



# Representation of Patriarchy and Female Subordination in Selected Works of R. K. Narayan

Ayushi Siddharth<sup>1</sup>, Dr. Neeru Varshney<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Research Scholar, Department of English, S.V. College, Aligarh, UP, India

<sup>2</sup>Assistant professor, Department of English, S.V. College, Aligarh, UP, India

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**Abstract** —This paper discusses patriarchy and female subordination in the selected works of R.K. Narayan who is one of the most glorified English-language novelists of India. Based on novels like *The Dark Room*, *The English Teacher*, and *The Painter of Signs*, the paper will examine how Narayan gives a picture of the social, cultural and domestic framework that tends to disenfranchise women within postcolonial Indian society. This paper will discuss that although Narayan does not identify himself as a feminist author, his subtle characterizations unwillingly reveal and criticize gender dynamics of oppression inherent in the traditional Indian society. The analysis is done through a feminist approach to explore the structural elements of male domination, forced domesticity, suffering without reaction and the lack of control of the women in the fictional town of Malgudi. Placing his narratives in the larger socio-cultural contexts, this work will add to the current academic debates concerning the topic of gender, identity, and resistance in South Asian literature. The special focus is on women characters like Savitri, Susila and Rosie whose plights throw light on the strong patriarchal principles according to which their lives, relationships, and desires are determined.



**Keywords** —Patriarchy, female subordination, male domination, Malgudi, womanhood, traditional values, domestic oppression.

## Introduction

Rasipuram Krishnaswami Iyer Narayanaswami or R. K. Narayan is considered to be one of the most respected authors on Indian middle-class life in the twentieth century. Narayan built a miniature image of South Indian society by moving his fictional town of Malgudi and described all its trends, contradictions and social structures that are similar throughout the years in such an uncomplicated way. This paper will discuss three of Narayan's major novels, *The Dark Room* (1938), *The English Teacher* (1945), and *The Painter of Signs* (1976), that describe the issue of patriarchy and oppression of women. Through these works, we are able to know about the continuation of male domination and the gradual change in the role and duties of women in the traditional Indian families and the society where Narayan has written for almost forty years of his career. The writings of Narayan also show a deep understanding of the patriarchal

institutions that defined Indian social and familial life, especially before and after the independence of the country.

Patriarchy is a social system that supports male dominance and female subjugation in numerous legal, economic, cultural, and psychological ways. Narayan fiction offers a detailed description of the influence of these bigger systems on the routine life of everyday individuals, although it is unnecessarily explicitly political. Female characters are often peripheral in his storylines, demonstrate how women compromises under highly patriarchal conditions.

## **The Dark Room: The Architecture of Domestic Oppression**

*The Dark Room* is the second novel by Narayan, and it is the simplest and the most direct one that he offers on the subject of marital patriarchy and women's oppression. The

story is about the role of a devoted mother and wife (Savitri) in a dictatorial and selfish marriage with Ramani. The title "*The Dark Room*" is an extremely powerful metaphor for the existence of Savitri and it represents the emotional and physical darkness that surrounds her in a family dominated by men. The protagonist Savitri's situation of subordination is reflected in her conversation with her husband, Ramani. "What a dutiful wife! Would rather starve than precede her husband. You are really like some of the women in our ancient books" (Narayan 11). This articulates the ideology of the patriarchy directly upon her. Ramani is the figure of the traditional patriarch that upholds the power through social status, emotional blackmail, and a monetary supremacy. Being the primary provider, he has absolute control over the family decision-making, the family finances, and the emotional atmosphere of the household. His attitude toward Savitri proves the prevalence of cruelty towards women in their married life. The dilemma that Savitri finds is an indication of how women are restrained in such unions in different ways. She has no financial ability to support herself; her identity is purely the roles of a wife and mother to society, and psychologically, she has adopted the merits of selflessness and faithfulness that the religious and cultural traditions promote. Ramani mocks her looks and makes comparisons with the young women, especially his office secretary, whom he develops feelings for. Ramani shows off to Savitri how handsome he is to another girl, and on the one occasion when he invites her to their own house it is a big embarrassment for Savitri.

