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RISING LIKE A PHOENIX: APPROPRIATING FEMALE AGENCY IN ANURADHA ROY'S  
*SLEEPING ON JUPITER*

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ABSTRACT

The patriarchal power structures blatantly condone and celebrate violence and use it as a means to subjugate women. Women are oppressed, stereotyped, and sexually objectified. Their voices are suppressed and silenced, and their experiences are often overlooked, obstructing their progress. The lopsided power dynamics between the gender binaries catalyze gender-based violence catapulting vast social and political implications. Anuradha Roy's *Sleeping on Jupiter* (2015) is an evocative work of fiction that recounts the distressing experiences of violence and trauma of its protagonist, Nomi and traces her trajectory from victimhood to survival. It also explores the journey of three elderly women as they fight their way through the oppressive patriarchy to assert their agency. The narrative delineates women's lives from subjugation to emancipation through a firm rejection of conformist patriarchal expectations. The proposed paper seeks to examine the detrimental consequences of pervasive corporeal, sexual, and psychological violence juxtaposed with the emergence of resolute and powerful women. It outlines Nomi's journey as she rises from the ashes by reconstructing her identity. It explores the mechanisms used by women to appropriate their agency by throwing caution to the patriarchy. It also aims to highlight contemporary feminist issues and the need to build a safe and inclusive environment for women.

Keywords: Power dynamics, gender binaries, gender-based violence, patriarchy, emancipation

Recipient of the 2016 DSC Prize for South Asian Literature and longlisted for the 2015 Man Booker Prize, *Sleeping on Jupiter* (2015), the third novel by Anuradha Roy, is a poignant work of fiction with evocative descriptions of the intricacies and complexities that went into weaving each of its characters and exploration of their respective journeys. Nomita Frederiksen, the protagonist, witnesses her father's macabre killing at the novel's onset. Her trauma is intensified when her mother abandons her. At the age of seven, Nomi is orphaned and stands alone in an unknown world. She soon loses her innocence by falling victim to perpetual sexual violence. Farheen Nahvi, in her article *The Case for a Feminist Approach to Gender-Based Violence Policymaking in India*, strikes at the root cause of the pervasive gender-based violence in Indian society by asserting that "India's social structure, with long-standing gender inequalities rooted in patriarchal norms and gender roles,

plays a significant role in perpetuating GBV. Traditional gender roles prescribe a docile nature and an inferior position for women." The novel traces Nomi's journey from her abuse to her emancipation. The narrative also explores the journey of three elderly women, Gouri, Vidya, and Latika, also victimized by patriarchy, from their predicament to their liberation. The novel is a perturbing account of sexual violence, objectification of women, and denial of their fundamental rights due to societal norms and beliefs. It explores the impact of patriarchy and religion on women's lives. It probes the violence against women, power dynamics between men and women, and the intersectionality of gender, caste, and class. It highlights the deeply ingrained patriarchal attitudes and cultural norms perpetuating gender-based violence.

The novel highlights the burning issue of child sexual abuse and gender-based violence. LMG Clark, in his article *Feminist Perspectives on Violence Against Women and Children: Psychological, Social Service, and Criminal Justice Concerns* argues that "Physical, sexual, and emotional abuse of women and children must be seen as a serious social problem that results in the cross-generational perpetuation of violence." Nomi was brought to an ashram headed by a (un)holy Godman, Guruji. He was publicly lauded as a spiritual saint and feigned kindness, but in reality, he was a sexual predator preying upon the innocent young girls under his care. His bed with "carved animal paws for legs." (89) also symbolized his predatory manoeuvres. When Nomi was summoned to his cottage, he gestured for her to climb onto his lap in order to exploit her sexually and gratify himself. He exploited her innocence by making her hold his genitalia with both her hands and stroked her until he had attained satisfaction and her hands were sticky with slime. Roy narrates:

