

RESEARCH ARTICLE**Maternal Departure and Retrospective Reconstruction in Anuradha Roy's
*All the Lives We Never Lived***

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Article Received: 15/06/2026; Article Accepted: 20/07/2026; Published Online: 22/07/2026

Abstract

Anuradha Roy's *All the Lives We Never Lived* presents maternal departure not as a single act of abandonment but as a lasting event reconstructed through memory, letters, photographs, art, and historical knowledge. Myshkin Chand Rozario narrates the story many decades after his mother, Gayatri, leaves home, and his delayed narration reveals how childhood pain changes when the past becomes available only in fragments. The article examines the relationship between maternal absence and retrospective reconstruction, with attention to memory, narration, gender, domestic confinement, emotional inheritance, and colonial history. It argues that Myshkin's adult understanding does not erase the suffering of the abandoned child; instead, it places that suffering beside Gayatri's frustrated artistic life and her desire for freedom. The study draws on trauma theory, postmemory, spatial thought, and narrative theory to explain how Roy transforms private loss into a complex account of family and history. Letters become especially important because they return Gayatri's voice to a story first shaped by silence and accusation. By reconstructing his mother's life, Myshkin moves from inherited judgment toward difficult recognition. Roy's novel finally shows that memory cannot restore the lost mother, yet it can create a more responsible relation to her un-lived possibilities, choices, and wounds.

Keywords: maternal departure; retrospective narration; memory; reconstruction; Anuradha Roy

Introduction

Anuradha Roy's *All the Lives We Never Lived* centres on a son who spends his life trying to understand why his mother left him. Myshkin's earliest social identity comes from public gossip, for he remembers himself as "the boy whose mother had run off with an Englishman" (Roy 1). The phrase reduces a complex family history to scandal and fixes Gayatri as a failed wife and mother. Childhood gives him no language for the pressures that shaped her choice, so he receives the event through shame, confusion, and anger. Decades later, letters and other traces allow him to reconsider it from a wider emotional and historical perspective. Roy's retrospective structure makes the mature narrator repeatedly encounter the wounded child he once was. Maternal departure becomes both the central loss and the central question of the narrative.

The novel neither offers a simple defence of Gayatri nor dismisses Myshkin's suffering. It places two truths together: a child experiences departure as abandonment, while a gifted woman experiences domestic life as confinement. Roy asks how social expectations make motherhood appear incompatible with artistic desire and intellectual companionship. The mother's disappearance produces silence, but the later letters

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interrupt that silence. Myshkin reconstructs the past from partial evidence rather than recovering it in its entirety. The article studies his movement from accusation to understanding and from private memory to historical interpretation.

Reasons for the Study

The first reason for examining maternal departure in the novel lies in the unusual treatment of motherhood. Indian family narratives often honour maternal sacrifice and emotional permanence, yet Roy presents a mother who leaves the domestic space and chooses another life. Gayatri's act challenges the belief that a mother's desires must remain subordinate to the needs of husband, child, and household. Her departure can appear selfish when viewed only through Myshkin's childhood pain, but the retrospective structure reveals the emotional pressure that precedes it. A study of the novel must preserve the child's wound without turning the mother into a moral symbol. Such a balance matters because literary representations of maternal absence often punish the absent mother more severely than the controlling husband or the social order. Roy's narrative invites a fuller account of how gendered duties shape intimate decisions.

A second reason concerns the form of memory. Myshkin does not narrate the past at the moment of loss; he speaks after many years, when memory has mixed with family stories, public gossip, photographs, historical events, and written documents. Paul Ricoeur writes that "time becomes human time to the extent that it is organised after the manner of a narrative" (3). Myshkin gives shape to lost time by arranging scattered events into a story, but the arrangement never becomes entirely secure. His adult voice can interpret what the child could not understand, though it cannot remove the child's emotional knowledge. The distance between experience and narration creates the novel's deepest tension. Retrospection becomes a method of inquiry rather than a simple return to the past.

