

Women's Identity and Environmental Connection: Unveiling Care-politics in Roy's *All the Lives We Never Lived*

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Abstract

Patriarchal dogmas confine women in a stringent role of caregivers. The unfair presumption that caring for the home and family is a duty, excessively assigned to women, creates the problematic character of the "absolute custodian," a role that excessively burdens women with unpaid labour while limiting their agency. Sustainable Development Goal 5.4.1 acknowledges the importance of unpaid care work performed within households in order to encourage the fair distribution of care and household duties. Care signifies a reciprocal continuum of affection and protective intent between women and nature within interconnected existence. Ecofeminist scholars like Vandana Shiva and Greta Gaard have expressed the apparent connection between women and nature. However, critics such as Mary Mellor and Sherilyn MacGregor contest this essentialist viewpoint, claiming that it unfairly burdens women. Gayatri in Anuradha Roy's *All the Lives We Never Lived* (2018) defies the irrational expectations of others to become an absolute custodian. This paper critically examines the identity of caregivers, focusing on how care-politics exacerbates women's psychological suffering and marginalisation. The paper situates the analysis of challenges faced by women in the context of the Sustainable Development Goals (2016–2030), linking the findings to concrete action points such as the need for social policy reform and public investment in women's mental health and education, so as to foster empowerment and women's participation in society. It also investigates the denial of moral obligations imposed on women and whether nature and art—as elements of ecology—provide an escape to women.

Keywords: Agency, Care-politics, Gender Equity, Sustainable Development Goals, women's Empowerment.

Introduction

Literary and gender studies are increasingly combining textual interpretation with community empowerment, social inclusion, and gender justice. Literature is about individual experience and the social structures that shape identity, mobility, and emotional life. Historically, the normative discourse of social order has constituted care as a gendered obligation rather than a shared ethical practice, with women as the primary subjects of this discourse. The politics of care is not limited to liberal views that see care as a finite resource for autonomous individuals or as a feminine virtue (1). Care has therefore been understood as an ethical principle, a relational practice, a form of labour, a cultural continuity, and a foundation of social relations. Recent health, pandemic, socio-economic, and literary research indicates that the politics of care is structural. Studies on caregivers register unequal responsibility, delayed access to healthcare and the effect of gender, kinship, resilience, depression, life satisfaction, and socio-economic resources (2-5). Studies on the pandemic

demonstrate that conditions of crisis increase the burden of care, influencing women's career paths and mental health (6, 7). In India, unpaid domestic work limits labour-force participation, career choices, time use, and access to resources (8, 9). Literary studies show that fiction also narrates care as relational responsibility, moral dilemma, and interpersonal relationships (10). However, there is not enough existing scholarship on how care politics marginalises women's identity and affects their psychological and emotional well-being. The ecological desire and artistic selfhood as challenges to traditional care politics remain underexplored. Though care ethics and ecofeminism have been discussed, research on care-politics, women's identity, and subjectivity remains limited. 'All the Lives We Never Lived' provides a space to investigate care-politics, ecological longing, artistic selfhood, and women's struggles under patriarchal control (11). In the novel, care becomes problematic when it is unevenly imposed on women and turned into duty,

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obedience, and self-erasure. Gayatri symbolises the silent protest of marginalised women, shaped by cultural norms and invisible caregiving labour. Her story is a mirror of the barriers that prevent women from accessing education, employment, social participation, and self-expression in India. Gender inequality is evident in politics, work, health, education, domestic life, and the environment. Women are systematically marginalised and their autonomy continues to be limited despite constitutional and legal guarantees of equality.