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

Nomi spotted an erotic picture on the wall concealed by a towel, just like Guruji's evil desires were concealed by his devout and gentle demeanour. The ashram, which was supposed to be a safe haven for the orphaned girls, turned out to be a pitfall where they were sexually abused, beaten, and raped perpetually. His attendant, Padma Devi, praised him for adopting twelve boat girls and clothing, feeding and admitting them to the ashram school. However, the girls silently yearned to break free and escape the sexually abusive confinement they were held in. Nomi says, "I wanted to run out and throw away my clothes and books and pens and pencils." (143). She was well informed that his generous veneer was only a subterfuge. On the seventh day, when her menstrual confinement is over, Nomi is bathed and washed clean, dressed up in new clothes, and her eyes are lined with kohl. She was readied to 'serve' Guruji. She remembers that "He said again that he was God on earth and I would be purified by serving him." (173). Her period marks her sexual readiness and prepares her body for violation. Sensing the inevitable, Nomi tried hard to extricate herself from his clutches and escape but in vain. He forced himself upon the innocent child and violated her body, thus underscoring the patriarchal belief that women's bodies are the males' property. In her book *Feminists Frameworks: Building a Theory on Violence against Women*, Lisa S. Price establishes that "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) Nomi reflects on the excruciating memory, saying:

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)

He raped her night after night, inflicting bodily and psychological pain for his own pleasure, thus rupturing her psyche. Bell Hooks, the radical feminist, critiqued the use of coercive authority, threat, and violence in a culturally lopsided relationship between the subjugator and subjugated in her book *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*, positing that "the power the dominant party exercises is maintained by the threat (acted upon or not) that abusive punishment, physical or psychological, could be used if the hierarchical structure is threatened." (120) The girls at the ashram were so ruthlessly penalized that they sometimes remained immobile

for days after corporal punishment. One of Nomi's teachers at the ashram school was so violently beaten that she disappeared for a long time, and when she returned, she was blood-soaked in bandages with all her hair shaved off. Nomi recalls that "Her head and one of her eyes was wrapped in a bandage. Her ribboned plaits were missing. Her lips were like two swollen rubber chillies." (42) Expressionless, she looked at the girls and warned them of a similar fate in store for all of them. Champa, one of Guruji's supposed favourites, tried to escape from the abhorrent confines of the ashram twice and was severely punished. On the first occasion, all her possessions from the past were set ablaze before everyone. Among her treasured chattels was a tiny doll with a drooping head and limp arms wearing a printed rag for a saree. Champa choked at the sight of the seized doll, juxtaposing the handicapped doll with her own impairment as Guruji's sexual abuse left her emotionally limp. When she fled for the second time, Bhola dishonourably pulled her by her hair and locked her up in a cottage. Inside, she was callously beaten, banged, and thumped and gashed by a prickly rose bush. She bled and cried for help.

Nomi remembers, "When Bhola came out of the cottage his white lungi was flecked red. The rose branch was bloodied and bent." (171) Bhola being a part of the patriarchal hierarchy, revels in the villainy. The French political scientist Françoise Vergès in her book, *A Feminist Theory of Violence*, avers that patriarchy and capitalism clubbed together, aggravate gender-based violence, and make the devaluation of women and glorification of male aggression central to the feminist discourse. She claims that her study "aims to contribute to the reflection on violence as a structural element of patriarchy and capitalism rather than specifically male." Piku, Nomi's only confidant, whimpered through the night after a beating, but she displayed courage by rejecting Guruji's summon and refusing to entertain him and his carnal desires. As a penalty, a bag full of dung was fastened to her ankle, and she was debarred from entering the school or the dining hall. Nomi recounts that "She ate outside, tied to that smelly sack, flies buzzing around." (174) Nomi remembers how she was put away in a kennel among six dogs and deprived of food as retribution for daring to untie her. Guruji's inhumanity with Minoti, a girl with a deformed leg, was a downright manifestation of his monstrosity, unleashing the beast within. He was a sadist deriving pleasure by inflicting pain on her. Champa reports that "He smashed her head against the wall. She bled and he laughed." (233). The violence that followed was dreadful and beyond human comprehension and conception. He flung her down, stripped her clothes off before everyone, and relished every bit of his barbarity. Champa describes the horrible scene: "Then he pushed a big spoon into her. All of us saw it. The girls were crying. She was bleeding." (234) Guruji's perpetration of sexual and corporeal violence was physically, emotionally, and psychologically devastating.

