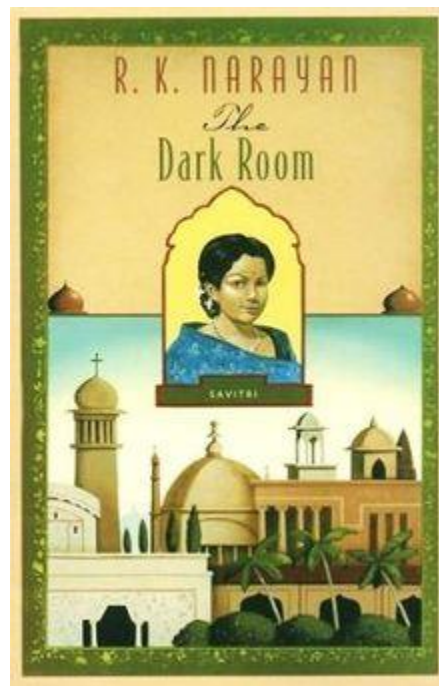


Aspects of Gender Conflict in English Literature

Hegemonic Masculinity and Emphasized Femininity in the Novels
The Dark Room and Lamps in The Whirlpool

M. Kavitha



Abstract

Hegemonic masculinity perpetuates the dominant social position of men, and emphasized femininity focuses on the subordinate social position of women. Throughout history, women have been treated as sub-ordinate to men. The word “Feminist” has caused a turmoil wherever it is uttered. The focus of this paper is to explore the subordination of feminine gender in the novels of R. K. Narayan’s *The Dark Room* (1938) and Rajam Krishnan’s *Lamps in the Whirlpool* (1997). The protagonists of the novels are seen as women struggling against all odds. These novels portray the picture of the sufferings of Savitri and Girija and explore the depression of woman who are always under their husband’s control at a deeper level.

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R. K. Narayan (10 October 1906 – 13 May 2001), full name Rasipuram Krishnaswami Iyer Narayanaswami, was an Indian writer, who was known for his works set in the fictional South Indian town of Malgudi. He was a leading author of early Indian literature in English. In a career that spanned over sixty years, Narayan received many awards and honours, including the AC Benson Medal from the Royal Society of Literature, the Padma Bhushan and the Padma Vibhushan, India's third and second highest civilian awards. He was also nominated to the Rajya Sabha, the upper house of India's Parliament.

Rajam Krishnan, born in 1925 in Musiri, Trichy District in Tamil Nadu is a major Tamil writer. Her works represent the lives of women in Tamil Nadu, India, particularly about the Brahmin women, well -expressed in a realistic style and language. Her novels and short stories have been translated into diverse Indian languages and English. She received the New York Herald Tribune International Award in 1950 for a short story; Sahitya Academy Award in 1973; Soviet Land Nehru Award in 1975. She has been privileged with a number of other awards such as Kalaimagal Award in 1953 and Thiru. Vi. Ka. Award in 1991. This paper will focus upon these two factors, Masculinity and Femininity in the two novels.

Keywords: Hegemonic masculinity, emphasized femininity, subordination of women, R. K. Narayan, Rajam Krishnan, *The Dark Room*, *Lamps in the whirlpool*

Introduction

The Dark room is the third of R. K. Narayan's novels. It is the only novel where Narayan thought of a social problem, namely the place of women in society, and worked it out with reference to the socio-cultural matrix of India of the 1930s. *The Lamps in the Whirlpool* is translated from the Tamil novel *Suzhalil Mithakkum Deepangal*. The title of the novel *Lamps in the Whirlpool*, the 'lamps' symbolize the situation of women in the family as well as the 'whirlpool' indicates the inconvenience that are faced by women. Specifically, the author gives a description of feminism and the orthodox regulations of the Brahmin community in this novel.

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She portrays the emphasis in Brahmin families to ‘*madi* rules’ and how Brahmin women have endured those ‘*madi*’ rules.

Savitri as a Subordinate in R. K. Narayan’s *The Dark Room*

The central character of this novel is Savitri, a submissive housewife, who is married to Ramani, an employee of the Engladia Insurance Company. They have three children, Kamala, Sumati and Babu. Savitri is a typical good Indian housewife of the India of those times, very much dominated and neglected by her husband who tries to shelter her two daughters and maintain their innocence, while never raising her voice or her hands against her husband. The girls and their mother are completely subjected to Ramani's whims and fancies, from what they will eat, to whether they will eat, to who they will invite as guests to their home.

Throughout all this, Savitri is placed on a pedestal as she silently endures the abuse and tries to keep her family together. She is beautiful, self-sacrificing, devoted and obedient - the ideal Indian wife. However much she hungers for Ramani's love, she never even gets a smile from him, and neither do his love-starved daughters. Ramani, bored by tormenting his placid wife, eventually starts having an affair with a beautiful woman at his office named Shanta Bai, and this insults her. Savitri convinces herself to bear quietly when her neighbor tells her about it, even though it eats away at her. She is too terrified of Ramani's rages to do anything, and the years of abuse have given her such low self-esteem that she blames herself for the affair. But when Ramani's treatment of her worsens, ignoring every desperate attempt by Savitri to save the marriage, she finally snaps. She throws her wedding necklace down (the wedding necklace is as significant in India as the wedding ring is in the west) and pours out years’ worth of rage and grief to Ramani, lamenting that she has no rights in society even if she wanted to assert them, and that she is only a chattel till the day she dies. So the solution is to die.

