



Trapped in the Dark Room: A Study of Female Subalternity in R.K. Narayan's Patriarchal Landscape

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Abstract: This paper examines the character of Savitri in R.K. Narayan's, 'The Dark Room' as a powerful representation of the marginalized subaltern woman, subdued by a rigidly patriarchal and socio-economically oppressive system. Through Savitri's emotional and psychological journey, the novel highlights the silencing, erasure, and economic dependence experienced by women in pre-independence India. Drawing upon subaltern theory and feminist critique, this study explores how Narayan subtly probes the societal structures that enforce gendered subjugation and internalized confinement, while also illuminating the inherent limitations of resistance within a deeply traditional framework.

Key Words: Subaltern, patriarchy, marginalization, Savitri, R.K. Narayan, The Dark Room, feminism.

1. INTRODUCTION:

R.K. Narayan's, 'The Dark Room' (1938) is one of the earliest Indian English novels that foregrounds the domestic and psychological torment of a middle-class Indian woman. Set in the fictional town of Malgudi, the novel portrays the life of Savitri, a submissive housewife whose identity is entirely constructed by the patriarchal norms that bind her. Her role as wife and mother exists within a socially endorsed framework that leaves little room for individuality or economic agency. This paper argues that Savitri is representative of the subaltern female whose voice is stifled by the dual forces of domestic patriarchy and broader socio-economic marginalization.

2. DISCUSSION:

Theoretical Framework: Subaltern and Feminist Perspectives

The term "subaltern," popularized by Antonio Gramsci and later expanded by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, refers to those who are socially, politically, and geographically outside the hegemonic power structure. Spivak's seminal question, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" is relevant in analyzing Savitri, whose sporadic attempts to assert her voice are often ignored or trivialized (Spivak 287). Feminist theorists such as Simone de Beauvoir and Judith Butler further illuminate how gender roles are culturally constructed and maintained, often making it difficult for women like Savitri to articulate resistance meaningfully.

Savitri's Subalternity and Domestic Confinement

Savitri's life revolves around her husband, Ramani, and their children. Ramani is emblematic of the authoritative patriarch—emotionally detached, morally indifferent, and professionally successful. His dominance is normalized within the domestic sphere, while Savitri's submission is expected and normal. Her retreat to the dark room is both literal and symbolic. It is a space of emotional exile, where her suffering is privatized and rendered invisible. As Narayan writes: "She went into the dark room and sat huddled on the floor. That was the only place where she could weep without being noticed" (Narayan 45). The dark room becomes a metaphor for the psychological imprisonment of the subaltern woman who cannot voice her grief publicly.

Economic Dependency and the Illusion of Escape

Savitri's brief act of rebellion—leaving home and seeking solace in a temple—is thwarted by her economic vulnerability. She cannot sustain herself in the outside world, which is equally indifferent to her plight. Narayan describes how the temple priest initially shelters her but soon grows exhausted of her presence. Ultimately, she is



compelled to return home, her act of defiance collapsing under the weight of social expectation and financial dependency. This return underpins Spivak's argument that the subaltern woman's attempt at self-expression is often unrecognizable or unsustainable in the structures that subjugate her.

Narayan's Ambiguous Critique

While Narayan's narrative is largely non-polemical, it does subtly critique the socio-cultural norms that confine women. He does not offer Savitri any grand emancipation; instead, her return to the household is portrayed with a sense of resignation rather than triumph. Her internal awakening is acknowledged, but it leads to no material change in her situation. This aligns with the reality of many Indian women whose awakening to oppression does not guarantee liberation.

3. CONCLUSION :

Through the character of Savitri in *The Dark Room*, R.K. Narayan offers a poignant exploration of the subaltern female experience in colonial India. Savitri's marginalization is not just a result of patriarchal authority but also of economic powerlessness and cultural expectations. Though her moment of resistance is significant, its failure underscores the complexity of subaltern identity—a complexity rooted in intersecting axes of gender, class, and voice. In this way, *The Dark Room* remains a critical text for examining the limitations of female agency in a patriarchal setup, while also serving as an early example of feminist consciousness in Indian English fiction.

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