

## **Girija's Flight from the Maze of Chaos to the World of Freedom in Rajam Krishnan's *Lamps in the Whirlpool***

**Dr. Ruby Merlin**  
Assistant Professor  
Department of English  
Holy Cross College  
Trichy.2

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### **Abstract**

The traditional Indian wife is the best antidote to modern ills related to family and culture. In all sections of the society whether in lower class or upper or middle class, Indian wife is all what men can dream of. But she has lived in a society totally ruled by tradition and appropriateness in which she is no more than a second-class citizen. However, during the second part of the twentieth century, one can witness a dramatic improvement in the lives of Indian women.

Unfortunately, some women in search of their identity alienate themselves from the realities of human life. They fail to establish harmonious human relationship with people around. The reasons for such failures have been delineated convincingly in the writings of Rajam Krishnan.

Rajam Krishnan's women question and sometimes rebel against their maternal role; but are not able to reject it outright. At some point in their lives deny motherhood and attempt finding escape routes, but eventually understand total separation is not possible since they feel children are vulnerable and re-enter their maternal roles but of course with modifications. Wives now seek to shirk their role, leave home as a token of their protest temporarily or forever which though certainly may shock the patriarchs yet offers them a scope to rectify and make amendments and remedies for the harm they have done to women.

This Paper focuses on the life of Girija, the protagonist of *Lamps in the Whirlpool* by Rajam Krishnan. It traces Girija's plight in her marital life and the struggle she undergoes and finally her attempt to free from the clutches of the traditional society.

Women in this large social and cosmic infrastructure of the universe were displaced at

some point of time. Her role and contribution in the functioning of this superstructure is either ignored or sided away as marginal or peripheral. Marriage is the sole justification for a woman's existence in India. The focus on a relentless stamping out of female identity gives a grim picture of Indian womanhood. There is physical, emotional and economic exploitation. Marriage is not just an individual choice but also an economic transaction of two families. Marriage does not provide the conditions necessary for individual growth. In spite of that, marriage remains the predominant institution for most young women in Hindu culture. Through special rituals maidens aspire to gain a husband so that they can procure a respected and accepted place in the society.

A woman before marriage is petted and pampered. Though she is always reminded of her departure all the time she is not taxed too much physically and emotionally. Yet she is not given an opportunity to realize what she wants from life or whom she wishes to marry. Parents make all decisions and she ceases to be a person in her own right.

After marriage, women fret and rebel against male domination and other things attached to a woman as a wife, housekeeper and ideal mother. Only procreation and fertility give a woman the much-coveted status. The psyche of a married woman is agonized on three levels – physical, mental and spiritual. They are torn between the memories of the past and the realities of the present. With the boom of an unpleasant and an unacceptable situation, nostalgic feelings get stirred up.

A married woman is transplanted from her native parental bondage to a new set of relationships. Until she gets re rooted to establish a strong man - woman relationship whole heartedly, there exerts fear, conflicts and frustration which in an extreme case leads to conflict and separation of the family. The conflict arises as a result of an imbalance between dreams or private fantasies and the bare realities. Such recurrent patterns of action, symbols, character types, dreams, myths or themes are held to be the result of elemental and universal forms of the patterns in human psyche.

The incompatibility between the husband and wife gives the woman a sense of alienation. The inability to belong to both her father's and husband's family makes her desperate, as all her expectation go unsatiated. On the contrary she has to meet the expectations of others. The housewife is supposed to have more aspirations outside the family. Her desire ought to be to take care of the house and that is the perfect prelude to the making of a mother. She is looked forward to managing the household, breed, and take care of the kids and also man's needs.

What a woman wants the most is understanding, sharing, participation and above all

recognition the recognition as an individual that is denied to her. She is always a shadow of her husband. The longing to be a person in her own right and not as a possession of man, ends in dissatisfaction. The wife wants equality, involvement and continuity within marriage, but these desires are not given due importance as man is egoistic. The wife is exploited to the maximum and she looks on herself as a victim and is helpless to maneuver the situation to her advantage.

Rajam Krishnan occupies a prominent place in the list of contemporary novelists. Her works are noted for the social consciousness that they impart. The novels are both creative as well as informative. Her creative world is simple and loving. It cares for the fellow human beings. It also records the trials and tribulations of day-to-day life and how human beings react to it. The works also condemn the long-rooted customs and practices that are practiced by the society. Her works mirror how the middle and underprivileged class people stand apart from their upper-class counter parts.

