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Bouncing Back: Battling Disruption and Reconditioning Self in Anuradha Roy's *Sleeping on Jupiter*

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Abstract:

Identity confers a person's culture, history and social background along with the individuality of self. Precisely, if feminist discourse is concerned, it is vital to question the prevailing notions of patriarchy that have denied women of their selfhood. The constructed power that conquers the idea of toxic masculinity, gives rise to domination of different kinds. Anuradha Roy, an Indian writer, is extensively acclaimed for her breakthrough narrative, *Sleeping on Jupiter* published in 2016. The novel unfurls horrendous acts of corporeal violence and psychological derangement around the spiritual walls. This study aims to highlight the ramifications of sexual violence that lead to psychic disruption. The paper also focuses on rebuilding the self and overcoming the memories of the gruesome past. Nomi, the protagonist, exceeds all her fears and managed to attain psychological liberty.

Keywords: Identity, women and selfhood, corporeal violence, psychic derangement, psychological liberty.

Identity, whether social, political, cultural, or personal, poses a common question, 'Who are you?' and it might be answered differently by different people in diverse circumstances. It is a ubiquitous notion that defines a person in different aspects. Society plays a significant role in constructing identities based on culture, norms, ideology and patriarchal domination. Erik H. Erickson, a German-American psychologist and psychoanalyst, opines in his book *Identity: Youth and Crises*, "The conscious feeling of having a personal identity is based on two simultaneous observations: the perception of the selfsameness and continuity of one's existence in time and space and the perception of the fact that others recognize one's sameness and continuity" (50). The construction of the identity of a female is influenced by prevailing social discourses. It reflects and evokes the notion that social identity is

amalgamated with the basis of personal self. Personal identity labels a person's inimitable characteristics apart from the confined classification of social groups and makes a person distinct from others.

Women, all across the world, are being denied their assertive selves by subjugating them under the pressures and expectations of social and patriarchal dominance. Women must challenge the constraints that hamper their freedom of self. Female identity is dependent on the psychological acceptance of self and assertion of their individuality. A society that benefits from self-doubt, enjoying self-love and self-esteem is rebellious. Violence, physical or psychological, binds women to combat the constructed power that subjugate their entity. It shatters a woman's dignity and affects her psychologically. Society makes them believe in their vulnerability and dependency on the androcentric structure. Women's quest for identity, freedom and equality is inevitable. Women are in dire need to attain psychological liberty by transcending the social conforms that deny their independence and consider women as victims.

Anuradha Roy, an Indian novelist, got globally acclaimed for her third novel, *Sleeping on Jupiter*, which has been longlisted for the Man Booker Prize in 2015 and the recipient of the DSC Prize for South Asian Literature in 2016. She has also been much-admired for her other three novels, *An Atlas of Impossible Longings* (2008), *Folded Earth* (2011), and *All the Lives We Never Lived* (2018). *Sleeping on Jupiter* won the attention of the audience, as Roy discusses the issue of predatory sexual behaviour of hypocritical religious leaders. The novel questions the sanctity of the so-called 'sacred walls' and the Godmen who run these dubious institutions. Roy talks about the journey from the experiences of violence, child sexual abuse, corporeal and psychological scars and traumatic past to the overcoming of fears, transcending vulnerability and surviving through the painful memories by attaining inner liberty. The novel depicts the poignant musings of a twenty-five-year-old protagonist Nomita Fredrickson, who is returning to India to overcome the abusive memories of her past.