The economic weakness of Savitri is clearly shown as when she escapes she does not have any money, skills, or social contacts outside her husband, so she is unable to take care of herself. Even considers drowning herself, demonstrating her helplessness. Her male companion Gangu, who wants to help her and feels like she is sharing her problem, tries to help her but in the end takes her to Ramani which is not a solution but a sign of being a failure. "What despicable creations of God are we that we can't exist without a support. I am like a bamboo pole which cannot stand without a wall to support it..." (Narayan 146). This is said by Savitri after attempting to run away and realizing society has no place for a woman alone, Savitri is forced to return to her subjugation, accepting it as the only way to survive. This makes *The Dark Room* so fascinating: Narayan does not give easy solutions or happy endings. The final part of the novel is intentionally vague and unreserved. Narayan introduces the idea of patriarchy as a system that is comprehensive and in which women find it hard to escape in practice (some of today's Indian books may also adopt social reform or education as a way by which women can

rise to conquer the dominance over them). *The Dark Room* in the title is not merely a refuge of her home but also the symbol of the prison of larger society, which is patriarchal and which she cannot escape. She ended up there, lying, this indicates that she seems like a woman whose soul has been squashed and who has resigned to her natural subservience.

### ***The English Teacher: Idealization and the Burden of Perfection.***

*The English Teacher* was published seven years after *The Dark Room*. It presents a different picture of marriage, but it still shows the hidden effects of patriarchy. In this novel, patriarchy appears in a form of "benevolent patriarchy". In this patriarchy men hold power and make decisions, but they do so in a caring and protective way. Susila's identity is closely connected to her husband, Krishna. She sees her role mainly as a wife and mother. She does not imagine a life or purpose separate from her family. Even when she becomes seriously ill, she does not focus on her own fears or needs. After her death, Susila is remembered as an ideal and pure person rather than a complete individual with her own identity. She is shown as the perfect wife—beautiful, loyal, caring, and never demanding. Her main role is to support her husband and family. The novel presents femininity according to traditional patriarchal values. Most details about Susila are connected to Krishna and their daughter. She is not shown with personal interests, dreams, or goals outside family responsibilities. The novel treats this not as a problem but as a virtue and a sign of true womanhood. When Susila moves to the city where Krishna teaches, her main aim is to make a happy home and to take care of their child. Patriarchy is also reflected in the way her illness and death are shown. Even while dying, she thinks more about her husband and daughter than herself. She worries about leaving her daughter alone as an orphan.

Although the novel shows deep love and sadness, it also reflects how patriarchy limits women to symbolic roles. Women are often seen mainly as good wives and caregivers instead of complete individuals with their own identity. The novel suggests that even loving relationships can still be shaped by patriarchal ideas. In *The English Teacher*, patriarchy does not always appear through cruelty or force. Instead, it works in quiet ways. Susila is expected to be patient, caring, and understanding. She never complains or demands anything for herself. Even in her death face, Susila plays the primary role of comforting Krishna to help him grow spiritually and console him. This image does not deny the fact that patriarchal ideology exists. *The English Teacher* is important to understand the attitude towards marital love, which is evident in the description of patriarchy voiced by Narayan as soft. Susila

can be a perfect wife only because she does not have personality beyond her domestic chores or wish that might clash with her husband. Subordination may be devotion, domesticity, and acceptance of limits.

### **The Painter of Signs: Modernity and the Precarious Survival of Gender Hierarchies.**

The Painter of Signs, written in 1976, shows a much different social scene. Daisy is the example of the new woman of the independent India-educated, professionally competent, devoted to social problems, and not willing to follow the traditional role of a woman. Daisy, a female character who appears in the story in a modernizing India, is not like Savitri or Susila. She works as an educated person who believes in family planning and social service. She goes around the villages, educates, and supplies contraception, and she works with a family planning organization. Narayan provides the argument on the existence of patriarchal ideas despite the changing social roles of women using the relationship between Daisy and Raman. Raman is the protagonist and works as a painter of signboards. Her commitment to her work is over and above the traditional expectations in marriage and housework. The initial conflict between her professional and traditional marriage life shows up when Raman falls in love with her and proposes to her to get married. Daisy never thought that she will ever quit her career and live a domestic life.

But the description of Daisy by R.K Narayan is multi-dimensional and partly ambiguous. Even though they are allowed for the agency, education, and professional dedication that the female characters did not have earlier, but they still have some limitations. Her devotion to family planning is portrayed with irony; she is so sincere that she seems humorless, overzealous, and, to some extent, without a warm heart to take care of her husband and give birth to children, not to take independent employment. Raman becomes attracted to the independence and unique personality of Daisy, but after engagement, Raman wants her to be obedient to the traditional norms. He believes that their needs and wants must be considered first before her duties. Daisy continues to work and does not look after Raman for a long period of time. He desires to subordinate her. He sees marriage not as a partnership of equals, but wants to reduce her independence to fit the traditional mold of a wife. The traditional patriarchal view is that a wife must accompany her husband, support him, and give birth to children. This portrayal silently subverts the critique of conventional gendering. The reaction of Raman to Daisy shows that the expectations of the patriarchy remain alive even amongst progressive and modern men.