Patriarchal structures control women's bodies, choices and identities in the name of family honour, tradition and social respectability. Men hold power positions and women are expected to take care of and manage the household (12). The home is a fundamental human life, but men are often represented as reluctant to engage in domestic space (13). This division of labour makes domestic labour natural to women. A house has been seen as something made by women, and men know how to build it only from the outside (14). Traditionally, women have been expected to take charge of family welfare, and for employed women, caregiving becomes an additional responsibility (15). Thus, the home becomes a disciplinary structure in which women's labour is naturalised. Care is not merely a private virtue but a social and political structure that shapes gendered relations (1, 12). Feminist scholarship explains how unpaid household labour supports dependence and subordination (15). Studies of domestic space suggest that the home can operate through discipline, emotional control and symbolic domination (13, 14). Ecofeminist and environmental studies also point to links between environmental degradation and the oppression of women (16, 17).

The novel is about unequal power relations between men and women where Gayatri suppresses her identity and choices to meet familial and social responsibilities. This is consistent with a 2024 report, according to which India was ranked 129th out of 146 countries and gender parity is projected to be attained in 97 years at the current pace (18). These inequalities have been acknowledged by global policy frameworks. Two of the Millennium Development Goals were on gender equality and maternal health (19) and Sustainable Development Goal 5 is on

gender equality and empowerment for women and girls. Goal 5.4.1 calls for the redistribution of unpaid care and domestic work (20).

The text also highlights the gendered nature of care and environmental stewardship. Women are cast as the caretakers of family, community, and nature. Like women's environmental activism, caregiving labour is romanticised as selfless, and this renders unpaid care work invisible. According to a 2023 report, around 81% of women spend five hours daily on unpaid domestic tasks; this figure rises to 92% among women aged 15–59, while 78% of women above 60 continue to be engaged in unpaid domestic services (19). Care workplaces' women in a hierarchy and acts as a barrier to social mobility.

There is a gap in the scholarship on the selected text in literature. The interplay of care-politics, ecological imagination, artistic desire, maternal guilt, and psychological recovery in 'All the Lives We Never Lived' has not been discussed in previous discussions. Gayatri's crisis is the refusal of mobility, reading, art, ecological experience, maternal selfhood, and emotional recognition. This study fills that gap by reading Gayatri's story through the lenses of structural inequality, gendered care, environmental justice, and agency. It discusses mandatory care, domestic captivity, limitations of self-expression, women and nature, women and art, emotional violence, maternal guilt, mental health, creative freedom, community empowerment and redistribution of care.

Methodology

This study is grounded in a feminist ecocritical framework that brings care-politics, ecofeminism, and ecocriticism into conversation. The theoretical premise is that women's relation to nature should not be read through an essentialist assumption of an innate feminine closeness to the environment. Rather, it should be examined as a historically produced relationship shaped by labour, domesticity, bodily regulation, ecological exclusion, and representation. Ecofeminist thought is useful here because it identifies the structural links between the domination of women and the domination of nature (17). This framework therefore treats care as a contested political practice, not as a feminine virtue.

Within this orientation, 'All the Lives We Never Lived' is read as a text in which the domestic,

ecological, and artistic dimensions of women's agency are closely entangled. Gayatri's longing for travel, sea, garden, dance, music, and painting is not treated as decorative imagery. These elements form the ecological and aesthetic underpinnings of her resistance. Feminist literary criticism is used to examine wifehood, motherhood, obedience, respectability, and agency. Ecocriticism is used to analyse how nature and place function as spaces of desire, memory, imagination, and escape. Postcolonial cultural analysis is employed where the colonial-era setting shapes women's mobility, family honour, and social respectability.

Methodologically, the study employs a qualitative textual design. The primary material is Roy's novel, while the secondary materials include scholarship on care-politics, feminist literary criticism, ecofeminism, ecocriticism, domestic space, symbolic violence, mental health, and gender-related development discourse. Since the object of inquiry is a literary text, the study does not use field data, interviews, questionnaires, or experimental observations. The findings are interpretive and are developed through close reading, thematic organisation, and theoretical analysis.

The textual material is organised into four analytical categories.

- a) Compulsory care examines the expectation that women must serve the family without reciprocal recognition.
- b) Domestic confinement analyses restrictions on women's movement, reading, art, and self-expression within a patriarchal domestic space.
- c) Ecological-artistic escape examines the role of nature, travel, dance, music, and visual imagination in Gayatri's movement towards self-recognition.
- d) Psychological stability analyses the gradual recovery of agency after emotional violence, symbolic domination, and enforced domesticity.

