



Exposing Spiritual Authority: Patriarchy and Identity Crisis in Anuradha Roy's *Sleeping on Jupiter*

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Abstract: This paper aims to uncover pseudo-spiritualism which transforms into a form of spiritual capitalism within the socio-religious structure of India depicted in Anuradha Roy's novel *Sleeping on Jupiter* (2015). Through the depiction of the ashram and its Guruji, Roy interrogates the collusion between religion and society in normalizing exploitation and commodification of religion, its beliefs and especially girl children respectively. The study further implores the fragmented identity of the protagonist, Nomi (Nomita), whose sense of self is decentralised by displacement, spiritual patriarchy, and institutional domination. Through a feminist and psychoanalytic lens, the novel emerges as a powerful critique of spiritual patriarchy and gendered abuse. Drawing on Melanie Klein's Object Relations Theory, the paper analyses how childhood trauma leads to psychological disintegration and emotional alienation. Additionally, the concept of false consciousness from Marxist theory is employed to examine how religious ideology conditions victims into internalizing oppression and to oppose spiritual capitalism.

Keywords: *False Consciousness, Identity Fragmentation, Object Relations Theory, Pseudo-spiritualism, Spiritual Capitalism*

Introduction

Anuradha Roy's *Sleeping on Jupiter* (2015), her third novel, was longlisted for the 2015 Man Booker Prize and shortlisted for The Hindu Literary Prize in the same year (Wikipedia, 2020). The narrative revolves around Nomi Frederiksen and three conservative elderly women—Gouri, Lathika, and Vidya—who travel to Jarmuli, a religious hotspot in India. Nomi, accompanied by Suraj, who is later revealed to be Vidya's son, visits the town to work on a documentary. However, rather than a journey for nostalgia, Nomi's visit to this religious microcosm becomes a confrontation with her traumatic past. By asserting her agency, she questions the authority of religious institutions that masks hierarchical power structures beneath pseudo-spiritual morals propagated through the ashram's Guruji. The novel critiques patriarchy, gendered violence, and spiritual capitalism through the disturbing figure of the pedophilic Guruji, thereby reflecting the gendered realities and hypocritical moral ideals of contemporary Indian society.

Orphaned at the age of nine, Nomi is placed in the Guruji's ashram where she is subjected to severe abuse. This trauma, additionally layered with the loss of her biological roots, profoundly destabilizes her mental state. As a result, she internalizes the images of religious figures like Guruji with violence and exploitation, leading her to question the foundations of spiritualism. Through fragmented narration that shifts between Nomi's past and present, Roy constructs what has been described as a "satisfying resolution" (Kirkus Reviews, 2016).

Pseudo-Spiritualism and Capitalism

Anuradha Roy's *Sleeping on Jupiter* (2015) offers a searing critique of Indian spiritual culture by exposing how institutionalized spiritualism functions as a facade for patriarchal dominance, gendered violence, and spiritual capitalism. Nomi, a survivor of severe abuse, along with other orphans is reduced to a commodity within the ashram and exploited by the Guruji to satisfy what can be understood as "commodity fetishism" (Weber). Drawing on Max Weber's concept of reification—the process by which human-made institutions and ideologies solidify into autonomous forces that dominate human beings—Roy demonstrates how Nomi and other orphans are subjected to both physical and psychological control. Locked away from world, deprived of individual freedom, and stripped of their agency, the children are marionettes to commercialize the Guruji's spiritual enterprise.

What distinguishes capitalism, as Weber argues in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, is the transformation of greed into an ethical imperative, a logic that, in this context, is sanctified through religion. Roy argues in her novel *Sleeping on Jupiter* spiritual capitalism emerges as a belief in faith which is stimulated by success and material accumulation. The Guruji thus acts as a figure head of "spiritual aristocracy" that possesses only a superficial connection to religion while feeding parasitically on its symbolic authority to gain power and capital. (Webster, pp. 121).

By using the ashram as a protective cover, the Guruji exploits not only the orphans but also visiting devotees. By dehumanization orphans into commodity he promotes his ashram thus exerting religious supremacy over the society. Roy questions the true essence of such religious figures which also shedding light on hypocritical blind-faithed cultural society through the character Gouri who denies associates any malignant qualities to saints even when the situation suggests otherwise. Religion becomes a mechanism for economic exploitation, where spiritual legitimacy is leveraged to accumulate wealth and power, converting the ashram into an arena of spiritual capitalism. Religious institutions become a place where spirituality is staged, discipline is marketed, and suffering of orphans become a small sacrifice in maintaining the guru's revered public image. Roy, in *sleeping on Jupiter* exposes the intrinsic connection between pseudo-spirituality, patriarchy, and commerce, illustrating how religious institutions manipulate faith to exploit individuals financially, emotionally, and psychologically.

