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Literary Research Paper

# WOMEN SUBJUGATION IN R. K. NARAYAN'S *THE GUIDE* AND *THE DARK ROOM*

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**Abstract**

This literary article explored the subjugation of women based on the idea of the sexual politics and other female issues. R. K. Narayan's novels *The Guide* and *The Dark Room* involve the story of multiple female characters as the representatives of Indian women. Both the novels have reflected the struggles that women go through while dealing with the suppression and mistreatment inflicted upon them by society and family. A qualitative approach was used for the progression of the study.

**Keywords:** Subjugation, dominance, patriarchy, discrimination

## 1. Introduction

The subjugation of women has been the core concept of many literary works. Literature can depict the actual status of women in a particular society. In *The Guide* and *The Dark Room*, R. K. Narayan deals with several female characters and has sketched them as the representatives of subjugated women in Indian society. R. K. Narayan portrays his characters as they are in real-life situations. Rosie, Raju's mother from The Guide and Savitri, Ponni from The Dark Room are some of the prominent female characters alongside others to be analyzed for the study. According to Merriam- Webster (n.d.), 'subjugation' comes from the Latin word 'jugus' which refers to the act of bringing under the yoke or control the way farmers control their cattle by means of heavy wooden yoke over their shoulders. Human civilization has progressed over time, but subjugation of human beings, especially of women still prevails. Millett (1969) proposes the term 'sexual politics' to assert that social indoctrination and economic inequality are the main factors for the subjugation of women in society. From childhood, women perform society's specified roles under patriarchal dominance and face economic discrimination. Over time, they accept these imposed roles as something logical and natural. At one point of time, these external forces create an internal response and women psychologically become impotent to raise their voice against injustices and submit themselves before men's authority and societal taboos completely. Therefore, examining the subjugation of women by exploring the identified factors in both novels was the study's general objective.

## 2. Literature Review

Modugula (2022) explores that the heroines of Narayan's novels are weak and fragile and known for their relationship with men. Narayan portrays a broad spectrum of Indian women. Narayan believes that men and women are complementary to each other. He did not start with equality but asked for equal opportunity in his writings. The characterization of women in *The Guide* evokes the idea of how Indian women think and act. Pushpanathan (2017) identifies Rosie character too challenging to be understood. She is presented as more of a dreamer than real. She fails to adjust

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herself to the dynamic forces of life. Her soul is injured by both her husband and lover. She is found to be a little indifferent to society; her real world is that of the inside. Tamizhmani and Sivalingeshwari (2018) have made the same observation about the character of Rosie. They assert that the character description of Rosie in *The Guide* is uncertain and is challenging to understand in nature and behaviour. Saikia (2020) describes patriarchy as a society where the supreme authority is vested in the hands of males of the family. Because of this, a hierarchical and hegemonic relationship is formed between two biological constructions. The submissiveness of women found in *The Guide* shows how a woman's strength or voice is tried to be killed. Eve and Poonkodi (2021) echo with Saikia in terms of overshadowing a woman's existence and explain the case of Velan's sister where her one decision brings about a change in the household. On the other hand, Raju's mother's inviting her brother to solve her family issue shows her being dominated by Raju and her brother. They hurry with her wedding without considering the reasons behind her denial or acceptance.

The research was also conducted on the female characters of *The Dark Room*. Tamizhmani and Sivalingeshwari (2018) illustrate that from the novel's inception, one can easily find that Ramani's wife has no influence in her household activities in 15 years of marriage. Other women characters presented in the novel are also differential and passive. It is portrayed in the novel how in Indian societies, women are to be disciplined under male dominance. Madhavaiah (2022) presents how Savitri tries hard for identity and freedom. But again, responsibility, the central characterization of Indian women according to social outlook, binds her back. Chaki (2019) also comes up with the same idea as Madhavaiah and states that Narayan has revealed the quest for identity by the principal female character. Savitri struggles to free herself from her monotonous existence but performs her duties as a loyal wife and loving, caring mother. Nevertheless, Savitri's darkroom is a metaphor that unveils the miserable condition of women and the oppression imposed upon them, according to Suganya (2013).

All these studies have attempted to discover the representation of women characters in both the selected novels and have found them as someone oppressed, suppressed in family and as well as in society. However, they have not addressed the root causes behind the such representation of women. Some of them have identified one or two factors but are not based on any particular theoretical ideas. This study aims at bridging this gap and discovers the underlying factors or aspects behind the representation of women as the subject of suppression or subjugation following specific theoretical ideas. This study would pave the way for further study of such texts written in the Indian context.

## 3. Methodology

The study has been conducted through content analysis and narrative-comparative method. The researcher has explored the textual analysis, critics" analysis through the reasoning, comparison and systematic analysis. The primary source has been the close reading of the texts *The Guide* and *The Dark Room* written by R.K.Narayan. The secondary sources have been the study materials from different literature article, research papers from e-journals, web links to gather information and prepare a credible paper.

