

## **Beyond Survival: Re-imagining Life Through Resilience and Hope in Anuradha Roy's *Sleeping on Jupiter***

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### **Abstract**

*Anuradha Roy's Sleeping on Jupiter is a profound, multi-layered exploration of the human capacity to endure trauma, reclaim agency, and reimagine the possibilities of life following devastation. Set against the backdrop of Jarmuli, a fictional temple town that juxtaposes sacred serenity with profane exploitation, the novel intricately weaves the lives of disparate characters united by silence and loss. The protagonist, Nomita, is a young woman scarred by childhood sexual abuse within an ashram, who returns to the site of her trauma not merely to remember, but to confront and dismantle the power structures that silenced her. Alongside her narrative, the novel traces the pilgrimage of three elderly women, Gouri, Latika, and Vidya, whose journey reveals the quiet resilience required to navigate patriarchal societal structures, aging, and widowhood. Furthermore, the sub-plot of Badal, a local temple guide grappling with his repressed sexuality, highlights the intersectionality of oppression. This research paper analyzes how Roy's characters traverse the darker corridors of memory and societal abuse to emerge not as victims, but as survivors. It argues that resilience in the novel is not a return to innocence, but a gritty, determined restructuring of the self. Through an examination of the characters' psychological landscapes and their interactions with the oppressive socio-religious environment, this paper highlights that while scars remain, life can be re-imagined through solidarity, confrontation, and the enduring power of hope.*

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## **Introduction**

Anuradha Roy is a commanding voice in contemporary Indian English literature, known for her lyrical prose and unflinching examination of the private lives of individuals caught in the currents of history and social rigidity. Born in Kolkata in 1967, Roy's career as a commissioning editor at Oxford University Press, India, and her subsequent rise as a novelist, have been marked by a keen sensitivity to the 'unspoken'. Her oeuvre, including *An Atlas of Impossible Longing* (2008), *The Folded Earth* (2011), *All the Lives We Never Lived* (2018), and *The Earthspinner* (2021), consistently interrogates the weight of the past on the present. However, it is in her third novel, *Sleeping on Jupiter* (2015) longlisted for the Man Booker Prize and winner of the DSC Prize for South Asian Literature that Roy delivers her most searing critique of the hypocrisy embedded within India's spiritual and social institutions.

The novel is set in Jarmuli, a coastal town that serves as a microcosm of India's paradoxes. It is a place where the divine and the demonic coexist; where ancient temples promise salvation while harboring predators. The narrative focuses on the concept of "re-imagining life" beyond survival. For the characters in *Sleeping on Jupiter*, survival is the baseline, but the true struggle lies in the attempt to craft a meaningful existence despite the fracturing of their identities.

This article aims to illustrate how Roy's characters face their fears and societal barriers to defeat trauma with hope and resilience. It explores the journey of Nomita, who physically and psychologically returns to the "scene of the crime" to reclaim her narrative; the trio of elderly women who find strength in female solidarity; and Badal, whose marginalized identity forces him to seek a new path. By analyzing these intersecting lives, we observe that resilience is not about erasing the past, but about learning to live with it and finding the strength to move forward.

## **The Geography of Trauma: Jarmuli as a Character**

To understand the resilience of the characters, one must first understand the environment that necessitates it. Jarmuli is not merely a setting; it is an antagonistic force. It represents the 'Societal Barrier' mentioned in the title. The town is dominated by the temple and the ashram, structures that theoretically offer sanctuary but, in reality, enforce rigid hierarchies. The ocean in Jarmuli serves as a powerful metaphor. While the temple represents the rigid, stone-like oppressiveness of tradition and the Guruji's inescapable power, the sea represents the subconscious, memory, and ultimately, the fluidity of healing.

Nomita often finds herself drawn to the water, a place that is terrifying yet cleansing. The ashram, conversely, is described with an architecture of entrapment gates, high walls, and hidden rooms. For the orphaned children, including Nomita, the ashram was a prison disguised as a paradise. The irony of Jarmuli is palpable: pilgrims come to wash away their sins, while the “holy” men commit the gravest of sins against the most vulnerable.