Loss and uncertainty are also found at the end. Daisy's decision is shown as a major sacrifice. She is unable to find companionship, love, and a family. The novel suggests that it can be difficult for women to balance professional goals and personal satisfaction. These ideas are shown in a traditional and old-fashioned way and gives importance and sympathy to such views. The novel does not imagine a situation where a man fully supports his wife's independent career, or where marriage and a woman's professional goals can grow together through understanding and compromise. Raman's aunt is an important character in the novel. She represents traditional values and beliefs. Her authority in the family is accepted without question. As a result, the novel shows concern about changing roles of women in society. At the same time, it accepts that these changes are practical and important. It also raises questions about how such changes may affect traditional social systems.

### **Comparative Analysis: Continuity and Change.**

Economic dependence is shown as one of the main reasons for women's oppression in all three novels. In these texts, marriage becomes the important arena where patriarchal power is exercised. Even the independence of Daisy owes to her situation as a working woman, and her freedom is because she chooses not to marry. *The Dark Room* presents marriage as a form of control and repression. Husbands are shown as having strong control over their wives' lives, including their emotions, choices, and even their bodies. Even though marriage seems to be a benevolent factor in *The English Teacher*, the wife is, however, in total dependency on the needs and development of her husband. *The Painter of Signs* believes that the career and marriage of a woman cannot be combined and must be sacrificed to the other. The main cause of the failed escape of Savitri is that she has no money; Susila does not wonder why she was financially dependent on anyone, as she considers it to be a normal situation.

Nevertheless, these novels also have major differences that depict the changing historical settings. She managed to divorce without becoming totally poor or impoverished, and that is a sign of success, albeit in a limited way. In *The Painter of Signs*, the career and marriage of a woman are incompatible and have to be sacrificed in totality to the other. Major changes in the Indian society that include independence, more education opportunities for women, more employment opportunities, urbanization, and exposure to diversity of value systems can be marked in the transition from *The Dark Room* to *The Painter of Signs*. The character of Daisy is educated, employed, devoted to social reform, and opposed to traditional marriage.

However, Narayan carefully presents these patriarchal structures in the novels. His view seems mixed and uncertain. He criticizes the harsh effects of patriarchy but is also unsure about other alternatives. At the same time, he understands women's oppression while still valuing traditional social systems. *The Painter of Signs* suggests that women may find it difficult to balance career and marriage. The novel presents them as choices where one may need to be sacrificed for the other. Even though Daisy is educated and independent, she still faces patriarchal pressure. Narayan allows Daisy to make her own decisions. However, her freedom also comes with emotional loneliness and social distance. This suggests that independence may have personal costs.

### **The Role of Tradition and Modernity.**

Most important things that Narayan did in his portrayal of the patriarchy is that he used tradition and modernity to relate gender in defining relationships. Tradition serves almost completely as the means of oppression in *The Dark Room*. Even such aspects that may be regarded as progressive, such as English education and office work, fail to liberate Ramani but, on the contrary, provide him with new forms to express his dominance as a male. Social expectations, culture, and religious doctrines are all used to make Savitri stay submissive. The book depicts tradition as a weight that limits the freedom and enjoyment of people instead of presenting any positive sides of the tradition. The time of all three books is the time when the society was changing greatly. *The English Teacher* took place in the freedom era, *The Dark Room* in the late colonial era, and *The Painter of Signs* in the post-independence years. All these novels deal with the conflict between traditional values and modern ideas in different ways. The novel suggests that tradition, especially spiritual values, can help people face problems of life. However, it ignores the fact that these same traditions can also make women subordinate. Instead of questioning this issue, the novel seems to support it. It presents a wife's devotion and self-sacrifice as something noble and spiritually meaningful.

*The English Teacher* presents a more complex relationship with tradition. Krishna finds comfort and meaning through Indian spiritual philosophy. However, this spiritual tradition does not question the existing gender roles shown in the novel. *The Painter of Signs* directly shows the conflict between tradition and modern ideas, especially in gender roles. Although Daisy's dedication to her work is admirable, the novel suggests that rejecting traditional values may leave a person feeling alone. Daisy represents modernity. She is educated, independent, employed, and committed to social reform. She does not want to be tied to a traditional marriage.

However, society's patriarchal mindset still puts pressure on her through social expectations. Daisy is judged according to traditional ideas of womanhood. Raman's aunt represents traditional values. She believes women should focus on household duties and support their husband.