Nomita, at the age of seven, witnessed and experienced the macabre killing of her father by masked men, the unfathomable loss of her brother, and the abandonment by her mother. She was intensely engulfed by the terror of the violence witnessed that she could hear shrieks of her father in her sleep, "In my sleep, I hear the sound of pigs at slaughter, the sound my father made." (10) After the unexpected devastation in her life she has been taken to an orphanage run by a Godman figure, Guruji, where she, along with other girls, was sexually exploited and emotionally devastated. The only clear memory that she had of her home, was a

perturbed one. Her initial years of life moved with the loss of belongingness and displacement, which shattered her emotionally and psychologically. Her days of innocence were being snatched away by the predatory world and unfamiliar faces. She was taken to a place that had “high gates made of metal sheets with a line of iron spikes above” (35), with a cottage filled with pictures of a long-haired man, identified as Guruji.

Nomi’s first close encounter with Guruji was horrifying. His eyes were stuck to Nomi as if he could not see anybody else, “He sat there observing me for a long time, saying nothing. I thought he could see into me, through the tunic and my skin and bones, right inside... Guruji patted his lap to make me climb onto it. Then he held me against him. His chest was warm and bare, and I could hear his heartbeat.” (36) She, aged seven, found his gaze disturbing, which further emerged as his compulsive paedophilic trait. Although, as far as religion is concerned, its power is believed as absolute, supreme, and irrefutable, regardless of its immoral preaching, at times. He veiled his actual image with the proclamation of his nobility and generosity. Nomi recalls him saying, “You think you have nobody...That’s not true. I am your father and your mother now. I am your country. I am your teacher. I am your God... Whenever you are frightened, think of my face. I will keep you safe. You have come to my ashram now. This is your refuge. Nobody will harm you.” (37)

After some days in the ashram, Nomi and her only friend Piku were caught playing near the barbed wire gate. Girls were instructed to stay inside the ashram, as they were told that the outside world was cruel and they could be put in jail for the transgression. A few days back a girl named Champa was severely punished for trying to run from the ashram. Her things were set on fire and was harshly beaten by an ashram boy, Bhola. Nomi was also cautioned several times for breaking trivial rules and at that moment, Guruji took her to his cottage and made her understand the seriousness of violating the rules by, at first, making her aware of the risks outside and simultaneously gently pressing her against his chest. The punishment wasn’t only physical but turned out to be the first grave psychological impact on Nomi. He came closer to Nomi’s face, Nomi, unaware of the voluptuous activity, continued sitting on his lap, experiencing his hands on her body from one scar to another. She recollects:

As his hand moved from scar to scar, it went under the skirt of my tunic and began to stroke the part between my legs. His hand went up my thighs and down. He shifted my weight and slipped down my knickers and put his hand right between my legs. He lifted

his robes and he pulled my hand towards himself and said, "Hold this, it is magic." It stuck out between his legs like a stump. (92)

He declared Nomi the "chosen one" and strictly ordered her not to disclose it to anyone. He masqueraded himself under the religious robe and impenitently said, "Not a word about this. I will call you and you will sit on my lap again." (93) Lisa S. Price in her book *Feminist Frameworks: Building Theory on Violence Against Women* elaborates on power, "Male sexuality simultaneously constructs power and is itself constructed of power. The wish to define a sexual object according to one's requirement for arousal and satisfaction remains only a wish unless one has the power to impose that definition...under conditions of male supremacy power defines the masculine." (46) His cottage walls were full of hidden frames of sensual images. The memory of the sticky semen in her hand disrupted her peace and created a sense of self-loathing and self-deprecation. Guruji's licentious act affected her intensely and snatched her away from her childhood innocence.

Nomi was close to two people in the ashram, Piku, her best friend, and a boy, Jugnu, who came as a gardener for that place. He was also a refugee, older than Nomi, and a mature one. He understood the deceptive walls of the ashram and promised Nomi that they would be soon free and leave for the new country. She gradually realized the facade she and other girls were entrapped into, but was helpless and couldn't find ways to get rid of that place. Nomi was, indeed, a smart and brave soul. She often used to get into fights because of Piku, who was timid and frail.