Close reading is applied to selected narrative moments involving Gayatri's marriage, her conflict with Nek Chand, her relationship with Myshkin, her memory of travel, her desire for art, her encounter with artistic communities, and her eventual departure from the marital home. Recurrent motifs such as home, garden, sea, journey, art, maternal guilt, and freedom are examined as symbolic structures through which

women are made responsible for care while being denied self-definition.

Results and Discussion

In Roy's novel, Gayatri, a wife and mother, has too many care responsibilities, symbolising the experiences of many women in India who perform unpaid care work. This issue is part of a larger societal problem in which women perform more housework than men and do not receive the recognition or assistance they require, making it more difficult for them to pursue education and employment. This is an underlying issue stated in Sustainable Development Goal Target 5.4. To address this, investment in community-based support systems and publicly funded childcare services are the need of the hour. Gayatri is a caregiver with no support network. To counter the idea that only women can and should take care of a child, the concept of 'allomothers'—people from family or otherwise, irrespective of gender, who take care of the child—has been discussed in relation to the improved reproductive health of a new mother after the burden of absolute care lightens. In discussions of substitutive care, it has been noted that, when allomothers alleviate the childcare responsibilities of mothers, it enables mothers to participate in economic pursuits that do not align with parental duties. Similarly, fathers contributing to childcare can ease the burden on mothers, allowing them to partake in subsistence activities (21).

At the societal level, the absence of males from caregiving significantly reinforces gender inequity. Policies that advocate for paternity leave, the equitable distribution of domestic tasks, and education on non-discriminatory caregiving practices can distribute caring obligations more fairly. For instance, the Palna Scheme (2022) by the Government of India provides day-care crèche facilities to children from 6 months to 6 years of age, enabling working mothers to engage in employment. This standardisation of care work promotes SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth) (22).

To support the well-being of expecting mothers, the concept of maternity leave has benefited women worldwide. In France, the typical duration of maternity leave is 16 weeks for a single child's birth, comprising six weeks of prenatal leave prior to the anticipated due date and 10 weeks after

childbirth. Mothers must take a minimum of eight weeks of leave, which includes six weeks postpartum. In India, the existing provision of maternity leave was extended from twelve to twenty-six weeks by an amendment in 2017 to support women working in organised and unorganised sectors. Additionally, facilities like work from home, compulsory crèche facilities around offices, and leave for adopting and commissioning mothers have benefited women physically, mentally, and psychologically (23).

The social and emotional identity of women acquires validation only when women act as moral obligators. Otherwise, “identity is exactly the place of prohibition and repression, a conflict of authority” (24). Gayatri’s repressed creative and personal identity underscores the conflict between self-actualisation and enforced gender stereotypes, as the identity of women in India is concealed—they are seen as either divine beings or merely objects. She has never been granted the basic recognition of her humanity. In the Indian socio-religious framework, where hypocrisy and paradox are ubiquitous, women as a group have borne the brunt of these inconsistencies (25). There seems to be an urgent need to address this identity gap to uplift the status of women, which can be achieved through social, educational, and awareness programmes.

In India, government schemes such as Stand-Up India (2016) promote women as major beneficiaries. The scheme tries to enhance the status of women in their houses and society by providing them with financial assistance for setting up Greenfield enterprises. The formation of Self-Help Groups (SHG) under the Deendayal Antyodaya Yojna National Rural Livelihoods Mission (2011) is another great effort to uplift women’s positions. Women are collaborating at the community level to improve each other’s economic and social conditions (26). The Beti Bachao Beti Padhao scheme (2015) has significantly improved the sex ratio from 918 (2014–2015) to 930 (2023–24). With the help of this scheme, the percentage of institutional deliveries has increased from 61% (2014–2015) to 97.3% (2023–2024). Raising awareness of safe menstrual hygiene management has effectively become one of the key components of the scheme, which has also resulted in a reduction in school dropouts (27). Educating women and creating