## 4. Analyses and Findings

Marlowe's Faustus once said, "Was this the face that launched a thousand ships, and burnt the topless towers of Ilium? Sweet Helen, make me immortal with a kiss: Her lips suck forth my soul, see where it flies! Come Helen, come, give me my soul again.". These lines imply the idea that as if Helen were the only reason for Trozan war and she could change the entire course of time solely. Like this in *The Guide* Raju said 'My trouble would not have started but for Rosie' (8-9). Both statements depict how this patriarchal society views women and their roles. A patriarchal mindset can be found in this novel when Raju hoped Velan's sister would be 'uninteresting' (15) since he thinks women bring 'trouble in life' (15). Again, when Velan talks about his sister's disagreement with the wedding, he complains, 'these jewels were given by me, bought out of my own money, for she is after all my sister' (10). This presents how men take pride in providing for women. Such economic discrimination pushes women like Velan's sister to change their decision without having a chance to express their

feelings. Then the family as Velan's, whose primary focus is to get the daughter just married off, tends not to 'delay even for a second for the happy event.' (126). But they totally ignore the fact that it can be a happy event for them, not for the girl whose life will change. Again, this society sets some activities, and professions fixed for women as gender roles. The first impression of Raju's mother for Rosie after hearing she is a dancer reveals so. According to her, 'they (dancers) are all a bad sort' (62) since the Indian society allows women to pick up specified roles and professions and dancing is not included into those. Such imposed gender roles build up a strong force within a woman that she also starts to believe in those and confine herself within a fixed norm. That is why despite being an Economics graduate, Rosie felt a shame for her family background and married someone just to get rid of her shameful history. She fails to embrace herself for what she is. Consequently, she even accepts Marco's attitude towards her passion for dancing and leaves it as per his wish. However, Rosie could give up on her passion for dancing but not the desires for care, love, and affection. This desire of her makes her fall for Raju. For the very first time she is seen to do something on her own and stand for her happiness. Again, it did not last long since deep inside, she still carried her submissive nature and wept for her husband who always put her at the least priority. Rather she rebuked herself since she felt 'Is this right what I am doing? After all he has been so good to me.' (106). To her, his little good was too much to consider over her own plight since society wants the most compromising attitude from the part of women. When her affair with Raju made her husband leave her, this highly educated girl could not go alone and went to Raju for support. This sense of dependency is too much prominent in Indian women as it was not the case only with Rosie, Raju' mother also cannot function alone. She needed to call her brother while taking any action when Raju brought Rosie home. Moreover, women's psychological submission hits the most when Rosie gets insulted repeatedly at Raju's home but does not utter a single word of protest. Later on, when Rosie flourishes in terms of fame and money, she possesses no control over her own finances. Her submissive mindset lets her continue to depend on Raju until he cheats her. Furthermore, in this novel, the strike of patriarchy does not end with Marco and Raju exposes himself as a flag bearer of patriarchal attitude. He at one-point takes pride how 'I (Raju) issued commands and directions to Rosie' (149) and she obeyed him. His authoritative attitude is more exposed when he disliked that Rosie could also be happy with others. He even declared 'she was my (Raju's) property' (168). Here Raju objectified Rosie. He wanted her to be happy 'but only in my (Raju's) company' (169). Raju's such mentality and attitude towards women ultimately made it possible for him to carry out the act of forgery with Rosie. However, ironically, Raju's cheating could not break the castle of Rosie's psychological submissiveness, and she tried her all to set Raju free rather than make him repent for his wrongdoings. After the forgery incident, the same Rosie was ready to go back to Marco even at the cost of leaving dancing again as she lost Raju and felt the need for another man for support. Patriarchy, economic discrimination, societal values have worked as variables behind the submissive expression of women characters in the novel. Whether it is Rosie or Velan's sister or Raju's mother, each was under the radar of patriarchy, faced economic discrimination and, while carrying out their gender roles, became the subject of subjugation.

'And Krishna's classroom jokes and the various ways in which he tormented his monitor; nobody was in a mood to question why the monitor, a perfectly timid and harmless man, deserved this treatment' (17), Narayan's this line from his novel *The Dark Room* can be deciphered as an indication towards his intention of revealing how and why women are tormented in Indian society. The way Krishna's acts have not been questioned, likewise men's unjust actions against women are also never brought under scrutiny. A dominating husband Ramani, always takes pride in being the family's only breadwinner. However, he ignores that his wife Savitri makes this earned bread eatable. Contrary, he feels superior to her since he believes 'it is none of a woman's business' (1) even if it is any affair related to her child or household. Savitri holds no authority over her own household even after 15 years of marriage and exclaims 'she had not the slightest power to do anything at home' (5) as power comes with money in Indian society. In addition, an economically dependent wife is expected to be a dutiful wife despite any unjust act of her husband. This has been the role society has fixed for women.

