in the novel through Myshkin and his mother Gayatri through the memory of Myshkin presents to us a historical consciousness which questions the western emphasis on rationality as a means of creating fact-based history and western concern with the metanarrative. The novel explores the significance of "memory" as a valid epistemological means of reconstructing history.

Key Words: *All the Lives We Lived*, Anuradha Roy, Desire, Historicity, Loss, Memory, Metanarrative, Patriarchy

When one talks about the way history is constructed one often wonders if it is only about factual details regarding chronology or it is a narrative in which the historian tries to reconstruct the past from his or her perspective, ideological leanings and motifs. If we take the second notion of history into account, it seems that all narratives dealing with the historical past are nothing but history, and in that sense, Anuradha Roy is making an attempt to portray history in the novel *All the Lives We Never Lived*. Here the historical reconstruction is given a very different aspect when "Memory" seems to be one of the means that is used to reconstruct the narrative of "loss", which afflicts the protagonists in the novel *All the Lives We Never Lived*.

The relationship between memory and history is quite complex. The recording and dissemination of history impact the memory of an event in a culture. Certain memories

are celebrated in life or culture through the multiple recounting of an event, while the ones, which are less pleasant, traumatic ones are often difficult to verbalize. They are repressed and remain unarticulated till amnesia about them is developed. The novelist, with the gifts of empathy and imagination, is often better placed to articulate the memory in the form of a narrative. A novelist is free from the rigour of grounding his narrative to rigid demands of strict adherence to factual evidence, and so one can give freer rein to one's imagination. Sergio Campos Matos in his article "History, Memory and Fiction: What Boundaries?" comments: "in a novel the plurality of voices makes it easier to express intimacy, of that which, in an autobiographical record, tends to be easier to be self-censored or concealed. Novels express moral imagination, multiplying life experiences and experiences lived." (Matos)

Thus, while memory remains a valid means of portraying reality, the history is not merely about the chronological arrangement of facts or an interpretation of historical evidence. Anuradha Roy, in *All the Lives We Never Lived* structures the narrative in such a way where the concerns of Myshkin and his mother Gayatri permeates the whole of the narrative. Gabriel Garcia Marquez, Salman Rushdie and other great practitioners of art have often dealt with history from the point of view of Memory, and they have shown how Memory which is often degraded as a means of reconstructing history has been a valid epistemological tool for knowledge construction which the western scientificity and rationality disapproved off and the non-west is trying to assert in various narratives to suggest that it should be taken as seriously as fact-based history.

Myshkin, the narrator in the novel, as he seeks to understand the motivations of her mother, which led her to abandon her family and embark on an uncertain journey, realises the nebulous nature of memory. He understands that writing a personal history, while banking mostly on memory is fraught with difficulties. He expresses the complex nature of his endeavour:

“In telling the story of any life, and certainly when telling our own, we cannot pretend we are narrating everything just as it happened. Our memories come to us as images, feelings, glimpses, sometimes fleshed out, sometimes in outline. Time solidified as well as dissolves. We have no precise recollection of how

long things took: a few days, weeks, a month? Chunks of time are blank, while others grow to be momentous in retrospect. I believe this is true for most people.” (22)

This reflection by the narrator provides a glimpse into the narrative strategy that the novelist employs in *All the Lives We Never Lived*, where what is valid for most people is taken up as a means to write a historical narrative even though it is something that the western epistemological ways would necessarily disapprove off to ascertain their supposed rationality. It is against this presumed metanarrative of the rationality of the western modernity that Anuradha Roy pitches her narrative against to show post-modernist incredulity towards metanarrative. (Lyotard)