awareness about these schemes may empower them to take charge of their lives, defy unjustified rules and regulations, and attain a social identity. Gayatri’s story also shows how women trapped in strict domestic roles suffer from mental health problems. This is also an issue in communities where women are more likely to experience anxiety and depression due to isolation and powerlessness. Important steps include strengthening mental health services, improving access to counselling, and adding psychosocial support to maternal health programmes. In India, mental health is not discussed or given as much importance as physical health. There is a need to inform women about the concept of mental health. In a meta-analysis, it has been observed that “caregivers had higher levels of stress and depression as well as lower levels of subjective well-being, physical health, and self-efficacy than non-caregivers” (28). It is important to mitigate this challenge through proper education and awareness programmes, which may be achieved through the involvement of government and private agencies. Self-Help Groups can be effectively utilised for creating awareness regarding mental well-being among a large section of women.

Gayatri’s fight against male dominance is a call for everyone to challenge symbolic violence and structural injustice. Symbolic violence has been described as the naturalisation of hierarchy, where dominated individuals participate in their own domination (29). In the novel, Gayatri is denied a space in the social narrative of freedom; she is made to believe that her domestic role is her natural purpose. This denial of creative agency echoes the argument that the roles of mother and wife have always been time-intensive, significantly limiting women’s capacity to engage in artistic pursuits. Societal norms, embedded since childhood, have imposed internal psychological constraints on women artists, hindering their creativity and curbing their ambitions (30).

SDG 5’s goal is to empower all women and girls and achieve gender equality. Supporting women’s self-help groups, legal aid programmes, and community advocacy is in line with this goal. Therefore, Gayatri’s story gives us a way to look at the systemic barriers that affect women who are already on the fringes of society. It shows how important it is to have integrated policies, better

schools, mental health support, and community empowerment to achieve social development that includes everyone.

Gayatri's distress reflects deep-rooted community problems: women being forced into household chores and denied their liberty, which further aggravates mental illness. It is therefore imperative to scale up community-based mental health programmes, support groups for women, and counselling services. This aligns with Sustainable Development Goals 3 and 5.

In the domestic sphere, women are expected to perform all duties diligently, often taking a toll on their psyche. A large scale 2023 comparative analysis of caregiving India, covering 42,949 households and interviewed 72,250 individuals, accounted for the involvement of 68% of caregivers in ADL (Activities in Daily Living) care, which requires intense physical and emotional responsibility. It has been observed that 49% of caregivers who worked more than 40 hours a week suffered from symptoms of depression (31). The mental and physical contentment of an individual has an inviolable relation—if one experiences deterioration, the other shatters without fail. The physical and mental health of women becomes highly vulnerable during pregnancy and after giving birth to a child. Women caregivers have a justified right to receive care at any stage of life, but their vulnerability during pregnancy and after childbirth must be addressed responsibly.

In India, as discernible through press releases, there are several schemes implemented by the government to provide care to women. The Surakshit Matritva Aashwasan (SUMAN) scheme (2019) aims to provide “assured, dignified, respectful, and quality healthcare at no cost.” LaQshya (2017) aims to improve the standard of care in labour rooms and maternity operating rooms to guarantee that expectant mothers are treated with dignity and receive high-quality care during childbirth and the immediate period following delivery. Janani Suraksha Yojana (JSY) (2005) is a scheme offering financial incentives to encourage institutional deliveries. In Janani Shishu Suraksha Karyakram (JSSK) (2011), every pregnant woman is eligible for free delivery, including a caesarean section. Additionally, the Pradhan Mantri Surakshit Matritva Abhiyan (PMSMA) (2016) offers pregnant women a fixed

day, free-of-cost, assured, and quality antenatal check-up by a specialist/medical officer on the ninth day of every month (32).