However, the violence wasn't just limited to the girls. Jugnu, later Johnny Toppo, was physically assaulted for firmly opposing the injustices at the ashram. This establishes that the violence wasn't a part of the male-female binary but the controller-controlled binary. He was kicked in the stomach, hit on the head, and made to crawl. He was half beaten to death when he condemned the act of holding Nomi captive because of her menstruation and tried to set her free. When he regained enough strength, he continued protesting and put the entire coconut grove on fire. He shouts, "Set the child free! Unlock that child, set this whole place on fire! Fire burns evil!" (172) He was then dragged and tied to a tree and fiercely thrashed "using rods, stones, feet, belts and fists." (172) and then carried away. The feminist discourse posits that the perpetrators of violence aren't males but the patriarchy, which victimizes men as well. Janine Shaw, in her article, entitled *Gender and Violence: Feminist Theories, Deadly Economies and Damaging Discourse*, emphasizes that the suffering of men cannot be omitted or ignored and contends that "by examining the hierarchies of masculinity, a feminist theory can offer a deeper understanding of violence targeted at men." Patriarchy is, therefore, inherently a hierarchical power structure where the powerful oppress the powerless, irrespective of gender binaries.

Badal preferred talking to Suraj instead of Nomi as he found her repellent and doesn't consider a woman worthy enough to engage in a dialogue with, robustly endorsing the patriarchal ideology. Nomi inadvertently found herself as an object of the male gaze when the two men looked fixedly at her trying to determine the appropriateness of her attire for the temple. She was disgusted when she was precluded from entering the temple premises. Failing to figure out the impropriety in her clothing Nomi remarked with a chafed look on her face, "I'm covered from neck to knees!...Everything I read before coming here said the country had changed. What was it like before? The women were draped in curtains?" (56) She was enraged and exasperated at the

religious hypocrisy and duplicity of laws that deliberately oppress women. She refused to adhere to the whimsical dictates of modest clothing standards set for women by men who themselves are half-naked. Nomi felt snubbed and excluded but she refused to be intimidated and expressed a strong disdain for such dogmatic practices. She chooses to challenge the patriarchy by deciding to rather not go inside than rent a sari and feed their egos and pomposity. Nomi exclaims, "I can't stand it, these temples, all these men laying down the law. Don't wear this, don't wear that, don't do this, don't do that. Half those men around the door aren't even wearing shirts. Fuck it. I'm not going in there." (56) The history bears testimony to how across all cultures and nationalities, the patriarchal power structures decide the codes of conduct and determine the 'ideal and decent' dressing standards for women. Be it keeping them veiled in hijab or burqa in the Arab and Muslim countries or deciding the lengths of their skirts in the USA, arbitrating to raise the necklines and drop the hemlines of women's garments in the UK, or draping them in a sari back in India, the male-chauvinist society never fails to assert their dominance over women. In her article *A comprehensive timeline of men telling women What to Wear*, Corinne Redfern asserts, "...throughout history, women have continually fallen subject to various rules and regulations that dictate what we 'can' and 'can't' put on our bodies. In fact, men telling women what to wear has been going on for thousands and thousands of years." The bare-chested priests exercising their authority over the appositeness of a woman's attire is a real example of the oppression of women in the name of religion, making them subservient and engendering feelings of inferiority, rage, and frustration. Nomi represents the plight of women who are discriminated against, victims of prejudice, and suppressed by the androcentric society.

Patriarchy is a hegemonic structure that strictly dichotomizes gender roles and expects women to exist merely in a man's shadow. It prioritizes the male sex and systematically institutionalizes its dominance over its female counterparts, thereby manifesting and reinforcing the subordinate status of women. British sociologist, Sylvia Walby in her book *Theorizing Patriarchy*, defines patriarchy as, "a system of social structures and practices in which men dominate, oppress and exploit women." (29) In a culturally patriarchal setup, the values of superiority and the obsession with power are so deeply embedded in the male psyche that it subjugates women physically and psychologically, urges men to oppress women, and any possible intrusion into their authoritative domain is regarded as an offence and triggers a backlash. Suraj is a typical product of the patriarchal power structure, which values and enjoys his liberty but becomes indignant when his wife questions his whereabouts. He gave an outlet to his violent aggression by brutally beating up a dog and smashing its bones. His acute insensitivity made him deaf to the dog's whimpers, and he didn't stop until Ayesha intruded and cried out of horror, possibly realizing that she had just escaped her husband's wrath. His violent behaviour with Nomi on a similar pretext is a manifestation of his aggressive masculinity. Kate Millett, the prominent feminist author, in her seminal text *Sexual Politics*, postulates that "control in patriarchal society would be imperfect, even inoperable, unless it had the rule of force to rely upon, both in emergencies and as an ever-present instrument of intimidation". (43) Suraj's use of physical force to assert his power and coerce Nomi to comply and neatly fit into the rigid fundamental mould structured for women by the oppressive androcentric society substantiates Hooks' contention that "Male violence against women in personal relationships is one of the most blatant expressions of the use of abusive force to maintain domination and control. It epitomizes the actualization of hierarchical rule and coercive authority." (120). He was delighted when Nomi's small palm failed to hold his carving knife and took pride in the moment since "It was a man-tool." (110)

