

**SEXUAL VIOLENCE IN THE SPIRITUAL SANCTUARY:
A STUDY OF ANURADHA ROY'S *SLEEPING ON JUPITER***

Dr. (Mrs.) N. Velmani

Associate Professor & Dean of Arts
Department of English
V.V. Vanniaperumal College for Women
Virudhunagar, Tamil Nadu 626001

If women are to discover and express who they are, they must begin with their sexuality and obviously it begins with their bodies. Female body becomes the site of forced colonization which the male master not only uses but also their target of assault and abuses. Luce Irigaray rightly claims that “It is important for us to guard and keep our own bodies and at the same time make them emerge from the silence and subjugation” (421).

Women writers of today have moved away from traditional portrayal of women as enduring, self-sacrificing women, the characterization of gender inequalities, extra-marital relationship, rather, their novels discuss burning issues of contemporary reality, the cultural change, cyber culture due to the onset of globalization. A number of diasporic writers- post colonial migrant writers of the first generation and second generation to the present young writers of the millennium- Jhumpa Lahiri, Kiran Desai, Tulsi Badrinath, Padma Viswanathan, Suma Chitnis, Aruna Chakravarti, Shilpa Agarwal, Veena Das, Malavika Karlekar, Kum Kum Sanjari, Anuradha Roy, Dina Mehta, Kalpana Swaminathan- work on the reality of women's issues and the contemporary aspects of Indian society not bothering only with patriarchy and gender biases. The recent film *India's Daughter* propagandas the hot news of the media the gruesome incident of a medical student gang raped.

Woman is doubly colonized both by Nature and Man. The basic question asked by Draupadi in *The Mahabharata*, ‘is woman a being or a thing?’ still remains unanswered. Women's bodies are objectified by various means for male consumption and sexual declaration. Marriage becomes almost an institution enslaving women to a lifetime of male domination: “Marriages never end, they cannot-they are a state of being” (*That Long Silence*, 127).

There's been a recent stormy call to action against sexual assault in India as rape cases have begun to make international headlines rather than being accepted as part of everyday female experience in the country. On the wake of this perpetration of violence against women and children, Roy's book *Sleeping on Jupiter* is timely released with extremely brave perspective. Roy in her “Acknowledgements” expresses,

There are countless horrific cases of child abuse and sexual violence in India. I have drawn on the legal and investigative history of many such incidents...violence, being the LSD of our times, human interest stories on

the subject play out one evening high-pitched news capsules in television every day. (II)

Anuradha Roy takes such a newspaper headline and turns it into the theatrical performance. *Sleeping on Jupiter* is a courage book dealing with a timely subject- violence against women within the most unexpected walls. The intriguing title comes from the protagonist's quest, their sense of being trapped in their lives and looking for alternative universe. "One, a temple guide, finds himself at such a crossroads that he yearns for the solitude of a totally different world. For him this becomes a longing to sleep on Jupiter under its 16 moons" (26).

There is a tapestry of lost innocence, displacement, rejection and pain in Roy's latest novel *Sleeping on Jupiter*. Her first book *The Folded Earth* was set around plateaus and rivers, the second novel *Atlas of Impossible Longing* was set in the hills, the third novel *Sleeping on Jupiter* is set by the sea, Jarmuli, a made up place fictional place, convincing complex location for the novel. Originally, the book started as a long short story. She then started following incidental characters, particularly a girl on a beach and an elderly tea-seller.

Unpeeling the layers of their stories led me to unexpected directions. The narrative lends itself to jagged edges, spliced narrative and areas of mystery, so I structured it in a radically different way from my two earlier books. (45)

The story occurs across a prologue like chapter documenting a violent past and then a chapter each across the 18 days, the various protagonists spend by the sea, unravelling their present. The scenes are so vivid, the first murder, the loss -of - innocence, the sea temple visit, the violence pin pointing a real event and Nomi, the girl who is made a refugee to be an Everywoman horribly affected from wars and violence.

Nomita Frederikson, from Oslo, is travelling to Jarmuli to make a documentary on the temple town. But she has an unspoken reason for her journey. Vidya, Latika, and Gowri, senior citizens and close friends are travelling to Jarmuli in the same A2 compartment. They are concerned about the solitary young girl when she is attacked as she gets off the train. They can do nothing and watch from inside. The train leaves but they don't pull the chain. They are destined to 'meet' later, by the sea are Badal Raghu and Johnny Tepo, trapped in a life not of their choice.

The context of the novel takes place over five days in the coastal temple town of Jarmuli in contemporary India. The town is populated ostensibly by priests and pilgrims and it is popularly known as a spiritual sanctuary, evil and brutality appear to trump goodness and innocence at every turn. Roy interweaves gracefully a cost of characters- a young woman, all braided hair, tattoos and piercings, Nomita Frederiksen, a refugee from her adoptive Norway; Badal, the temple guide, a trio of elderly Calcutta ladies holidaying together, Vidya, Latika, Gowri, Suraj, her photographer accompanying her on the filming assignment to Jarmuli, Johnny Tepo, the chaiwala on the beach.