As per the currently available data, the SUMAN scheme has 90,015 healthcare facilities all over the nation. The JSY scheme has benefited over 11.07 crore women till 2024 and, since 2014, JSSK has provided services to over 16.60 crore beneficiaries. Regarding PMSMA, over 6.19 crore expecting women have been examined, out of which 78.27 lakh high-risk pregnancies have been identified as of 2024. Maternal Mortality Ratio has declined from 130 per 1 lakh live births (2014–16) to 80 (2021–23), and 20,752 healthcare facilities have been created (32).

The patriarchal household does not allow women to focus on their physical and mental well-being, directly hampering their existence. In such harsh masculine spaces, women start devaluing themselves. They start considering themselves not worthy of receiving care, support, and respect. Psychological instability due to several dominations prevents women from exploring their personal interests, if these do not coincide with the prevalent norms that keep them ‘womanly.’ The pronounced gender imbalance in sharing responsibilities from household chores to care creates a kind of inequality inside the four walls. In the novel, Gayatri is the victim of this rampant inequality. She is bound to perform only a few duties, which include caring for her son Myshkin and fulfilling her duties as a wife, keeping aside her own dreams and desires. This indicates that she lacks agency over her own life.

Agency is defined as “what a person is free to do and achieve in pursuit of whatever goals or values he or she regards as important” (33). Lack of agency ignites another major crisis, that is, the struggle for identity. In an argument with her husband, Gayatri's husband, Nek Chand, commands her not to read novels but the book he has provided. He says, “Have you read the first chapter even? Think of Myshkin . . . he looks to you as an example. Now what kind of example are you setting, dancing like that in the garden?” (11). The refusal of both agency and identity is one of the crucial tenets of patriarchal domination. Men like Nek Chand constantly wish to generate a certificate of recognition for women around them, whether a female relative or a stranger. They knowingly pressurise women to confine

themselves within a false bubble of societal norms. It indeed comes under the umbrella of psychological violence that women experience in the name of decency and respectable behaviour. The artistic abilities of Gayatri find no space, even in the rarest corner of Nek Chand's conservative house.

Reducing a woman to a mere tool for managing the house, rather than recognising her creative and artistic self, is a sign of symbolic violence. Symbolic violence has been explained as a form of violence exerted through the purely symbolic channels of communication and cognition, including recognition or even feeling (29). Women burdened with innumerable responsibilities have also been read as victims of this form of violence. It has been argued that holding the roles of mother and wife has always been, and continues to be, time-intensive, significantly limiting women's capacity to fully engage in their artistic pursuits (30). Societal norms, embedded since childhood, impose internal psychological constraints on women artists, hindering their creativity and curbing their ambitions.

Caring for family, friends and the environment can never be a negative experience, but compelling someone to be the exclusive and required custodian of care generates psychological and social suffering (34). Gayatri's husband and society treat care as a natural obligation and not as a shared ethical responsibility. She is a victim of such an attitude. The politics of care is consequently not limited to the family. It reaches out to the environment, to art, to the greater moral idea that women are supposed to care, maintain and heal all that is around them. In the text, nature and art are ecological escape strategies, since they allow Gayatri to envision a self-outside the limited structure of domestic servitude. The garden, the sea, travel, dance, music, and visual art are not ornamental components in the narrative. These are spaces where her repressed identity is expressed, mobilised and psychologically released.

This interaction between women, nature and art is crucial as Gayatri's captivity is both home and existential. The household reduces her to a wife and mother, whereas nature and art restore to her the possibilities of sensory freedom, creative agency, and emotional self-recognition. Art and literature can be read as part of ecological

experience, not only as inspiration for artists. They open a place where the individual re-relates to the world outside patriarchal regulation. Gayatri's love for art and nature is a symbol of her not wanting to be just a caretaker in the family. It also shows her desire to be part of life forms that are vast, relational and self-defined. In this view, ecological retreat does not represent a departure from duty. It is an escape from a structure where women are held disproportionately responsible and then moralised as sacrifice.