Nek Chand Rozario, the narrator's father and Gayatri's husband, tells her, “The trouble with you Gayatri, is that all you want to do is live off your memories.”(24) Nek here sees memory as a dark force, which can disrupt the rational present. Nek who believes in the nationalistic ideology and is obsessed with the idea of liberating India from foreign rule, turns a blind eye to the plight of the woman within his own house. It is one of the most problematic dichotomies that the western educated middle-class people of India suffered from at the beginning of the twentieth century when they professed liberal and nationalistic ideas, but when it comes to their own lives, they were completely autocratic and patriarchal. While reflecting on this dichotomy, Roy

herself comments on the delusional nature of patriarchy: “Patriarchy is this peculiar thing: even well-meaning men can be deluded into thinking they know what is better for a woman.” (Xalxo) It is this patriarchal contradiction which Gayatri could not stand and therefore is forced to run away from the small town of Muntazir, which in Urdu means “waiting impatiently for”. (Sengupta) Thus what Anuradha Roy is trying to accomplish in the novel is to portray the historical situation of women in the early twentieth century India through the memory of a sixty-year-old man, Myshkin who reminisces about his mother’s flight with her lover abandoning him when he was nine years old. Madhura Desai comments:

(Myshkin) is attempting to understand the reasons why his mother abandoned him. His only helpers are his mother’s letters and his memory. A lot of themes have been explored in this novel like liberty (personal and national), love, morality, human relationships and artistic expression but abandonment is the major force behind all these themes. (Desai)

Anuradha Roy grounds her narrative in a number of historical facts. There are some historical characters that make a cameo appearance in the novel. “Sydney Percy-Lancaster, the Anglo-Indian horticulturalist, is one of several characters from history in the novel, along with the poet Rabindranath Tagore and the German painter and curator Walter Spies. Roy feeds the words of these figures – gleaned from diaries, letters and newspaper columns – through the consciousness of Myshkin, a fictional

apprentice to Percy-Lancaster.” (South China Morning Post). Anuradha Roy, while talking about the inspiration behind this novel, states that it was a historical context, which provided her with a setting to create a fictional world. She says:

I wanted to write the story of a boy who lived such an intense life of the imagination that he actually entered and inhabited certain paintings. The magical thing about the writing of it was how a whole world slowly started taking shape as I mulled over which pictures the boy would look at. At a museum in Bali, looking at the paintings of Walter Spies, I discovered he died on 19th January, the very day my beloved old dog had recently died. I know this sounds whimsical, but it felt as if my life, the novel and one real-life character were connected. Slowly these ripples spread wider – as I discovered Tagore had met Spies; that Beryl de Zoete, who wrote a book with Spies, had come to India to write on dance. (Xalxo)

In this context of the historicity of the novel, there is an interesting anecdote that can be given from the novel *All the Lives We Never Lived*. Chandrima S. Bhattacharya in her review of the novel points out that one of the characters in the novel Brijen, a talented musician drinks Old Monk in the year 1937 when the brand Old Monk was launched in 1954. Historically thus it is an anomaly in the novel as Bhattacharya suggests that as if “Old Monk can do without history or can be given any history.” When we think in terms of fact-based history, it seems that it is an

aberration in the novel as the fact is not historically accurate, but Anuradha Roy's focus is not writing the history of Old Monk. She is instead writing the history of Muntazir, a small town in the foothills of the Himalayas, near Dehradun along with the individual accounts of Myshkin and his mother and through them, she seeks to present the consciousness and conscience of the generations of Indians in the twentieth century.

Factually there may be things which may suggest that the novel *All the Lives We Never Lived* is not historically accurate, but one needs to understand that the poetic truth and historical truth are two different things. Anuradha Roy is not claiming to write history but merely is trying to present how the memory can be a means of rewriting history. There is a history of the ruler which the ruler writes to glorify his concerns and conducts, but there are other histories. Those histories that the ruler or the ruling class does not want to mention in their narratives must also be written and heard, and Anuradha Roy is doing precisely that in her novel so that the other history can also be known. In the novel we see Gayatri as a repressed woman who is living a claustrophobic life in her marriage with Nek. In this context, it is to be mentioned that Gayatri, Myshkin's Mother, was the pampered daughter of a liberal freethinker, Professor Agni Sen, who had encouraged his daughter to learn art, dance and music. He made arrangements for her to nurture her passion for dance and painting and took her with him to various parts of the country to give her an exposure of the world. When he