A third reason arises from the relation between personal loss and public history. Gayatri's departure occurs within late colonial India, a period marked by nationalism, cultural exchange, artistic experimentation, fascism, and war. Her association with Walter Spies and Beryl de Zoete connects the family story with transnational artistic networks and the political dangers of the 1930s and 1940s. Roy refuses to isolate domestic unhappiness from the historical world beyond the home. Myshkin must learn that his mother's life did not end when she left him; it entered other landscapes, relationships, and dangers. His reconstruction widens the meaning of family memory by placing it within colonial and global history. The novel deserves study because it shows how a private wound can contain histories that the wounded person never knew.

Content and Scope of the Research

The article focuses on three connected areas: Gayatri's departure, Myshkin's retrospective narration, and the materials through which he reconstructs her life. It examines the early family environment, Gayatri's artistic temperament, Nek Chand's patriarchal authority, Myshkin's sense of abandonment, and the later arrival of letters. Attention falls on the way the adult narrator revises his childhood understanding without denying its emotional force. The analysis considers memory as selective, delayed, and shaped by new knowledge across generations and borders. Letters, photographs, paintings, places, and historical records serve as material traces that complicate the family's earlier version of Gayatri. The scope remains centred on maternal departure and narrative reconstruction rather than offering a complete study of every historical figure or political event in the novel.

The study uses ideas from trauma theory, postmemory, spatial theory, and narrative thought. Cathy Caruth explains that trauma is not located only in an original event but in the way its unassimilated nature "returns to haunt the survivor later on" (4). Her formulation helps explain why Gayatri's departure continues

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to affect Myshkin's adult life. Marianne Hirsch's account of postmemory clarifies how later generations relate to experiences transmitted through stories, images, and behaviour rather than direct experience. Myshkin's later knowledge of his mother's years of absence resembles a postmemorial relation because he receives them through documents and imagination. Gaston Bachelard's reflections on domestic space help explain the house as shelter and prison, while Edward Said's account of exile illuminates emotional separation from home.

Maternal Departure as a Foundational Rupture

Gayatri's departure becomes the event around which Myshkin organises his life story. He remembers not only the absence of his mother but also the public language that defines it for him. The label "the boy whose mother had run off with an Englishman" converts a child into evidence of adult scandal (Roy 1). Social judgment enters his self-understanding before he gains access to the facts. He carries a story told by others, which portrays Gayatri as reckless, immoral, and unnatural. Myshkin's identity develops under the weight of a sentence whose simplicity hides conflict, humiliation, artistic frustration, and marital control. Roy begins with the public version so that the rest of the novel can test and revise it.

The departure wounds Myshkin because a child experiences parental absence through immediacy rather than social explanation. He cannot place Gayatri's dissatisfaction within patriarchy, artistic deprivation, or the politics of marriage. He knows that she has gone and that he has been left behind. Freud's distinction between mourning and melancholia offers a useful point of comparison: "In mourning it is the world which has become poor and empty; in melancholia it is the ego itself" (246). Myshkin's loss moves between these states because the world loses the mother, while the self absorbs shame and perceived rejection. He repeatedly wonders what his mother's departure says about his own worth. The unanswered question prolongs grief because no stable account allows mourning to reach completion.

Nek Chand's conduct intensifies the rupture. His rational authority and commitment to public life appear respectable, but they leave little room for Gayatri's emotional and artistic needs. He treats her interests as impractical disturbances rather than essential parts of her personhood. Domestic order protects his position, while Gayatri experiences the same order as restriction. Bachelard states, "The house shelters daydreaming, the house protects the dreamer, the house allows one to dream in peace" (6). Roy's house reverses that ideal for Gayatri because it fails to protect her imaginative life. A space that shelters husband and child can still imprison the woman expected to sustain it.