The narrative also reveals the risk of transforming women's ecological sensitivity into yet another form of gendered labour. Women are raising their voices for nature, conservation, and man-made disasters more. Environmental writing has highlighted the harms of synthetic pesticides on farming and the environment, leading to devastating diseases like cancer (35). These interventions are essential because they reveal how ecological devastation impacts on both human and non-human life. Yet the increased prominence of women's concern for the environment has frequently been misinterpreted as proof of women's innate duty to care for the environment. Such an assumption risks extending household care into environmental care, thus adding a further burden to women and not making ecological responsibility a collective social obligation. This narrative applies to the life of Gayatri. Her interaction with nature and art is not an extension of domestic service, but a bid to retrieve a self that has been suppressed by domestic service.

The story should therefore be read as a complex structure of resistance between women, nature and art. Nature offers Gayatri a world beyond the stifling of the household; art provides expression to aspirations that cannot be articulated inside patriarchal domesticity; and ecological imagination enables her to re-enter life as a thinking, feeling, and creative person. These factors combined suggest that Gayatri's escape is not only physical. It's emotional, it's artistic, it's ecological, it's political. Through this movement, the novel attacks the patriarchal inclination to place the responsibility of care on women, while denying them the freedom to receive care, to construct meaning, and to define their own existence.

Rather than society recognising that the environment is every individual's responsibility, the onus overburdens women with yet another duty, like family and household care. Gayatri longed to explore the world, nature, and art forms, and she never wanted marriage. Her desire for exploration of the outside world became a tool for inward exploration, empowering her identity. It aligns with the idea that true empowerment transcends merely offering educational, social, and economic opportunities; it involves uncovering the inherent strength within women (36). This empowerment serves to confront and alter conventional gender roles and aids in dismantling biases. When women assume control over their lives and occupy positions of authority, they contribute diverse viewpoints, thereby advancing equality. This idea of agency and social personhood needs to be highlighted and communicated to the wider section of subjugated women, informing them of their rights and motivating them towards fulfilment of their desires.

Gayatri's childhood travels filled her with wonder and motivated her desire to journey afar. Her meeting with Rabindranath Tagore and Walter Spies amidst the beauty of the sea further inspired her love for art and nature. Unfortunately, after the sudden death of her father, she was subjugated by the rest of the family. The fact that Gayatri's family—both before and during her marriage, except for her father—denied her any opportunity to pursue art or connect with nature displays a selective attitude toward women's personal growth. The patriarchal setup and regressive social outlook result in the complete negation of Gayatri's talent. Despite all the hurdles and the constant backlash from her loved ones, her zeal for art remains very much alive. She strives to redefine her identity through art, like modern Indian women artists who have spent many decades forging solid positions of identity and consistently exploring various avenues for justice (37). These artists address themes such as the misuse of power, the sheer denial of authority to women, and the overwhelming quest for freedom of expression.

Before Gayatri takes charge of her life, taking care of Myshkin and the household remains her only vocation, and this confinement strangles her sense of self. To overcome the mundanity of her life, she involves herself in the world of art and finds peace

and comfort in nature. Her situation reproduces the larger pattern in which women, when denied mobility and agency, often transform restricted spaces into sites of inner resistance and it often turns into site of peace. A recent account of Sonabai Rajawar illustrates this connection powerfully. Confined for nearly fifteen years in a windowless house by her husband, Sonabai began making clay toys for her son, later creating sculptures, clay lattices, and natural pigments that turned the very space of confinement into a haven of artistic expression, strength, and tenaciousness. Her work demonstrates how art can emerge even in oppressive domestic conditions, not as passive decoration, but as a mode of survival, self-expression, and quiet rebellion (38).