Savitri runs from the house in tears to throw herself into the Sarayu River. She drowns herself but floats to the surface, and is seen by a local crook named Mari who is moved by pity and pulls her out of the water, pumping the water from her lungs. He asks her why she tried to kill herself and tells her that there is always hope in life, and always another path. The crook's

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wife, Ponni, cleans Savitri up and advises her to find solace in a life devoted to spiritual contemplation. And so Savitri starts to work in a temple, hoping to find peace as a Hindu nun. Instead, she finds herself molested and eyed by other men, and constantly at odds with the sexist priest who hates seeing a woman working in a temple - a place dominated by the male Brahmins of the Hindu clergy. Disillusioned and depressed, Savitri begins to miss her daughters and wonders if she was selfish and irresponsible to leave them, and wonders how badly they are being treated by Ramani. She realizes that all her attempts to escape were useless, because as a woman in this society, she has no place at all except where her family is, whether she likes it or not. And running away will not protect her daughters or bring her peace. Resigned, and oddly at peace with her lot in life, a quiet and contemplative Savitri returns to Malgudi and to her home. But nothing changes. Ramani is spitefully triumphant that his rebellious wife has at last learned her place, and continues to behave as he always did. Savitri revolts but returns defeated. This is one of Narayan's definitely darker novels and one of the few where he seriously examines the gender inequalities of traditional Indian society in the mid-twentieth century.



Rajam Krishnan 1925-2014

Courtesy: <http://solvanam.com/?p=37327>

Girija as a Subordinate in Rajam Krishnan's *Lamps in the Whirlpool*

The protagonist Girija, is a typical middle class Brahmin girl. She has completed her post-graduation and worked as a teacher in a village school. She is inspired by her students and Colleagues alike. Girija is married to Swaminathan only to perform the duties of a Hindu wife in

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a Brahmin family. They have three children Kavitha, Charu and Bharat. Swaminathan's mother is as much a central character as Girija because she treated her daughter-in-law as a slave to do her duties. Girija has to follow the 'madi' rules and 'acharam' as instructed by her mother-in-law. Her husband is not at all caring about his wife. After seventeen years of married life she used to do only household chores. Even she is not having time for relaxation. Rathna, her husband's niece visited her once. Girija was awakened by the talk of Rathna. One day, her husband throws the plate because the food is not palatable. Girija is irritated by his arrogant behaviour. She is not in the state of mind to please him. He insulted her very badly; she was treated like a slave in that house. For the first time she does not like to please him. Girija leaves from her home. She wants to spend some time on the banks of the river Ganga. She meets the pilgrims Gowriammal and her husband. Girija also meets a spiritual widow in Rishikeshi. She meets a spiritual widow in Haridwar who has dared to defy society after her husband's death. Girija explains her situation to the woman. She advises Girija to take life in her hands and act with clarity. She returns home with a sense of enlightenment, after four days.

She is not allowed to enter the house by her family members. Girija's husband and mother-in-law charge her with infidelity and order her to leave the house. Horrified Girija goes to Ratna, who is engaged in feminist research in Delhi University. Ratna and her friends give her refuge and take care of her as if she were a wounded bird. Girija seeks employment with a nun who runs a home for refugee children. Her concern now is to see that her daughters are not destroyed by the family regimen.

All along Girija had been a victim of the strict rules of orthodoxy. She painfully recollects how her children are denied the joys of being caressed and fondled by their mother from a tender age, as it would violate the "madi". She is torn between her worry for her daughters. She wants to keep in touch with her children. Then Girija transforms herself to a new empowered woman.

Hegemonic Masculinity

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Male domination and female submission take place unconsciously, because the gender inequalities have evolved over one million years and get institutionalized. The psychological conflicts between the genders reinforce the inequalities. Ramani in *The Dark Room* is such a bossy chap, who expects every aspect of perfection in his household and failing to meet that will only reinforce his bad temper towards his wife Savitri. Similarly Swaminathan in *Lamps in the Whirlpool* is the embodiment of callousness. He is totally insensitive to the feelings of his wife. He married her just to do all the household chores and she was treated like a slave in that house.

The treatment of the husbands towards their wives compelled them to take a serious decision in their life which has brought a turning point in the novel. The contrary is that Savitri revolts but returns defeated whereas Girija revolts and transforms to a new empowered woman. The Indian women lose their identity after the marriage. Education does not give any rationale of their life. They become sacrificial goats in the ritual of running the family.

Conclusion

In *The Dark Room*, Savitri, the protagonist, is on the lookout for her independent human identity, because she does not wish to remain content with her status as a mere slave to her husband. She cannot totally free herself from the dead weight of blind tradition and when she realizes that her search for independence and personal dignity does not lead her anywhere, she accepts her fate with calm resignation though an inexpressible despair seeps into her soul. Savitri's quest for her identity, at least of her independent individual entity, begins in a dark room of her husband's house. It is a way of protest against the tyrannical behaviour of her husband. At the end of the novel, she is equally powerless, as is obvious from her despairing questions to herself, "But what can I do? And what have I?" (179)

In *Lamps in the Whirlpool*, Girija, the protagonist, becomes a slave, following only the rituals after her marriage. Education has not given her any rationale for her life. She does not find any relaxation. She has lost her freedom, her self-respect. Girija is, in fact is afraid that the choice she has to make will lead to maybe giving up her children. In our Indian life "Motherhood is everything". It is an uncompromised one in any situation. At the end of all this work, Girija

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wants to keep in touch with the children. It is very important that Indian woman must learn to balance between the two extremes. Girija is well educated. But she lost her self-identity as empowered women because of the rigid rules of her family.

Though the country has attained tremendous progress, the role of Indian women remains the same. Gender discrimination is the universal phenomenon in the society. Due to the education and economic independence, the status of women has been raised. In order to overcome the discrimination in the society, they must know their rights. They must raise their voice against the brutalities and violence which is aimed at them by the society; they must stand up and rebuke the male dominating society which discourages self-reliance in women.

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