Almost all her female characters are feministic in their approach. Rajam Krishnan speaks for the cause of women through all her female protagonists. She opines that women should free themselves from the clutches of culture and tradition and be individualistic.

Be it at home or in the society, Rajam Krishnan's protagonists stand apart from the rest. They are individuals with unique characteristics. These characters do not confine themselves to the false superstitious practices of the family and compromise with the hopeless marriage. They liberate themselves from the claws of these family problems and lead a free life

Rajam Krishnan's protagonists do not fly in the sky like tailless kites. They base their foot firmly on the ground and think before they act. Most of her characters are educated and they protest against all the social evils. They also fight for the cause of women

Rajam Krishnan believes that the novel is an instrument to bring in great changes in the society. She also believes that the novel can inspire and make the readers to act accordingly. Most of the female protagonist of Rajam Krishnan are victims of the joint family set up where they are denied their personal rights. This in turn leads to their alienation. In most of her novels one finds the female protagonist following one principle, that is, they believe in getting rid of the obstacle and walking out to find a better environment. Rajam Krishnan does not stress only on walking out but she firmly instructs to set their own final destination. The situation of the woman caught in such traumatic situation is similar to that of standing in the middle of cross roads. One will be surely confused to select the right path to reach the correct destination. Rajam Krishnan's female characters also face the similar situation, but they are wise and capable enough to choose the right direction even at cross roads.

Girija of *Lamps in the Whirlpool* is an educated woman who had sacrificed her professional life for the sake of her family. But her mother-in-law and husband Samu treat her as a domestic animal whose primary duty is to serve them and the children. Her individuality is curbed and she has no say in the matters of the family. She is immune to her own surrounding to such an extent that she notices the beautiful painting in the hall of her house only when Ratna and her friend show it to her. The cruel practices of “madi” and “acharam” suppress her belongingness. Her husband who is supposed to be her life partner treats her as a just another member of the family. He does not appreciate her for all the effort she takes. Girija’s patience and tolerance attain a breaking point when Samu flung the plate of food. She opens up and boldly speaks out her mind. That is when she decides to leave home and seek solace in Haridwar. The three days stay there, prove to be enriching. Her encounter with an old woman teaches her what life is. On her return she finds that she is branded as impure. She takes a brave decision of leaving home for good.

Woman seeks companionship as a wife and the man is after self gratification. The togetherness and warmth that she expects is denied to her. The husband who is oblivious of the wife’s physical and sensual needs is responsible for her anomic behaviour. The indifferent behaviour of the husband, leading too emotional and sexual desperation makes her neurotic. The husband is most narrow mind, ruthless and careless. The wife experiences an acute sense of loneliness, emptiness and boredom due to her sensitiveness. There is lack of communication and the wife goes back into her shell like an oyster.

Especially a married woman, the transplantation takes place on three levels: physical, mental and spiritual. They are torn between the memories of the past and the realities of the present. With the boom of an unpleasant and an unacceptable situation, nostalgic feelings get stirred up.

In spite of all the material comforts awarded to a woman there is an emotional void. The woman is always disillusioned whenever she searches for communication. A good sensitive intelligent wife wants to have conversation about books, events, ideas and people or anything else, which can be shared by both. This never happens and the woman suffers from loneliness. The loneliness, suffering and frustration leads to disintegration. Marriage makes her lose her poise and respectability, especially when the wife knows that her man desires others company. She feels lonely and sometimes she even hates her husband. Marriage makes her mere lonely, insecure and unhappy. She is fed up and bored. Her life is full of false pretensions, empty and meaningless. There is emotional isolation and the woman is unnaturally subdued. The sense of desolation makes her desperate and she devotes her attention to things other than marriage and

husband. Her spirit is destroyed completely.

The wife has to bear many types of burdens. There is an element of tiredness and disgust. To play the role of ideal Hindu wife she has to discard her selfhood and identity. The bitterness that is accumulated creates disgust for the role of a wife. She receives lots of hurts and injuries. The bottled-up emotions burst up after a long stifling tension that she feels emotionally weakens her equipoise. Marriage alters a woman completely. She does not remain what she was before her marriage. The enterprising and intelligent woman hates to get stuck at home. The life she lives is a life of boredom and tedium. She feels engaged and enslaved. She reacts to the sufferings caused by incompatibility though she does not articulate it.