An analogous pattern of artistic recourse is evident in a study of the Japanese military's "comfort women" system, where women were explosively made to entertain military officials through different art forms and were also subjected to sexual exploitation on a regular basis. In isolation, these women sought to survive trauma through art, music, and collective expression. It is recounted that, on rare occasions when they found something to laugh about in their torturous lives, or when they felt lonely and miserable, they would sing together or hum quietly (39). Read alongside Gayatri and Sonabai, these instances suggest that art and nature often become alternative spaces of dignity when women are denied control over their own bodies, desires, emotions, and movement. When overburdened with responsibilities, women are denied agency and the freedom to exercise their own will over their minds or bodies. This practice of negating women's agency must be challenged through continuous efforts to make women's rights known and accepted, gender-sensitive learning from a young age, and community outreach work that teaches respect for women's autonomy and shows how responsibility should be shared in all areas of life.

The "normative assumptions have consequences for female caregivers, such as restricted access to socially valued resources, lack of recognition of their own needs, and inability to use their time for other activities, such as self-care" (12). Patrilineality and patrilocality, the inseparable tenets of patriarchy, compel women to remain bound to the marital home and family after being uprooted from the home where they were born

and raised. These ideologies constantly haunt Gayatri, and the constant subjugation in her marital home transforms her from a victim into a rebel with purpose. In response to Nek Chand's patriarchal behaviour—despite his self-proclaimed progressive identity—Gayatri questions: “my freedom is something you can store in a locked iron safe? To dole out when you see fit?” (11). This stresses the profound psychological consequence of emotional and symbolic violence, highlighting the significance of creating supportive community structures that empower women to raise defiance without self-blame, fright, or guilt.

The psychological and emotional upheaval of women often results in severe excruciation. Women face a greater level of hardship and restriction compared to men, leading to a higher rate of psychological distress among married women (40). In the patriarchal order, marriage brings a set of unspoken vows demanded only of women, under which no woman can flourish to her full capacity. Gayatri rejects these narratives. She chooses to depart from Nek Chand and his residence, challenging the limitations and political constructs surrounding the notion of absolute care (34). Myshkin remembers the days when his mother appeared different from other women in their locality; she possessed a seed of freedom inside her. It was colonial-era India, where women were expected to behave meekly and stay inside the shelter provided by the man of the house. After facing endless hurdles, Gayatri dared to leave the house in a tonga in search of a traditional dance teacher who taught dance to courtesans in the red-light area. The final act of defiance is her migration to Bali with Walter Spies—who was homosexual—signifying her quest to pursue her love for nature and art and symbolising a universal longing for self-realisation shared by many marginalised women globally.

The transition of a marital victim (and a mother) from an oppressive space to one of her own desires may generate feelings of oppressive self-blame for leaving behind her child and household. Yet, when Gayatri becomes sad for leaving Myshkin behind, she affirms: “anyway, no room for self-pity, none! I am here. I came because I chose to, I will not mope and moan, I will work” (11). Gayatri integrates herself with her dreams, art, and nature and chooses art and freedom over burden and subjugation. She does not fall for the

trap of innocent guilt, as she is aware of the overburdening and false expectations of her husband and society.

Gayatri's escape from her marital home opens the door for discussion about women who are trapped in homes that offer nothing but psychological and physical violence. With changing times, women are often inclined towards exploring the option of legal separation. Divorce is now often seen as a respectful dissolution of marriage and, in some cases, provides financial rights to an unemployed wife as well as child custody. Awareness and realisation of women's own rights can prompt them to seek justice when they are oppressed. The Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act, 2005 provides shelter to the victim and ensures temporary custody of the child, if any (41). Section 85 and 86 of the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita (BNS) further protect women from the cruelty of domestic violence, dowry, and mental torture (42). Exposure to nature, art, and literature has been observed to have a transcendental impact on women's disturbed psyche. Art-based interventions have been observed to demonstrate a significant impact on alleviating symptoms of anxiety and depression in women during pregnancy and postpartum periods (43). Another poignant role of art and the environment can be witnessed in the lives of sexually assaulted women who opt for art therapy for mental recovery from trauma. It has also been affirmed that art therapy provides essential space and relief from the overwhelming outside world, functioning as self-care for trauma survivors (44). Thus, to empower women and to foster psychological stability in them, the collaboration of art and nature-based therapies into community mental health initiatives can serve as an effective strategy.