### **Nomita: The Fragmented Self and the Journey of Reclamation**

Nomita, the protagonist, serves as the novel’s emotional anchor. An orphan whose family was decimated by war, she was left on a boat by a mother who promised to return but never did. This primal abandonment sets the stage for her subsequent victimization. Taken to the ashram, a place that should have replaced her lost family, she is instead subjected to the predatory grooming of Guruji. Guruji is a chilling representation of power corrupted. Outwardly, he is a spiritual leader, revered by politicians and the public alike, in silence, he is a monster. Roy masterfully depicts the grooming process the “special” attention, the sweets, the isolation which confuses the child Nomita. The trauma is compounded by silence; Nomita lacks the language to articulate the abuse, and the societal structure lacks the ears to hear it. The adult Nomita, now Nomi, returns to Jarmuli from Norway as a documentary filmmaker. This dual identity. Nomita the victimized Indian orphan, and Nomi the assertive, Westernized woman is central to her resilience. She uses her camera as a shield and a weapon. The camera allows her to look at Jarmuli through a lens, creating a necessary distance between her and her trauma. The past cannot be kept at bay. Her nightmares are visceral, blurring the lines between the past and present:

“There is a dream I often have. I am a baby in it, held aloft by a man. He is on his back on a bed, his legs are bent at the knee, he is holding me high above him, my face is above his face, his hands are under my arms, and he takes me each time to the brink.” (Roy 34). Babita and Dr. Krishna Chaudhary in their review, *“Unraveling the Threads of Oppression,”* note that Nomi’s journey is one of integrating these fragmented selves. They argue that “Nomi’s acceptance of her fragmented identity becomes an empowering act in itself... She learns to embrace it as a source of strength” (Babita and Chaudhary 12). Her return to Jarmuli is an act of defiance. She searches for Piku, her childhood friend, hoping to find a trace of the one person who shared her reality. Although she fails to find Piku, the act of searching is itself a victory over the silence that Guruji imposed upon her.

The climax of her journey involves not just memory, but a confrontation with present dangers. Suraj, the photographer hired to assist her, mirrors the predatory nature of Guruji. When Suraj attempts to sexually assault her in the bathroom, Nomita’s reaction marks her evolution. Unlike the child Nomita who was frozen by fear, the adult Nomi fights back violently, stabbing him. This act

of violence is tragic, but in the context of her history, it is a reclamation of bodily autonomy. She refuses to be a victim again.

### **The Pilgrimage of Solidarity: Gouri, Latika, and Vidya**

While Nomita's battle is solitary and sharp, the narrative of the three elderly friends, Gouri, Latika, and Vidya offers a softer, yet equally powerful vision of resilience. Their pilgrimage to Jarmuli acts as a structural counterpoint to Nomita's dark quest. These women represent the 'everywoman' of India, navigating the invisible constraints placed on widows and the elderly.

1. **Gouri:** She is the anchor of tradition. An elderly widow, she is deeply superstitious and concerned with the propriety of rituals. However, her resilience lies in her endurance of loneliness and the physical indignities of aging. She fears mortality and loss, yet she travels, seeking connection.
2. **Vidya:** Vidya represents the passive acceptance of the social structure. She is the peacemaker, often caught between Gouri's rigidness and Latika's rebellion. Her resilience is quiet; it is the resilience of maintaining harmony in a discordant world.
3. **Latika:** Latika is the spark among them. Independent, sharp-tongued, and skeptical, she challenges the patriarchal norms that Gouri accepts. She questions the blind faith of the pilgrims and the authority of the temples. Latika represents the modern Indian woman growing old within a traditional system.

Their resilience is found in their female solidarity. In a society that often renders elderly women invisible, they see each other. On the train and in Jarmuli, they form a protective circle. When they encounter difficulties whether it is the physical strain of the journey or the emotional weight of their pasts they rely on one another. This friendship is a form of resistance against a society that expects them to fade away quietly. As the abstract notes, "They trust each other and face the problem with resilience." Their plotline proves that hope is not just a young person's game; it is essential for dignity in old age.