In *Lamps in the Whirlpool*, Girija leaves, hoping to get some relief from the oppressive atmosphere of the house by spending some time on the banks of the Ganga. She decides not to tell everything to her mother-in-law or anyone else. Girija is happy as she used to be, when she starts her journey to Haridwar.

An uncontrollable urge, an inexplicable desire had impelled Girija to leave home. She had torn herself away from her family with implicit faith that she would find peace on the banks of the Ganga. Even as she was savouring her freedom, the question of what the future held for her tortured her. (LW 45)

She needs a model to follow, so she gets the advice of the old woman from Rishikesh. The lady explains the meaning of freedom to her, where she could take decision clearly.

She meets an elderly pilgrim couple and stays with them while in Haridwar. She finds that the old woman Gowri Ammal has been treated abominably by her arrogant husband, a munsiff. But in old age the woman talks of her past without any bitterness and ironically, now her husband is totally dependent on her. 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.

Take care...Believe me, nothing is impossible. You can shape your own destiny.  
At last, Girija was very clear in her mind.

Your problems are yours to solve. Confront your Mamiyar, who is, after all, also a woman, and share with her your feelings about being trapped in the cage of madi. Convince her that these rules are devoid of human feelings. You are equal in status to your Mamiyar in that house. So why can't you bring about change? You also have a

responsibility and a duty towards the emotional development of your children. (56)

She returns home with a sense of enlightenment, after four days. By developing communal bonds with an old lady Girija gets solace and a sense of determination. “She felt strangely calm” (59) after her trip.

When she reached home it dawned on her that according to her husband Samu. “She had broken the rules and she would have to pay the price” (61). This boldness in Girija infuriates Samu to the extent of labelling her as an unchaste woman. Girija’s husband and mother-in-law charge her with infidelity and order her to leave the house. Girija is extremely shocked by the treatment by her husband.

What a heartless, savage attack! It was as if a jet of gas which she had forgotten to turn off was now ready to explode in her face. Life within these four walls was so fraught with danger that an unwary move could trigger of an electric shock. Why did her husband and his mother ignore her feelings? Why didn’t they ask her what had motivated her to act as she did? Was she solely responsible for keeping the fragile bubble of family honour interest? (62)

Girija is unwanted in her home when she comes back from the trip; she becomes an unwanted person at her home since she has crossed the restrictions of the family as a wife. Her chastity is questioned by her husband and even the children are not allowed to talk to her. In extreme fury she speaks out her mind to Samu:

You dismissed all my years of servitude in an instant when you flung away your plate of food and walked out. Neither your mother nor mami ever cred to take my side. I am not a mere wax doll. Over the years, you annihilated my self-esteem and the life force within me. You made me work as a house hold drudge. The cruelty inflicted on me was worse than any physical abuse. Did you not ignore my role as the lynchpin of this household for eighteen years? I could not continue to function like a machine any longer. My power of endurance snapped. I went to the Ganga for solace. (64)

Horrified by her present situation Girija doesn’t know what to do and where to go. She is then reminded of 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 regiment. Girija is torn between her worry for her daughters and her awareness that she must seek out a new life for herself. She fears that her

daughters would be indoctrinated and regimented into the complex procedure of ritual piety. Now they are typical of the younger generation living in Delhi, with scant respect for any form of orthodoxy. But the son would be cherished with fondness because sons matter most in Indian families. The old woman goes over to the hostel accompanied by the servant Maya to hand over Girija's certificates and clothes but not her jewellery. What provokes Girija is a cheque for Rs.10,000/- which Samu sends through his mother. Girija flings it back. Later she learns that her husband had also come up to the building but had preferred to stay in the car. She is now certain that there is no love lost between them. She pledges her gold chain in the bank (it was made out of her savings while working as a teacher before marriage).

Girija's later part of her life is somewhat better as she gets an employment with a nun. However, her concern is to see that her daughters are not destroyed by the family regiment. Girija is emotional and confused about her daughter's situation. Thus, she seeks a solution. When Ratna tells a movie story, she is curious to know the climax because she is confused with her responsibility and freedom. When a girl commits suicide, she remembers her daughter and worries that they may also commit suicide. She becomes strong when Samu refuses to meet her and the money given by Samu does not matter her. So she throws away the cheque of ten thousand rupees at Samu's face. Thus, Girija learns how to be independent and face the world and becomes aggressive towards her husband and in-law.