Conclusion

The exploration uncovers Gayatri's opposition not merely as personal but universal. It also investigates the politics of care in a domestic patriarchal setup. The narrative shows how women are restricted by home duties, parenthood, and societal respectability. It is a moral ideal, but it becomes a hardship if it is solely demanded of women. Gayatri's story shows that care can take away freedom, recognition, creativity, and mental tranquillity. Her migration from dwelling to art and nature is symbolic of her desire for selfhood. It also

shows that agency is never only an individual matter. It is moulded by family, society, emotion, and culture.

Contributions

The major contribution of this work lies in its cross-disciplinary reading of Gayatri's character through feminist, ecofeminist, and ecocritical perspective. This reading demonstrates how women's emancipation cannot be viewed merely as an act of revolt against patriarchal authority, constructed social structures, and symbolic violence. It must also be understood in terms of household labour, social exclusion, ecological desire, and artistic expression. Gayatri's journey brings these issues out. The work is thus relevant to debates in the literary, feminist and environmental humanities. It indicates that care, nature, and art are not independent topics in the narrative. They work together as places of oppression, but also as prospective sites of healing. This reading also has a broader social significance. Gayatri's struggle indicates a direct relation between the mental well-being of women and agency, mobility, education, and creative freedom. It is also associated with the sharing of care work in the family. The novel depicts how law and policy are not enough to create social change. Cultural attitudes to women's labour, desire, and selfhood also have to alter. Programs addressing women's health, education, safety, childcare, and employment have more impact when families and communities also change their conduct. Institutional support is also needed.

Limitations

This study has a distinct and definitive focus on women's identity, artistic selfhood, care, and ecological awareness. Methodologically, the study is rooted in an in-depth qualitative reading and detailed text-based approach within the lens of ecofeminism, care-politics, and ecocriticism. The paper neither attempts to oversaturate the study by addressing every dimension of the novel nor does it purport to report empirical findings about women's lives in all social contexts. Rather it recognizes the scope for the exploration of further interconnected motifs such as intersectional feminism and ethics of care.

The analysis is based primarily on care-politics and its modern relevance through the character of Gayatri. It also explores the relationship between the environment, art, and agency. Other features of

the work are left to further research. These include masculinity, childhood memories, nationalism, migration, caste, class, and narrative politics. The conclusions are thus interpretative. They are built according to the selected theoretical framework. Further research may compare Gayatri with other female protagonists in modern Indian English fiction. It could also consider how motherhood, artistic freedom, ecological imagination, and domestic constriction are perceived in regional literatures, Indian language traditions, and cinema. Comparative analyses of literary texts and films could shed light on the ways in which women's empowerment is constructed through diverse cultural media. Such work can widen the discourse of care-politics and highlight the ways in which literature continues to engage with the unresolved concerns of gender justice, emotional liberation, and social transformation.

Abbreviations

ADL: Activities in Daily Living, BNS: Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita, JSSK: Janani Shishu Suraksha Karyakram, JSY: Janani Suraksha Yojana, NGO: Non-Governmental Organisation, NRI: Non-Resident Indian, PMSMA: Pradhan Mantri Surakshit Matritva Abhiyan, SDG: Sustainable Development Goals, SHG: Self-Help Group, SUMAN: Surakshit Matritva Aashwasan.

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Author Contributions

Rachna: Manuscript Preparation, Conceptualisation, Literature Review, Averi Mukhopadhyay: Supervision of the Research, Review the Manuscript Critically. Both the authors have read and approved the final version of the manuscript.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest related to this study.

Data Availability

No statistical data has been used as the primary source for this study.

Declaration of Artificial Intelligence (AI) Assistance

AI-assisted editing was used only for minor grammatical and typographical corrections. The authors are solely responsible for the intellectual content of the manuscript.

Ethics Approval

The ethics approval was not required, as the study did not involve any human or animal subject.

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