The death of Gouri's husband rendered her a prisoner of her son's whims, who took up the role of a patriarch and enforced his own decisions upon her regardless of her wishes or opinions. He assumed the dominant position, exercised his authority, undervalued his mother's choices, and made home nothing but a suffocating prison for her. Dementia further worsened her case, and she had to seek permission and depend on her son even to see her friends. When Gouri went missing for a while on the trip, Latika and Vidya anticipated and feared her son's fury. Gouri's vision of being airborne and flying into the sky twice could result from the house arrest she was under and her urge to break free. Latika's emotional needs for love and affection were denied by her emotionally distant husband, who often displayed his bitterness towards her in front of a gathering. Roy writes: "He was often that way with her, especially in front of other people, reducing her to long,

shamed silences.” (74) His elopement with a student further intensified the psychological violence he had inflicted upon her. It cracked open a wound that hadn’t healed even after thirty-one years, and “the merest mention of those two months in her life turned the lights off inside her.” (133)

However, men aren’t the only agents of patriarchy. In her book *No Country for Women*, Taslima Nasrin critically comments, “Most women are upholders and bearers of the patriarchal system. Women mostly are unaware that they are tortured. In most cases, women are afraid to be liberated from their confinements. This deplorable condition is due to this patriarchal system.” (18) Vidya unconsciously becomes the flag bearer of patriarchy by displaying a sexist mindset in criticizing a girl for her choice of clothing and outrightly holding them responsible and even reckoning them as an accomplice in the crimes they are subjected to. Assessing Nomi’s outfit and appearance, Vidya longed to voice out: “Have you seen how young girls dress these days? And then they complain if men bother them!” (20) Latika’s anticipation of Vidya’s embarrassment at the news of her son romancing a girl half his age vividly reflects Vidya’s patriarchal outlook. Latika, too upholds the patriarchal viewpoint by judging Nomi for her tryst with Suraj at the beach, equating her with a gold digger, and giving her a character certificate right away. “What’s she doing walking on the beach with a married man, making him buy her necklaces? Didn’t you see how come-hither she looked?” (132) The women, too, though unconsciously and indirectly, become perpetrators of psychological violence by upholding the patriarchal ideology.

The childhood abuse manifests into Post Traumatic Stress Disorder when Nomi grows up, making her a victim of anxiety, panic attacks, and nightmares and instilling in her an inherent fear of sexual violence. The abuse strained her relationship with her foster mother, leaving little room for a mother-daughter interaction as she turned into a “monosyllabic lump around her” (83) wearied of her persistent efforts to germinate a flowering bond. Even her drawings reflected her grey and dispirited disposition. Her foster mother observed her depressing sketches, a poignant symbolic representation of her shattered and scarred life failing to comprehend the unsayable. Nomi reminisces: “I had filled drawing books with dead birds, broken weathervanes and barbed wire. She wondered why I didn’t draw some happy pictures. Flowers, the sun, green meadows.” (44). The years of sexual violence had made Nomi combative. When she got down on a waystation to help a destitute woman, a potential attempt of eve-teasing was made by two lecherous men ogling her, and she retaliated by attacking one of them. Roy recounts:

He was leering and saying something to her. She paid him no attention. As if by mistake, still grinning, he brushed an arm against her breasts. The girl stepped backwards, and in a single move that appeared to take no more than a second, she thrust the bread at the woman and flung the hot tea in the man’s face. She kicked his shin and crotch as his hands flew to his face. The man stumbled and fell to the platform. (31)