The Guruji's immense wealth underscores this hypocrisy; his supposed spiritual asceticism is contradictory with the concept of worldly aestheticism (Weber) which can be seen in his lavish lifestyle-travel to his overseas ashrams by private helicopter. Through the character of Johnny Toppo, who observes that "people will do anything for money" (Roy), Roy further critiques the moral erosion produced of commodification of faith. The character of Gouri exemplifies society's blind devotion to religious institutions, revealing how faith itself has been commoditised, institutionalized, and transformed into a source of social authority and economic power.

Feministic Identity and Influence of Patriarchy

Roy's female characters are consistently portrayed as figures in growth, and Nomi Frederiksen exemplifies this trajectory. In her childhood, Nomi is seen as physically inferior to the authority figures in the ashram. Yet even at that vulnerable age, she resists bullying by standing up for her friend Piku, asserting, "She trusted only me. I was her protector" (Roy). This moment foregrounds Nomi's early moral strength and agency despite her powerless position.

Nomi's identity is far from simple; rather, it is deeply complex and fragmented. It can be argued that she possesses a collective identity while simultaneously lacking a stable singular self. This inner conflict is evident in the line, "Suraj wondered again at the way she spoke, as if she had no sure identity" (Roy). Her displacement begins early—she loses her family to war and becomes an orphan. As a "boat girl," she is forced to be a substitute for Chunni by a Chunni's mother. This disoriented identity is reflected by the number of earnings she wears. Later when she is placed in the orphanage run by Guruji she is sexually abused by him which is inscribed as the act of "loss of innocence" in the novel. Even after escaping the

ashram and living with her foster mother, the psychological scars of her past prevent her from developing a “sense of belonging,” a condition that resonates with Homi K. Bhabha’s concept of cultural and emotional displacement. In her adulthood Nomi faces emotional detachment, which is explicitly observed in her question to Surji, “Don’t you feel like disappearing from your life sometimes?” and that she has never experienced “Straightforward happiness”.

Nomi repeatedly expresses herself as transient and unrooted, describing her existence as being “a parcel being sent from one country to another” (Roy). This enduring sense of displacement shapes her life, ensuring that her identity is never a complete whole. Nevertheless, memories of her brother and their grapefruit tree, her friendship with Piku, and her relationship with Jungu, who narrates the story of *Shabari* from the *Ramayana*, provide her with moments of emotional stability, however fleeting. Although she is never fully accepted anywhere, Nomi ultimately forges her own identity, finding solace and meaning in the fragile yet profound bonds she forms.

The struggle for identity and acceptance in *Sleeping on Jupiter* is not confined to Nomi alone but is equally reflected in the lives of the secondary characters—Gouri, Lathika, and Vidya—conservative elderly women who travel to Jarmuli for pilgrimage. As members of a deeply patriarchal society, these women have endured male dominance, domestic oppression, and the judgement of a hypocritical social order. Their experiences expose how patriarchy continues to regulate women’s lives even in old age.

Gouri, mentally weakened by aging and acute memory loss, is treated less as an individual and more as a patient by her “pompous” son, who restricts her freedom under the guise of protection. Her nostalgia for the “air of authority” which reminds her of home reflects a paradoxical symbolism, even when not in regular setting. With her gaily ironic remark, “I’m not under house arrest here too, am I?”, Roy subtly reveals the male authoritarianism imposed upon her, which masks patriarchal control under the name of care.

Similarly, Lathika’s individuality is constantly scrutinised. Her choice of hair colour and youthful behaviour are questioned and condemned by society, despite her husband’s marital infidelity being conveniently overlooked. This unequal moral judgement highlights the gendered double standards that women are subjected to. Lathika also experiences emotional abuse when her husband criticises her for her “sharp tongue,” reinforcing how women are silenced and disciplined for expressing themselves, while male transgressions remain unchallenged. The societal stigma surrounding female alcoholism further exposes how behaviours are moralised and viewed differently based on gender.