The most pathetic aspect of her situation is that she almost loses her sense of self. Girija's personality simply does not exist anymore after her marriage. Education has not given her any rationale of her life. There is no time for self-enquiry. She loses hold of the fact that she is an entity and has a responsibility to herself and the society.

Girija is an educated woman who is caught in the mire of ritual piety and austerity imposed upon her by her mother-in-law. Girija was an ambitious woman and after her marriage, she was asked by her husband to take care of the family and be a housewife till she dies. Thus, before marriage itself she has to kill her rational thinking, which is one of the aspects of violating her rationality. She is very much aware of degradation which has been done to her through her brother, who did not allow her to go and work. She thus learnt to live like other housewives, who adjust a lot and sacrifice for the welfare of the family. Before her marriage, Girija utilized her teaching skills and she made one of her weak students to pass tenth standard exams.

I was full of enthusiasm and always ready to try out innovative methods of teaching at every level. Most of the children in my school betrayed to poor families. I achieved excellent results. Let me give you an example. There was a girl whose mother was a thief and father a drunkard. The mother forced the child to steal. The school uniform provided

a respectable façade. When she was caught by the police the headmaster was determined to expel her because she had brought disgrace to the school. I coached the child myself for two years. She finished her tenth standard and life. (24-25)

Thus, her ambition and successfulness are relegated to the past and in the present scenario she becomes feminine. The observance of ritual piety characterized as “madi,” alienates her physically and emotionally from her children. Her education and skills are devalued at her marital home. Even her husband, Swaminathan, is unable to understand her and treats her like a domestic servant. Girija though aware of her conditional life does not try to come away and she needs someone to provoke her. Her relative Ratna provokes Girija by questioning her and by reminding her of the old days when Girija had some feminist aspects. Girija knows that her freedom is suppressed by her-in-laws and thinks over her treatment in that house. Thus, her feminine emotional nature hinders her attempts to question the ‘madi’ rules in her in law which really dominates her.

Patience is one of those aspects of femininity which Girija has been following. She starts losing them when Samu irritates her. “The walls of patience, which she had built up so carefully around herself, were now in flames” (30). She is in two minds, whether to fear for mother-in-law or to take her rights in her hands, when Ratna wants to stay at home. Girija does know what satisfies her most but it is the question of how to initiate her move against the violation of her rights. However, at the end, these emotional things are overthrown, she comes out. It shows women need initiatives/support to walk out of the restriction they are bound with. Ratna stirs up the thinking of Girija, when Girija is confused about overcoming femininity/ the “madi” rules of her mother-in-law. When she is really provoked by Ratna’s speech, her mother-in-law’s sentimental touches make her to take a strong decision to cross out of her femininity. She regrets for her present condition – “I seem to have forgotten what I once was. I am not even able to help my own children with their studies. Kavita scored only forty per cent in English and has to be tutored. I am very upset” (25). She could not even notice the paintings on the wall in their living room. When the visitors find out the meaning of the pictures, she feels ashamed of her situation, though she learnt painting once. Girija feels that women have right to work and it adds to their intellectual power and it is not the mere reason of earning money. When Abu asks her about the things which she had lost after her marriage life, though she knows it is freedom of living, she could not convey first. Girija is mentally stuck up with family households and restrictions of the family, whereas after leaving the family she feels liberated to do whatever she wants to. Girija’s dormant sense of self gets awakened when all her years of devotion and commitment are obliterated and negated by her husband and mother-in-law. She rebels against the undignified treatment meted out to her by walking out of this oppressive relationship and tries to carve out an independent space for herself. Her courage lies in the assertion of her individuality and self-

respect.

Rajam Krishnan, through the character of Girija opines that a sophisticated life with well furnished house and commodities alone will never allow a woman to voice out her opinion. Such a situation had compelled Girija to protest and leave her home After being subjected to such suppression and ill-treatment, Girija feels that the view that a wife's primary duty is to cook and to meet out her husband's needs has been formulated by the male dominated society. There is an urge in her to break the fetters and breathe the air of freedom. "She emerges as an embodiment of courage boldly coming out of the caged life and ready to face life with confidence and purposeful action" (Merlin 393).

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