To perform this role of a dutiful wife Savitri needs to wait for her husband for dinner regardless the fact that Ramani never appreciates her effort rather takes it for granted always. However, this concept of gender roles starts to form within a woman from childhood. Savitri's little daughters are examples of this. These little children even knew what the work of girls is and what the work of boys was. They could not let their brother Babu deal with their dollhouse since they believed it was not boys' work. They rebuked him for doing so and asked 'Are you a girl to take a hand in the doll business? Go and play cricket. You are a man' (21). They were taught girls will only play with dolls and boys will play cricket. That is how society implants specified gender roles in the mind of even little children. Again, Ramani instructs Kamala not to 'shuffle your (Kamala's) feet while walking' (26) since society wants women to be timid and soft. All these behavioral patterns create a paradigm within women and they start to take every act of men as something justified. Janamma expands this idea more by stating, 'Men are impetuous. One moment they will be all temper and the next, all kindness. Men have to bear many worries and burdens, and you must overlook it if they are sometimes unreasonable' (33) when Savitri shares her concerns with her. One may think such discriminatory attitudes are shown to those women who are not economically dependent and less educated. But ironically, it is the truth for ambitious women as well. People like Ramani believe 'Women would in no way add to the profits of the company, though they added considerable color to the office on the days when they were present' (35). According to them, women are mere objects at work places. The educated woman, Shanta Bai's struggle for being economically dependent makes her realize how in Indian society 'It is all nonsense to say that women's salvation lie in education. It does not improve their lot; it leaves them as badly unemployed as the men' (36). It clearly depicts the society always favors men and advocates for no woman. If it did, then neither Shanta Bai would face discrimination nor Savitri would blame herself for the adultery-like offence that her husband made. Just as Krishna's every act has been perceived as justified, men's every action is also justified in this society and women's feelings are nullified. Nevertheless, in the later phase, Savitri tried to escape this social taboo against women and stand for her dignity. She left home because her husband was unwilling to get out of his extramarital affair and went out for a new meaning in life. But the submissive nature grown from the inception of life does not let one taste freedom. Despite availing a stable job and shelter with the help of Ponni she was not sure enough of her decision. She was furious upon the epiphany 'What a despicable creation of God are we (women) that we cannot exist without a support. I am like a bamboo pole which cannot stand without a wall of support' (98). This epiphany was not just a mere thought of her, but an amalgamation of psychological insecurity, guilt for not performing her duties as a loyal wife, not being a caring mother. All these complex and mixed emotions made her homesick. She yielded to her submissive nature and returned home. But this time not to her home, but to Ramani's. She returned to a house, not a home, since she exclaimed, 'A part of me is dead' (108). Her insecurity, mental state, social expectations, and patriarchal dominance killed her dignity. Savitri, her daughters even Shanta Bai are all victims of this patriarchal society, men's authoritative nature and get to submit themselves before society's expectations even if it means strangling their dignity and happiness.

Whether Rosie from *The Guide* or Savitri from *The Dark Room*, women have been the subjects of subjugation in both novels. Economic discrimination prevailed throughout the plot development of these novels. Rosie or Shanta Bai like educated women, or Savitri like homemakers each had to rely on someone, specifically on men for getting a job, managing finance, or running the home. Women are shown to depend on men for security and economic purpose and cannot go alone without the support of a man. Again, the treatment towards adultery was always in favor of men in both texts. However, in *The Guide* a woman was involved whereas in *The Dark Room* a man. In *The Guide* Rosie gets involved in adultery, providing her husband's indifferent attitude. Marco's attitude, desire for love, and affection drove her to such action. Here, neither adultery nor Marco's attitude can be justified. But society and even Rosie blames only herself. Rosie overlooked how her feelings were repeatedly hurt and only cared for hurting her well-behaved husband. Also throughout the novel, Marco never showed any remorse over his wrong actions. In fact, society does not take the emotional needs of women into consideration. If a man provides food and shelter for his wife only, he makes a perfect husband.

On the other hand, Savitri, who performs her duties as a loyal, dutiful wife, also gets cheated by her husband. However, in contrast to Rosie and Marco's case, Savitri does not get any sympathy; instead, she is held responsible for this. She criticizes her for not being good enough to entice her husband. Both novels show how patriarchal influence and social wrong values ignore the unjust action of men and always put women under charge. Nevertheless, the final resolution of Rosie and the character of Ponni come up with a spectrum of hope. This echoes the idea of Modugula (2022) that Narayan does not dictate but instead pictures a gradual change. The way Rosie, at last, went on her own or Ponni had equal control of her households shows women are subjugated due to the absence of proper social values and their own psychological strength. If society changes its outlook and women start to take a stand for themselves, then they will be able to get out of the men's dominance like Rosie and have an equal stature as men like Ponni.

## 5. Conclusion

This study depicts women's unequal and unjust stature at home, at the workplace, and in society. R. K. Narayan has introduced the concepts of patriarchal dominance, economic disparity, the social outlook for women, and the psychological turmoil of women while dealing with all these unjust phenomena of society. These phenomena put women into odd situations and make them struggle to the extreme. From birth to death, they ought to go through several trials and need to make others happy, even if it makes them unhappy. Raju's Mother, Savitri, represent the homemaker, less-educated, and Rosie, Shanta Bai, represent the educated, earning group of women. Regardless of their dedication, loyalty, education, and economic independence, they fail to escape the clutches of patriarchy and suffer. Only self-discovery and psychological freedom can lead them to have a life worthy to live to the fullest.

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