Gayatri's departure grows from a long conflict between prescribed motherhood and denied selfhood. She loves Myshkin, yet love does not remove her hunger for music, painting, movement, beauty, and companionship. Roy avoids presenting maternal love as an unlimited power capable of overcoming every form of deprivation. Gayatri's choice causes real harm, but the novel asks whether the family had already harmed her by refusing to recognise her inner life. Her attraction to a wider artistic world does not begin as a rejection of the child; it begins as an effort to inhabit a life suppressed within marriage. The tragedy lies in the absence of a path that could unite creative freedom and maternal attachment. Departure becomes both escape and wound.

Retrospective Narration and the Divided Self

Myshkin narrates from old age, and his voice contains two temporal positions. One position belongs to the child who sees his mother leave and feels betrayed. The other belongs to the adult who can read letters, study history, and imagine conditions beyond the child's knowledge. Retrospective narration allows these positions to speak together without fully merging. The mature narrator may understand Gayatri more deeply, yet the child's grief remains present in tone, repetition, and emotional hesitation. Roy does not portray

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understanding as a cure. She presents it as a difficult enlargement of memory.

The divided temporal structure protects the novel from sentimental reconciliation. Myshkin does not simply forgive Gayatri after discovering her letters, and Gayatri does not return as an idealised victim. The documents reveal affection, aspiration, fear, and suffering, but they cannot answer every question. Gaps remain because the memory and archive are incomplete. Myshkin must connect what he remembers with what the letters disclose. The resulting account remains provisional, shaped by love as well as resentment. Roy presents reconstruction as an ethical practice that accepts uncertainty.

Letters, Archives, and the Return of the Mother's Voice

Letters form the most important material basis of Myshkin's reconstruction. Before their arrival, Gayatri exists mainly through memory, gossip, and the judgments of those who remained. The unopened letters seem "pulsing with the energy every unopened letter in the world has" (Roy 5). Roy's image gives the archive a living force because written words carry a voice across distance and time. The letters do not merely provide information; they disturb the emotional order that Myshkin has built around absence. They make the missing mother speak after death and compel the son to receive a version of her life that does not centre him. Reading becomes an encounter with delayed intimacy.

The archive changes the direction of narration. At first, Myshkin's story asks why his mother left him. Later, the question expands: who was Gayatri when she was not only his mother? Such expansion marks the ethical importance of the letters. They restore dimensions of her life erased by family shame, including artistic longing, friendship, travel, danger, and political circumstance. Marianne Hirsch writes that postmemory is shaped by "imaginative investment, projection, and creation" (5). Myshkin similarly must imagine the absent years from fragmentary traces, though he remains aware that imagination cannot become direct memory. His reconstruction gives Gayatri a narrative presence without claiming total possession of her experience.

Reconstructing Gayatri Beyond the Maternal Role

Myshkin's central achievement lies in learning to see Gayatri as more than the person who left him. Childhood naturally places the mother at the centre of the child's needs, but adult reconstruction requires recognition of her separate history. Roy develops Gayatri as a woman responsive to colour, music, landscape, dance, and movement. Her artistic sensibility does not fit easily within a household governed by discipline and masculine seriousness. She experiences beauty as a form of life rather than decoration. Myshkin gradually comes to understand that suppressing such responsiveness would have meant a different kind of death. Recognition does not cancel his wound, but it corrects the narrowness of the public label.

The reconstruction exposes the violence of ideal motherhood. Society expects the mother to remain present regardless of unhappiness, while it treats the father's emotional distance as ordinary authority. Nek Chand's failures do not attract the same scandal as Gayatri's departure because patriarchal culture defines male duty in terms of provision and public respectability. Female duty, by contrast, requires constant emotional availability and self-denial. Roy reveals the unequal moral language applied to parents. Gayatri becomes notorious because she visibly breaks the rule, while Nek Chand remains protected by the normal appearance of the household. Myshkin's later narration slowly uncovers that imbalance.