Guruji continued his licentious activities with Nomi and the other little girls. The girls were being lured in the name of basic amenities and a permanent shelter. Nomi, turning twelve, got her first menstruation. She was being outcast in another hut, feeling extremely lonely and secluded. After the purification, Guruji called her into his cottage. Nomi experienced devastating corporeal violence at the hands of Guruji. He relentlessly raped her, not only giving her bodily scars but mutilating her psychologically and emotionally:

I remember how Guruji came in, locked the door, sat down and patted his thighs. How he stroked my legs as he spoke. How he told me I was a nun in the service of God. I was the chosen one... He held my face in between his hands and stuck greasy lips on my lips, pushed his tongue in. it felt like a wet snake. I remember the way he kept stroking my body at first over my clothes, then his hands went under them. I remember

breaking away, trying to run, reaching the door, pulling a stool to it to unlatch it, and that when he stood up, he looked large enough to smash me against the wall. My body felt as if it would tear into two when he forced my legs apart, then wider apart. He stuffed cloth into my mouth to stop me shouting for help. I remember my screams made no sound. There was blood. A burning between my legs. The sense that my body was being split open. (174)

She and other girls continued suffering torture, sexual assaults, severe punishments, and brutal erotic acts by Guruji, without any shame. Suddenly one day, Champa came to her with a secret plan of fleeing away from the ashram. They both managed to run off, secretly, in a manure van from the ashram and reached a girl's home with hidden identities. From there, they got adopted to different places. Nomi was adopted by a single woman in Oslo. Before going to Delhi Nomi decided to reveal the deceptive and voluptuous godman and save the girls, specifically Piku. She wrote a detailed letter to the newspaper with some shreds of evidence and secretly put it in the post box.

The courage that she possessed, to not only save herself but all the other girls and future victims from the hands of the devil, was invincible. Years later, in Oslo, she could see the effect of her audacious step on the internet, "I found a picture of Guruji on the internet and glued it to a wall. I looked him in the eye every day, I stuck pins into his face. He will not scare me again, not from a distance nor when I stand face to face in the same room with him and say I was there: I was there from the start, I know everything." (240) She wrote the letter about his evil deeds and succeeded in getting him behind bars, yet the memories of her encounter with Guruji, haunt her and make her anxious.

Living in Oslo, for a decade, with her foster mother, Nomi, driven by the burning memories of her past, decided to return to India. Her homecoming serves a significant purpose of recovering from the horrific incidents of her childhood. She is in quest of her roots, at a place where she lost her family, her identity, and her inner peace. Concealing her core purpose, she has come up with a peripheral motive of exploring the temple town for a documentary film. Nomi encounters three elderly women in her compartment who were discussing their insignificant lives after retirement, betrayal by their husbands and children, and their experiences of ennui. Nomi steps down to a station for tea but suddenly got attacked by two men with an unusual touch. Already scarred by unpleasant predatory encounters with men, her instinctive defense was to spill a hot cup of tea on one of the men, kick him hard, and run away.

Nomi has become very attentive and such ghastly incidents make her recollect the childhood trauma which urges her to revert violently. Reaching Jarmuli recalls her many grave memories and started haunting her every moment.

In Jarmuli, she is being accompanied by Suraj for her research work for the film. His wife left him months back because of his hysterical traits. In the afternoon, while sleeping, Nomi suddenly feels suffocated by a familiar terrifying dream which took her to a boat in which she was taken to the Ashram. She is often haunted by such dreams and generates a kind of phobia that induces terror, panic, and anxiety. Sigmund Freud, an Austrian neurologist, in his book *The Interpretation of Dreams*, affirms, "The dream process consequently enters on a regressive path, which lies open to it precisely owing to the peculiar nature of the state of sleep, and it is led along that path by the attraction exercised on it by groups of memories; some of these memories themselves exist only in the form of visual cathexes and not as translations into the terminology of the later systems." (572) The memories that she is carrying in the deepest corner of her heart have imbibed a significant part of herself. Being a victim of child sexual abuse, she displays several symptoms of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. She is engulfed by anxiety disorders, secrecy, helplessness, vivid flashbacks, intrusive thoughts, etc. She never discussed her disturbing years with her foster mother. Her heart was jammed with solitude, dark places, and fragmented self.