Clinical psychologist Katreena Scott in *The Oxford Handbook of Gender, Sex and Crime*, edited by Rosemary Gartner and Bill Macarthy, states that “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) Suraj’s physical assault evoked her trauma of sexual abuse, and she counterattacked, hallucinating Guruji right there, first with his anti-mosquito spray burning his eye away, visualizing Guruji’s eyes that always seemed to look right into her. Nomi looked past Suraj and screamed, “You don’t scare me” (230). She followed it up by gashing him with his own carving knife and whetstone from the toolkit. Scarlet blood splashed around, but “she would not stop, she flung all his gouges and chisels at him, one by one, as if he were a dartboard...His arm bled, his face bled, his stomach hurt, he could barely see.” (231) She kicked his crotch assuming that she was attacking the very ‘weapon’ that Guruji used to torment her. The frightful dreams from her past induced phobia and anxiety that Nomi struggled hard to battle against. In his celebrated book *Interpretation of Dreams*, Sigmund Freud postulates that “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 sight of an albino monk following her and her constant dread of his potential assault on her was an expression of her repressed fears.

The taboo subject of menstruation and the subsequent ostracization of women on account of their 'unchaste' bodies find expression in the narrative when Nomi is cast out and locked away in a hut after she gets her first period. Likewise, all the ashram girls who got their periods were imprisoned in the same hut. They were locked away for a period of seven days. The cultural belief and stigma around periods make women susceptible to infections and create a sense of shame and embarrassment. Tiril Skarstein, in her article entitled *Left in the Dark: How Period Taboos Put Women and Girls at Risk* asserts, "Common period taboos include the idea that women are impure, dirty, or sinful while they're menstruating." It is pertinent for society to engage in a dialogue to address the issue of menstrual hygiene and break this taboo. Sensitizing the masses regarding menstrual biology is essential to disseminate knowledge and awareness and muster social support to bust the myths surrounding menstruation.

The women in the novel rise from the utter state of subjugation and powerlessness, like a phoenix, exercise their agency and autonomy regardless of the violence and trauma they are subjected to, and emerge as unassailable, strong, independent women. Nomi asserts her agency by daring to escape with Champa. She exercises her autonomy by exposing the demonic reality of Guruji and the diabolic environment of the 'sacred' ashram by bravely writing to a newspaper, thereby rescuing Piku and the other victims and even the potential victims. Despite repeated use of violent measures to subjugate her, Champa exerts her agency by successfully running away from the oppressive and abusive ashram. Latika exercises her agency by refusing to dwell on and liberating herself from the clutches of the past. She defies age by beautifying herself and challenges patriarchy by freely pursuing her interests in men and consuming alcohol. Gouri asserts her agency by deciding to take a trip to Jarmuli and breathing in the fresh air, countering her son's wishes. Vidya exudes her agency and autonomy by being an independent and self-contained woman.

Despite the abuse and ordeals, Nomi exhibits profound courage by taking a trip back to Jarmuli, which acts as a mechanism for her to combat and overcome a traumatic past. She regains her emotional strength and liberates herself by confronting her fears and past trauma. The quest for her lost identity is realized when she makes peace with her past and attains psychological emancipation. She reconstructs her identity by reassembling her fragmented self and transforming into a dynamic character. Gouri, Vidya, and Latika break the patriarchal barriers to achieve and assert their autonomy. Champa's audacious move to escape from the ashram the third time, regardless of the despotic oppression she is exposed to, challenges patriarchy by setting her free. Patriarchy vilifies women, sexually objectifies them, overrides their autonomy, and crushes their sense of self. Still, women's autonomy lies in self-complacency, carte blanche, a firm belief in their faculties, and an acceptance of themselves. Roy has portrayed the role of women's agency and how they can reclaim their power in such searing circumstances. Roy's female characters assert their agency and attain autonomy by bravely fighting against societal norms and refusing to conform to patriarchal expectations. Additionally, the novel challenges the notion of male entitlement and the pervasive nature of toxic masculinity. *Sleeping on Jupiter*, thus, offers a powerful commentary on feminist issues and struggles in contemporary society and calls for an urgent need for social change.

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