### **Psychological Aspects of Subordination.**

Narayan's novels transcend the social structures and institutions to look at the internalization of patriarchy in terms of psychology. Savitri in *The Dark Room* has been trained that being a good wife means sacrificing and serving. A woman is judged by the quality of service she is giving to her husband and children, and her needs and wants are not as important. She first reacts to Ramani's words by blaming herself for the wrong gone things and how she has failed to execute her role as a wife. Her self-blaming shows the degree of her internalization of patriarchal concepts, how that impacts desire and thought, and how it can be replicated and challenged, in the psychology of the individual. This psychological aspect is one of the best examples of Savitri in *The Dark Room*. The internalization process is evidenced by Savitri, who earlier embraces her inferior status.

The novel is a psychological progression of her embracing the world, rebelling against it, and finally falling into despair. Whenever she does lose it, it is justified and fierce, but also a consequence of being mentally drained and bearing the burden of having no other identity or purpose or place rather than family duties. She is aware of the injustice and cruelty of Ramani. The physical and psychological struggle to release herself from the internalized subjection she has undergone is her wish. However, the book shows how challenging this form of psychological resistance is to maintain in the event that the necessary social and financial support is lacking. At last, it is not only the pressure of the outside world that makes Savitri come back, but she herself realized that she does not have any existence without her husband and planned to come back.

The psychological aspects of patriarchy in *The English Teacher* are less marked, although they are equally important. The degree of internalization in Susila instead of the torturous acceptance of Savitri is more realized through the satisfaction with her limited world. As an indication of her spiritual development, this total identification is represented in the novel as admirable. It is a symbol of the utmost submission to the point of feeling like freedom with restrictions being tolerated as a fulfillment. Apparently, Susila has no personal life issues to deal with in the conflict between personal desires and

social norms since she has fully accepted her roles both as a wife and a mother.

The psychological aspects of patriarchy in *The Painter of Signs* are shown through the thoughts and expectations of Raman and Daisy. As in beginning Raman has feelings for Daisy. At that time he admires her a lot, but after their engagement his expectations changed, he wants her to be a traditional wife. Daisy also faces psychological pressure due to patriarchal social roles even after being educated and independent.

### Silence and Voice

The quietness of female characters is the characteristic of these novels. Although Savitri is a viewpoint character in *The Dark Room*, the narrative description is more about her inner world rather than direct speech or thoughts. Moreover, the stillness of his female characters can also attract attention to the challenge of representing the representatives of the opposite gender, in addition to the reflection of real social conditions. Susila does not tell us much in *The English Teacher*, but the memories and observations of Krishna give us most of the information about Susila. This same theme of silence is the echo of historical situations when the voice of women was often stifled and their opinions neglected, and their lives were almost not written even in the patriarchal nations. Daisy in *The Painter of Signs* is even more eloquent than the other two characters, but she still has little trouble coming up with the expression of her innermost feelings and motivations. Nevertheless, it also raises some doubts about the control of the narrative and the way the characters are represented. Narayan is a male author whose primary presentation is in terms of male thinking; it is therefore natural that the female experiences are explained in terms of male thinking.

### CONCLUSION

The male dominance shown in all three selected novels by R. K. Narayan reflects the strong control of patriarchy in Indian society. These novels show that patriarchy is not only caused by cruel men or weak women. It is also connected to social systems, religion, culture, economy, and personal beliefs. Through the lives of Savitri, Susila, and Daisy, Narayan presents different ways women respond to patriarchy. Savitri suffers in silence, Susila sacrifices herself, and Daisy tries to gain freedom. However, all of them face pain, struggles, and limitations. Narayan also shows that patriarchy affects women in many ways. Even kind and caring men, such as Krishna, may unknowingly support women's oppression. At the same time, educated and independent women also

struggle to escape social pressure and traditional expectations.

Narayan's treatment of these issues also has some limitations. He often presents events from a male point of view. Sometimes, he portrays independent women in a satirical way and shows attachment to traditional values. This makes his criticism of patriarchy more complex. Overall, these novels clearly show how patriarchy works in everyday life. It shapes people's thinking, limits women's opportunities, and affects their freedom. The novels also show how women resist, adjust, and survive under patriarchal control. Narayan highlights gender inequality and encourages readers to think about the need for a more equal society.

### Scope for further research

This study discusses patriarchy and subordination of women in *The Dark Room*, *The English Teacher*, and *The Painter of Signs* written by R.K. Narayan. Future researchers may consider the persistence of marginalization of women's voices and the analysis of the exclusion of women in the right to be heard and express themselves independently in narratives. Future researchers may also study the limited freedom and role of women in English literature. Such studies may help in better understanding gender inequality and the struggles faced by women in both literature and society.

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