learned that Rabindra Nath Tagore would be travelling to Bali by ship, he decided to board the same ship to provide her daughter with an opportunity of meeting the great poet. He introduced his daughter to the great artist Walter Spies and exposed to her to local art, culture and traditions of Bali. Gayatri has a strong personality and an independent mind. The narrator comments about her: "Propriety, sobriety, obedience: these were the things she had made it her life's mission to annihilate." (40) After her marriage with Nek, Gayatri's artistic interests, as well as her worldly experience that she has gained from her foreign visits, make it impossible for her to settle in a conventional marriage with Nek where she has to submit to her husband's wishes all the time. Being an obedient wife to Nek means accepting the fact that she should cut herself off from all her artistic desires, temperament and talents as Nek finds these artistic indulgences to be frivolous and bereft of any dignity.

Nek is one who is vociferous in the outside world about his apparent nationalistic fervour and also talks regarding the liberation of women, but when the same person comes within the household, he is a patriarchal tyrant who is guided by the prevailing opinions in society regarding the role of women. He expects Gayatri to exercise her freedom within the boundaries set by him. He is deeply influenced by Mukti Devi, who is the head of Muntazir Seva Ghar, often called by the people as the Society for Indian Patriots. He is kind and gentle and is considered as a good man by all his neighbours and students. He is

principled, strong and disciplined and lives by the principles he has set for himself after much reading and reflection. But he suffocates Gayatri for he fails to empathise with her values, accords little respect to her artistic leaning and exhibits scant regard for her talents. Leah Franqui comments about him "While he theoretically believes in freedom for women, and lectures his family nightly on the vitality of the Indian independence movement, Nek is far more conventional than he believes, subjecting his wife to his rules and making it clear that her freedoms are at his indulgence." He always strives to be meaningful in the service of the nation and finds artistic pursuits to be a waste of time and energy. Gayatri, in a letter to Lisa, expresses her anguish:

It's such a bore! Before you know it you're listening to a lecture & he thinks he knows best of course & you are no more than a foolish deluded woman if you don't agree with him and his Mukti.... He humiliated me every chance he had. He wanted his friends to laugh at me and condescend. He ridiculed the books I read & the paintings I made. (222-223)

This dichotomy of Nek makes married life for a strong-willed and vivacious woman like Gayatri very difficult. It means for her compromising her self-respect and alienating herself from her source of joy, her artistic pursuits. She lacked a sense of companionship with Nek, for whom marriage meant that wife should renounce her independent thinking and subject herself to the ideas and demands of her husband. It is this apparent dichotomy of Nek which

Myshkin finds out when he reads the letters of his mother to find out why his mother left him when he was nine years old and left for Bali with his apparent German lover, Walter Spies.

Apparently, the novel *All the Lives We Never Lived* seems to be about Myshkin Chand Rozario, a sixty years old horticulturalist who tries to find out why his mother left him and went along with her supposed lover. The novel is an attempt to come to terms with his childhood trauma of being abandoned by her mother, the pain of separation from her and the feelings of guilt and loneliness that haunted him. The novel opens with an acknowledgement of this loss:

"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 largely thought of as British." (9)

The loss of the mother in Myshkin's childhood had a devastating impact in his life. He turned into an introvert, anxiously awaiting his mother's return. He could never find out why his mother has left him until he receives a packet of letters written by her mother where she talks about her reasons for running away from Muntazir. People just believed in the news that Gayatri betrayed her husband and ran away with a foreigner for love, but nobody could understand her reasons that propelled her towards making this choice. From the letters, we come to know that Gayatri did not leave his nine-year-old kid and her family and left for Bali because she was in love with the German

artist Walter Spies who breezed through her life. Walter was a homosexual and has no inclination towards a normal heterosexual relationship. She took this drastic step because she felt repressed in her marriage.