Nomi's pilgrimage and her travel to Jarmuli to pay homage to the famous temple is an attempt to confront the traumas of her past, Nomi is both Indian and not Indian, having come from Norway: "The sun was like a moon in this country and in its light I felt as if I was looking at everything through a pearl" (11). She is transported with other orphaned refugee girls to the internationally celebrated coastal Jarmuli to seek the spiritual home and protection of Guruji "Who could see into me through my tunic and my skin and bones, right inside" (57). As the train continues on its way, her fate unknown to her motherly travelling companions "their holiday

sprints snuffed out by the absence of a girl they knew not at all”(62) - until they encounter her a few days later in Jarmuli.

She disembarked at a station en route, to buy some bread and tea from a stand on the platform but within minutes, the three old women see the girl running for her life after being aggressively accosted by two men. The story is told in flashback how six years of her childhood were spent living in an ashram, a spiritual sanctuary populated by pilgrims and their protocols, the tourists and their guides, priests and sadhus headed by a godman. When the guru was publically lauded all over the world, when the outside world wasn't watching, he inflicted emotional, physical and sexual abuse on Nomi and other children in his care.

Anuradha Roy juxtaposes the sexual violence with the physical violence. A 7- year-old-child witnesses the murder of her father by axe-wielding masked men who have invaded their home. The smell of a ripe grape fruit fresh from their garden is contrasted with the sight of the whitewashed wall inside their hut 'streamed red' with the father's blood and the echoes of his haunting screams as he is beaten by the miscreant and then butchered like the pigs slaughtered for their meat. The horror and barbarity of Nomi's physical violence inhumanly echoes the palpable helpless anguish of three women physically separated by the window. The novelist focuses on the sexual violence juxtaposed with carving of the temple evoking carnal desires. The town's temple depicts the carvings of lovers coupled in a variety of embraces inciting sexual pleasure. The guide explains to the tourists: "Nothing wrong. Please understand. In ancient India no barrier between life and love. Erotic is creation itself, so it is celebrated in our temples" (103).

Sleeping on Jupiter revolves around the ethic and aesthetic instinct of Lost- and found concept- something oddly pleasing and anxiety- inducing that marks midnight thriller watching on television. In her list of acknowledgements, Roy weaves a common thread from the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* and Jibanananda Das's poem *Bonolata Sen* and binds these texts with her novel. Das's famous poem is about a lover's search for the lost Bonolata Sen. Rama loses his wife to find her later; in the *Mahabharata*, the Pandavas lose their kingdom, property and wife and the Kauravas lose their lives. That is why Anuradha Roy places her novel by the sea, that ultimate metaphor for lost and found. Nomi feels,

It's the sea. The sound of it. It brought back so many old things I had forgotten....At every sea, she would sit down like this and wait for it to tell her something, she didn't know what, but she'd know it when it came.
(87)

Roy scatters 'losses' throughout the novel-The novel begins with the death of Nomi's biological family, her mother, her brother, her childhood companion Piku and even her childhood. When Nomi arrives in India from Norway, to collect what has been lost, she gets lost herself. Suraj, the photographer who accompanies her on this filming assignment to Jarmuli, has lost his wife to his best friend; Badal, the guide, loses his scooter, a lover and almost his sanity; Tepo, the chaiwala on the beach, has lost his life as Jugnuin the ashram; of the three elderly women, one lost her husband to a secretary, another a Konkani lover and the third, a victim of dementia, her memory. The young Nomi says about her move from Jarmuli to Norway "I was a parcel being sent from one country to another" (112).

In the modern feminist writing, a woman's body has acquired in-depth socio-cultural significations. It attempts to inscribe the internal or psychic engravings upon a woman's body which is the ultimate site of self- realization and true liberation. According to Judith Butler, the modern feminist, gender, sex and gender identities are culturally constructed whereas sexuality along with sex is equally performative in nature. In her book *Bodies That Matter*, she writes "For

surely body live and die; eat and sleep; feel pain and pleasure, endure illness and violence, and these ‘facts’...cannot be dismissed as mere construction” (11).

The patriarchal perception of women as mute sex objects and mere bodies for sexual gratification is exposed through the novel. In spite of women’s education and the career oriented life style of the current generation; woman has been commercialized as an amorous commodity and a prey to appease man’s voluptuous desires. The novel successfully traces the grotesqueness and grossness.

Indian English fiction especially by feminist writers, gains significance in the sense that they outrageously question the commoditization of women as mere ‘bodies’. They protest against the projection of women as mute sex objects that demean their dignity as human beings. Since the concept of sexuality has been essentially a male paradigm, the hegemonic value system expects women community to assimilate the indignity and feign silence and secrecy in controversial episodes like rape and sexual abuses.

Works Cited

Butler, Judith. *Bodies That Matter*. New York: Routledge, 1993. Print.

Roy, Anuradha. *Sleeping on Jupiter*. New Delhi: OUP, 2015. Print.

Sinha, Sunita. (ed)., *Modern Literary Theory: New Perspectives*. New Delhi: Atlantic Publishers(P)Ltd. 2012.

Rivkin, Julie and Michael Ryan.(ed)., *Literary Theory: An Anthology*. Malden: Blackwell Publishing. 2004.

www.thehindu.com/books/literary review Suniitha Balakrishnan.