### **Badal: The Struggle for Identity at the Margins**

Badal serves as a crucial character in understanding the scope of Roy's critique of Jarmuli. He is a temple guide, intimately familiar with the sacred geography, yet he is spiritually and emotionally hollow. His narrative brings the themes of sexual identity and class into the novel's exploration of resilience. Badal is marginalized on two fronts: his economic status as a low-level guide and his hidden homosexuality. In the hyper-religious, heteronormative space of Jarmuli, Badal's desire for Raghu, the tea shop worker, is a dangerous secret. He channels his affection into gifts, such as the mobile phone he buys for Raghu, hoping to buy affection in a world where he feels he cannot naturally command it.

The shattering of Badal's hope is brutal. When he discovers Raghu with someone else specifically Suraj, who represents the predatory elite Badal is devastated. The betrayal is not just romantic; it is a reminder of his powerlessness. He realizes that in Jarmuli, he is destined to be an observer, not a participant in happiness, his interaction with Nomita serves as a turning point. Nomita, the outsider, sees Badal not as a servant but as a human being in pain. She offers him advice that transcends their class differences. Her intervention helps Badal realize that his "shattering" is also a breaking of chains. By the end of the novel, Badal packs his belongings and leaves. This departure is his act of resilience. He chooses the uncertainty of the unknown over the certain misery of Jarmuli. He rejects the societal barriers that demand he remain silent and invisible.

### **The Illusion of Safety: Analyzing the Antagonists**

To fully appreciate the resilience of the protagonists, we must analyze the forces they are resilient *against*. Roy presents the antagonists not merely as "bad men," but as symptoms of a systemic rot.

Guruji is the embodiment of institutional betrayal. He uses the guise of religion to access vulnerable children. The horror of his character lies in his public perception; the fact that politicians and police officers bow to him makes Nomita's struggle seemingly impossible. Manil Suri, in his review for *The New York Times*, rightly observes that the book captures an India where "a female teacher might appear with mysterious wounds... and women encounter harassment at every turn" (Suri). Guruji is the architect of this harassment, protected by the very walls meant to house the divine.

Suraj, the photographer, represents a more modern, secular form of misogyny. He appears helpful initially, a man of the world. However, his entitlement to women's bodies whether it is his dismissal of his wife Ayesha or his assault on Nomita mirrors Guruji's entitlement. Roy uses Suraj to show that the threat to women is not limited to ashrams; it is pervasive in modern, professional spheres as well.

### **Re-imagining Life: The Synthesis of Hope and Trauma**

The core philosophy of *Sleeping on Jupiter* is that trauma does not disappear; it must be integrated. The "Re-imagining of Life" mentioned in the title is an active process. For Nomita, re-imagining life means accepting that she may never find Piku and that justice against Guruji may not look like a court verdict. Justice, for her, is her survival and her refusal to be silenced. It is the act of speaking her truth, even if only to herself and a few others. For the three women, re-imagining life means finding joy and adventure in the twilight of their years, refusing to be defined solely by their relationships to men (as wives, widows, or mothers). For Badal, re-imagining life is a physical relocation, a brave step into a world where he might find a community that accepts him.

Roy does not offer a fairy-tale ending. The wounds are still there. But the characters have moved "Beyond Survival." They are no longer merely reacting to their oppression; they are making choices. Nomita's escape from the bathroom, Badal's departure from the town, and the women's completed pilgrimage are all assertions of will.

### **Conclusion**

*Sleeping on Jupiter* is a haunting testament to the resilience of the human spirit. Anuradha Roy masterfully constructs a narrative where the serene exterior of a holy town belies a turbulent interior of abuse and neglect. Through the character of Nomita, Roy challenges the silence surrounding child abuse in religious institutions, offering a searing critique of how society protects powerful men at the expense of vulnerable children, the novel is not just a tale of defeat but it resembles as a story of how life can be reshaped. M. Nathiya's analysis of this text highlights that resilience is multifaceted. It is the loud, violent resistance of Nomita; the quiet, collective endurance of Gouri, Latika, and Vidya; and the desperate, flight-based survival of Badal.

The article presented here confirms that while societal barriers caste, patriarchy, religious hypocrisy are formidable, they are not insurmountable. The characters in *Sleeping on Jupiter* demonstrate that hope is a discipline. It is the refusal to let the past dictate the future. By confronting their fears, supporting one another, and daring to imagine a life outside the structures that bind them, these characters offer a powerful message: even in the darkest of places, the human desire for dignity and freedom can carve out a path toward the light.

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