Gayatri's relation to Walter Spies complicates the issue further. He represents artistic freedom, cosmopolitan movement, and a world beyond the restrictions of her marriage, but he is not presented as a simple romantic rescuer. The life she enters contains its own uncertainties, exclusions, and dangers. Colonial privilege and cultural fascination shape the artistic circles that attract her. Roy allows the relationship to carry desire and possibility without turning Europe into uncomplicated liberation. Gayatri leaves one restrictive

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order but does not enter safety. Her life abroad becomes vulnerable to war, detention, and forces beyond her control.

Maternal departure thus becomes linked with exile. Said writes, “Exile is strangely compelling to think about but terrible to experience” (173). Gayatri’s movement may appear compelling because it promises freedom, yet separation from Myshkin produces lasting pain for both mother and son. Myshkin experiences another form of exile while remaining at home, for the familiar house becomes emotionally altered by absence. He is displaced within his own family history. Roy shows that exile can occur through movement or through the departure of another person. Home survives physically while losing its earlier meaning.

History and the Limits of Private Judgment

Historical reconstruction alters Myshkin’s moral understanding by situating Gayatri’s life within events beyond the family. Colonial India, European artistic networks, anti-colonial politics, fascism, and the Second World War intersect with intimate choices. The son’s early account treats departure as a private act directed against him. Later knowledge shows that political powers, racial categories, internment, and war can redirect personal lives. Gayatri’s fate cannot be explained solely through romance or maternal failure. Historical forces narrow the possibilities available to her after she leaves. Roy links the household to the world rather than treating them as separate spheres.

Retrospective reconstruction cannot restore a lost life in full. It can only gather traces and arrange them into a meaningful relation. Myshkin learns more about Gayatri, but he cannot speak to her, question her, or receive a direct response from her. The letters arrive as presence and proof of irreversible absence. Such doubleness gives the novel its emotional force. The archive opens the past at the moment when change has become impossible. Knowledge arrives as a form of mourning.

From Accusation to Responsible Recognition

Myshkin’s reconstruction moves toward recognition rather than complete forgiveness. Forgiveness suggests that one person has the authority to close the moral account, but Roy leaves it open. Myshkin acknowledges the damage caused by maternal departure and the damage caused by the life imposed on Gayatri. He learns to hold conflicting truths without reducing one to the other. Such recognition represents emotional maturity because it accepts that love can coexist with injury. The mother may love the child and still leave; the child may understand the mother and still grieve. Roy’s narrative gains power from its refusal of a simple resolution.

Myshkin’s final relation to the past becomes less possessive. At first, he wants an explanation centred on what Gayatri did to him. Later, he learns to ask what happened to her and what forms of life were available to her. The change does not diminish his place in the story; it allows another consciousness to exist beside his own. Such movement defines responsible reconstruction. The narrator uses memory not only to preserve personal pain but also to revise the judgments built around it. Roy presents narrative as a moral labour of making room for the absent other.

Conclusion

Maternal departure in *All the Lives We Never Lived* functions as a foundational rupture that shapes Myshkin’s identity, memory, and narration. The child first understands Gayatri through absence and public shame, while the adult narrator encounters her through letters, images, places, and historical research. Retrospective reconstruction expands the meaning of departure from a private betrayal into a conflict involving gender, art, marriage, colonial modernity, and war. Myshkin’s later knowledge does not erase abandonment, and Roy does not ask the reader to celebrate Gayatri’s choice without reservation. The novel

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instead creates a difficult space in which maternal love, artistic desire, injury, and freedom remain connected. Such complexity gives the work its emotional and intellectual depth.

Letters play a decisive role because they return Gayatri's voice to a narrative once controlled by silence and accusation. Their delayed arrival forces Myshkin to recognise that his mother possessed a life beyond the maternal role assigned to her. Memory and archive work together, though neither offers complete truth. Retrospection enables a more humane understanding because it places the child's wound beside the mother's suppressed possibilities. Roy finally suggests that reconstruction cannot recover the dead or repair the past, but it can resist inherited simplifications. Myshkin cannot live the life he lost with Gayatri, yet he can narrate her without reducing her to the woman who left. The novel turns that act of narration into a form of belated care.

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