Nomi, while sipping tea on the beach at Johnny Toppo's tea stall, adjusts her camera lens to view the serene sea. Suddenly her lens fixes on a monk, with long white hair, dark glasses, and rosary in his hands. Nomi, when just about to capture the scene, halts suddenly, as just the sight of the monk makes her insecure:

She let go off the camera. She got up and started to run down the beach, past the hotels, around the upturned boats, away from the crowd and into a birch forest, threading her way through the bone-white trunks of trees, the glow of a burning house in the distance, away from the blood streaming down its wall and in her head a girl's voice cried out again and again for her brother, so loudly that she did not hear Johnny Toppo agitating for his money until he was in front of her, blocking her way. She could see dark stars. She closed her eyes, opened them again, saw that the sun had gone and the sea had turned to foaming blood. (82)

The anxiety surrounds her completely as if it is Guruji who is looking, with rage, into her eyes for revealing him and his unholy ashram. She often encounters blood, while recalling her past. The deep redness of blood stuck to her head like the Red Room, a symbol of captivity and vulnerability presented in Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre*. Nomi has become a fearful child, always scared of screaming sounds, lonely places and monks with robes. She is on a quest for the liberty of her tormented soul. Nomi eagerly longs to disappear from the horrid reality of the past and unchain herself from the reminiscences. Nomi always feels surrounded by a sense of emptiness which has created a void and fear in her. She often finds herself in a position of being attacked. Thinking about the monk she has witnessed, the previous day, made her recall her past, more clearly:

Nomi lay in a large double bed in the hotel across the creek. She had fenced herself in on every side with pillows, her backpack, her travel guide, extra blankets rolled into barrels. The portion of the bed left for her was a small rectangle into which she just about fitted if she folded her knees into her chest. She clutched a pillow close. She was trying not to think of the monk on the beach. He was out there somewhere. Had he seen her? Had he recognised her? He must have, if she recognised him. (114)

Nomi, with her truckloads of thoughts, becomes impatiently frustrated and she finds herself in a disturbing state. Rosemary Gartner and Bill Macarthy in their book entitled *The Oxford Handbook of Gender, Sex and Crime*, assert, "Child sexual abuse has strong associations with a range of mental health problems, including affective disorders, anxiety, posttraumatic stress disorder, substance abuse, personality disorders, and psychosis." (388) Nomi often finds herself in an unfamiliarly scary state, where she fights back her demons in violent ways. She was struggling to believe that all of these are the repercussions of the long-lasting impact of the abuse she had gone through. The hallucinations make her uneasy and intimidate her with a similar experience. She thinks of retorting back in a violent manner but couldn't gain the courage to revert and instead feels captivated by the devastating memory of the past. The psychic disruption urges her to get free and liberate herself from the haunting reminiscences. The experience of her inner turmoil and its physical manifestations have been vividly portrayed by the novelist:

Beyond the curtains through the window I could see the flesh-thick petals of crimson flowers on a lifeless tree and then my heart thudded as if it would burst, the iron rod twisted and turned, there was burning wire around my skull, and I tore off all my clothes

and ran to the door, I turned on the shower, I slid to the bathroom's polished floor. Over my head, my shoulders, my breasts, the water poured, I was sodden, I was sobbing, I scoured myself with nails, my nails were thick and pitted and dirty and hard, they scratched my skin, but I could not stop...I tried, but I could not go back into the room. (120)

Nomi feels strangled by the wire around her skull and the rod in her head, which makes her brain and her entire existence bound by those traumatic incidents. She could still sense the touch and ooze on her hand and lost track of time to get that off her hand. She wanted to get rid of the ongoing impact of that touch. The incident has thoroughly disturbed her mental state and often makes her repulsive. The overwhelming fear delves her into engrossment in violent thoughts:

I thought I had torn the thing out, it would never come back. Nobody would cow me down, I would attack. I could slam my fist into a brick, not feel the pain, lick the blood away, hit the brick again. I would kick a ball hard and cry with joy. The boys sniggered, but it made me feel whole, it made me weep because that ball wasn't a ball, it was a man's head, it was that man I was kicking dead. This was the way I broke it, the thing was half-killed, I thought it had lost the will to fight but then I came to this hotel. It is by the sea, I had chosen it deliberately, to stare it down, to say you can't do anything more to me, but then at breakfast by the pool there was a man with a knife that he plunged into a melon not once but twice, thrice, and then again, and when he was done he prised the slices apart, the juice inside poured out in red spurts. I told myself it was just fruit. (120)

Nomi expresses the rage in her, by being on the oppressor's side. She sneers at the fiends to put them down and manifests her wrath by punching the wall and wiping the blood away from it. The violent imagery that she infers, makes her robust enough to kick the head of Guruji like a ball and stand fearlessly to face him. The knife seems to pierce her tranquil mental health but she didn't let it overcome her. She appears as a fighter and a survivor of her disturbed psychological trepidation.

The next day at Jarmuli, Nomi visited the abandoned place of Ashram. She wanted to confront the place that inflicted extreme pain upon her. The place was all deserted and was known as a "godforsaken place" where immoral things happened. Nomi was aware of all the terrible things, as she was a vital part of the Ashram and besides that, was the sole reason for

its desolate state. Reaching there she encountered an old sculptor, whom she initially mistook for a man in robes, following her. Later she was sure that the place had lost its dignity and there was no one left to terrorize little girls, with predatory eyes.

Nomi, reaching the hotel after visiting a temple that evening, had a heated argument with Suraj. He left her in the temple and she struggled hard to reach the hotel. The aggressive dispute frenzied Suraj and he grabbed Nomi's arm to throw her out of his room. She somehow managed to free herself and without a tremble in her voice, ordered him to sleep. She was straightforward and superior in her address to Suraj. Her unidentifiable tone gets on his nerve and he pulled her in a way that ripped her kurta. They end up under a shower, and Nomi, while freeing herself, somehow slipped from his hold and her head got slammed on the hard floor. Her head was bleeding and she was lying still on the floor. After some time, she came to her senses, and Suraj tried to make her understand the misunderstanding, but Nomi was all raged up. She aggressively shouted at him, as if her abusive past has come in front of her eyes. This time, she wasn't vulnerable but rather an assertive young woman. She lunged him with a knife, letting go of her feeble state, and didn't stop till he ran away to save his life. Nomi spurted her wrath out, of all those years. She overcame her fear of being abused and attacked. The bad memories engulfed her and tried to bring her down emotionally and physically, but Nomi has now attained emotional strength and psychological liberty. She was all ready to fight back her reel and real demons that have made her a vulnerable person.

Nomi, at the end of her journey to Jarmuli, reunites with nature, leaving behind all the aversion and hostility. After a long time, she relishes the beauty of the sea, which has taken away everything from her, and finally, finds solace in the lap of Mother Earth. Her quest comes to an end with her strengthened soul and she attains her inner peace and rebuilt her identity by conquering the fears of the past and accepting herself as a survivor of traumatic memoirs. Her tormented spirit has amalgamated with the sensitivities of nature and healed her body and soul. Her visit proves a mechanism to encounter the grisly memories and stand strong against the demons that have been haunting her since she left the ashram. Nomi decides to settle for her psychological freedom from the entrapment of scarring reminiscences. Women's liberty lies in the contentment of self, free choice and anticipation of what one might become. It is her struggle in coming to terms with her past and her journey towards psychological wholeness that accounts for the greatness of the novel.

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