The loss that Myshkin had suffered as a child had made him grow up as a reclusive child, and when he receives the pack of letters written by her mother at a mature age, his compulsion to find out about her mother finds expression in his understanding of self and culture. The individual and the society are often at loggerheads in our society because the individual aspirations always find itself to be somehow to be disjunctive to the ethical and moral codes of the society, leading to a 'loss' of self-identity and self-belief. When someone tries to take a step to break free from those shackles of the supposed moralistic code which punctures the individual's identity as well as self-belief, one naturally gives vent to some self-assertion, as it happens in Gayatri's case. Instead of living at a loss in the small town of Muntazir being in an awkward marital disharmonious situation with Nek, when she decides to take a step forward to live a life of her own, she makes a conscious decision, which is not merely being swayed away by the passions of the heart.

After leaving her home in Muntazir, Gayatri is confronted with the immensity of the loss. She realises that she has burnt her bridges with her family to which she cannot return any more. People in the train to Madras considered her as a 'shameless woman', who doesn't mind selling (herself) to white men." (217) She understands that she would be branded as an evil woman "who does not

love her child?" He is fearful about Myshkin and feels miserable without him. She feels lonely and misses the protective circle of family, friends and kin and social life in Muntazir. The changing political situation, imprisonment of Walter Skies heightens her insecurity, and she has to struggle to meet her basic need all by herself. She is never able to overcome her sense of loss. It rather keeps on accentuating with time.

In such a situation, Gayatri attempts to deal with her "loss" in a way where she intends to fulfill her heart's desire for artistic pursuits to give some flight to her own self. But in the process of taking this flight, she had to leave nine-year-old Myshkin to tend for himself, which haunts him the whole life. The loss of the mother at a young age was something that he could not deal with all his life, but at the same time, he did not want to do anything about it as it was a scandalous patch in his life which he thought it best to leave ignored. But when he is confronted with the letters of his mother, he realises that he needs to deal with the infamous patch of his past to find some solace for himself. When he tries to unravel the life of her mother Gayatri to himself, he figures out that women were never given their due in the Indian set up which made her mother take a step which is thought to be a scandal.

No one tries to understand the desires of women, as women are not supposed to be desiring subjects but are always thought by the patriarchal society as desired objects. When a person like Gayatri takes a step to give certain kind of vent to her heart's desire it leads to a scandal, but it is significant that

she can deal with her loss and carve out a niche for herself as an artist. The mature Myshkin, through his own efforts, could understand the real reasons of her mother's flight to Bali which makes him a much saner individual and a better human being.

Thus, the novel *All the Lives We Never Lived* revolves around two significant characters – Myshkin and his mother Gayatri. Both of them are at “loss” at the beginning of their lives which they try to deal with in their respective ways. Gayatri is at “loss” after the death of her father and in a disharmonious marriage with Nek. She initially deals with it by reminiscing her glorious days, when she travelled to exotic locations with her father. She later chooses to take a flight to Bali and get some respite from the claustrophobic atmosphere of Muntazir and immerse herself in the pursuit

of art. Myshkin is at “loss” because of the absence of her mother in his life which he can deal with later in life when a mature Myshkin uses “Memory” as a tool to glimpse back at his past and that of his mother to understand both the circumstances and be at peace with himself. Apparently, the novel *All the Lives We Never Lived* seems to be a domestic drama, but in the hands of Anuradha Roy the domestic drama becomes some kind of national history where the local aspect of Muntazir acquire a global significance, as the notions of personal and political freedom are mixed in a contrapuntal way by Anuradha Roy. Memory, thus, becomes a valid means of recreating the past and overcoming its traumas by coming to terms with it.

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