Through these female characters, Roy illustrates that women’s experiences of abuse—whether mental or physical—are pervasive and normalised. Although generational struggles for equality may appear to have weakened overt male dominance in Indian society *Sleeping on Jupiter* (2015) demonstrates that patriarchy has not been eradicated but continues to operate under various guises. Women continue to be confined within rigid archetypes. One such example from the novel is fasting for *Shivaratri* first to secure a good husband, then for her husband’s health, and later for her children’s well-being. Such rituals symbolise a social structure that leaves little room for women’s independence.

Society, Feminism and False Consciousness

In *Sleeping on Jupiter* (2015), Anuradha Roy reveals how religious institutions within society create false consciousness through pseudo-spiritual practices that hides exploitation and strengthens patriarchal power. Nomi’s traumatic childhood in the ashram dismantles the sanctified image of religious authority, exposing a form of spirituality stripped of ethical responsibility and turning stratification of power and commerce. Drawing on Marx’s view of religion as an ideological force that dulls critical awareness and legitimizes suffering, Roy presents Guruji as a self-deified figure who claims to be “father, mother, country, and God,” thereby erasing individual agency and normalizing abuse in the name of divine will (Marx). Such manufactured reverence encourages victims to internalize domination as spiritual discipline. Although Guruji preaches that “all religions are paths to the same God,” he manipulates both society and Nomi into believing in his unquestionable divinity. Roy critiques this contradictory social mind set as an contradictory

example of what Marx calls the “inverted consciousness of the world,” where exploitation is mistaken for holiness. Society’s religious false consciousness is further exposed through characters like Gouri, who tells Nomi, “Child, a monk will never do you any harm. He is a man of God. Why should he follow you?” This response illustrates how blind faith protects the abuser while silencing the victim, reinforcing Roy’s critique of a society that sustains religious authority at the cost of truth and justice.

From the Object Relations Theory perspective, Nomi’s deep aversion to religion, intimate relationship and saints stems from her early relational trauma. The child’s care giving father figure who is meant to offer protection and emotional support becomes a source of violation, resulting in a fractured internal world where religion is internalized into an image which is associated with danger rather than protection. Consequently, religious institutions and saintly figures are unconsciously registered as “bad” persecutory objects, explaining her rejection of organized faith. Through this interplay of social critique, false consciousness, and psychological trauma, *Sleeping on Jupiter* reveals how patriarchal religious structures not only exploit women and children but also deform their capacity to trust, believe, and belong.

Roy also sheds light on the false conscious mind of contemporary Indian society through the portrayal of its deep contradictions. She draws attention to the irony of temples displaying erotic sculptures justified by the belief that “the erotic is creation itself,” while, at the same time, saints commit acts of child abuse and indulge in drinking. The novel further exposes society’s double standards in regulating morality, particularly in its strict expectations regarding how women should dress when entering temples, while men are neither questioned nor restricted. This gendered hypocrisy is evident in the case of Suraj, who is unquestioned when he smokes within the temple premises. Through these contradictions, Roy critiques a society that selectively enforces morality, normalizes male transgression, and sustains religious false consciousness by protecting patriarchal privilege over ethical accountability.

Conclusion

In conclusion, *Sleeping on Jupiter* dismantles the illusion of sacred authority by exposing pseudo-spiritualism as a patriarchal and capitalist enterprise that commodifies faith and exploits vulnerability. Through a feminist lens, Anuradha Roy reveals how hierarchical power structures and male dominance operate under the veneer of religious sanctity, thereby silencing women and normalizing abuse. At the same time, the novel offers a counter-narrative of resistance through memory, storytelling, and the reclamation of agency. Ultimately, Roy calls for an ethical re-evaluation of spirituality which spectacle in favour of accountability, empathy, and genuine human connection.

Nomi’s confrontation with her past serves as the culmination of this critique. When Suraj attempts to rape her and nearly succeeds, Nomi asserts her agency despite her physical limitations declaring, “You don’t scare me. I don’t believe your bullshit.” This moment signifies her refusal to submit to male dominance and her determination to stand up against her abusers, including both Suraj and Guruji. The “scars, bruises, and cigarette burns” from her past, along with the hardships she has endured, are transformed into symbols of strength that enable her to resist patriarchal violence. By returning to the lake at the end of the novel, Nomi fully reclaims her sense of belonging, displays tranquillity and courage as she confronts her past. Thus, the novel concludes by affirming female agency and resistance against male authoritarianism, reinforcing its feminist interrogation of power, faith, and violence.

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