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The Epic Blueprint versus The Modern Plight: Mythological Morality in RK Narayan's *Dark Room*

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Abstract

In *The Dark Room* (1938) R.K. Narayan inscribes socio-cultural, mythological and linguistic concerns of 1930s India. Situate the text within the paradigms of classical Hindu epics and Brahminical culture. The novel as a literary artefact: an analysis of form and style to gauge how novelistic structures mirror antiquated patriarchal stereotypes.

An investigation into the divergences and convergences of the original English text of *The Dark Room* and its two early translated renderings, by Savithri Ammal and V. Krishnaswami in Tamil and a discussion of how political nuance, ironic distance, and localized readability are modified by choice of words, idiom and orthography. The use of A.K. Ramanujan's ethnographic, feminist analyses of South Indian culture, of Meenakshi Mukherjee and Lakshmi Holmström's comparative and critical essays, alongside the critical interventions of modern post-colonial theoreticians to probe the home as both physical and metaphysical confinement, a space where patriarchal gender constraints intersect with issues of caste privilege, identity and disempowerment.

The exploration into the transfiguration of the female body from the domestic sulking room, through its journey to the river Sarayu and its ritualistic subversion; interrogating submersion as a Hindu mythological concept of cleansing and border transgression.



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Introduction: The Mythological Resonance of *The Dark Room*

R.K. Narayan's *The Dark Room* (first came out in 1938 in English) caught the imagination of the people in the region only after it made the transition from the original language to Tamil under the pen of two individual translators: Savithri Ammal and V. Krishnaswami. It so happened that going by information gleaned from the revered magazine *Anandha Vikatan* over the years, although it was Savithri Ammal who took on the Herculean task of translation, it was V. Krishnaswami to whom the credit for publishing and accolades went largely. What's arresting here – quite hauntingly so – is the resonance between the name of the first translator, the underpinning of classical Indian epics, and the novel's sufferer, its female protagonist. Cast any eye upon the lore that constitutes any edition of Indian mythology, and the name Savitri invariably shines brightly. She stands out as that one, relentless, legendary heroine in the *Mahabharata* who put a bold fight up with none other than Yama, God of Death, and brought her dead husband, Satyavan, back from the brink. Narayan's protagonist presents just the reverse: a deeply ironic, poignant and almost tragic version.

His Savitri may have mountains of inward self-respect but is rendered utterly crushed by external circumstances – that is, by destiny, material dependence, and domestic encapsulation. Her so-called act of domestic defiance itself unfolds itself as a deep heartache; she loses her domestic warfare against her husband, Ramani, and is barely able to save the faintest traces of human dignity, maternal autonomy, and home rights. Whereas the heroine of the epic out-smarts Death itself and snatches her spouse from the very jaws of oblivion, Narayan's flesh and blood heroine is trampled and crushed in the domestic, micro-political, Bourgeois, patriarchal life!

So, striking indeed is the vast gulf between the powerful goddesses of old tales and the stifling day to day existence of a twentieth century woman of India! The Paradox of Indian Identity and literary narratives. In his seminal "Is there an Indian



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Way of Thinking?" A. K. Ramanujan, explores a series of philosophical positions, raises annoying questions regarding whether a pan Indian mindscape exists.

By putting pressure upon the issues in various ways, Ramanujan brings out its fluid and contingent nature: "There was an Indian way of thinking; there isn't any more. If you want to know the Indian thinking, go to the old books and not the modern urban Indians. Go to the pundits, Vaidya's....; On the other hand: India never changes under its modern face Indian still thinking of the Indian Vedas". Now if we transpose the above socio-religious queries on the above cited argument on Indian literary tradition, then the identity problem with regards to R.K. Narayan looms large. Narayan's place in the global canon is secure, but his literary tradition is very controversial. Peel the superficial labels of success and one can discern layers and layer of conflicted hybridized selves: Born in Rasipuram, split between Mysore and Chennai, thinking in Tamil, and yet choosing the language of the colonizer for his narratives! Beneath all such designations, however, there lies a layer he guarded well without publicising in the interviews and yet managed to imprint it to a deeper layer of the text: namely his caste background. This sense of caste consciousness permeates the text landscape, whether it is in the geographical space of fictional malgudi, the rhythms of domesticity, the etiquette surrounding food habits, or the outer boundaries of the public city and the private dwelling.

An Encounter with the Novel *The Dark Room*

To engage with the text - conceived in a vernacular, local space but born in English – requires reading between the lines, as the foreign tongue often softens, muffles, or even disguises the blunt domestic violence through the smooth syntactical fabric of polished English, whereas entering into an early Tamil translation offers a constricted journey down a subterranean tunnel. Rather than expediting the narrative, the vernacularisation of the text peels away Narayan's irony-lined shell. The Tamil text itself is mired in an overwhelming register of jargon of specifically Sanskritized loan-words, often found within the Brahmin Agraharam (caste enclave) context of the time.



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The linguistic complexity and dense texture of the register become so overbearing that they threaten to shut off many readers with an affinity for a secular and modern sensibilities that appreciate Narayan's light-hearted style.

Scholarship has cut to the quick of this linguistic transformation, and Lakshmi Holmstrom, in the essay "The Dark Room in Tamil: The Translation Translated?", plainly states: "The translation cannot match Narayan's irony and spare narrative style, but it renders more closely the speech styles of some of the Tamil speakers, the shifting power positions between the characters and the book's cultural milieu." By pointing to "some of the Tamil speakers", Holmstrom is targeting, indeed, the speakers caught up within the hierarchical order of South India whose language practices enforce those hierarchies and reinforce those social differences. While some critics, intent on seeing Narayan as an early advocate for women's rights, point to a more progressive vision that might have accompanied the social-reform-inflected early 20th Century, Holmstrom's interpretation hints at the regional translator's attentiveness to those raw, stratified power structures below the surface. By shifting the text's affiliation from ironic irony to stark and heavy realities, the text's alignment changes.

Moreover, one can hardly ignore that Narayan spent part of his early career during the first half of the 1940s working for The Justice newspaper which aligned itself with the non-Brahmin/anti-caste Dravidian movement.

Regardless of these crosscurrents of progression, The Dark Room remained ultimately bound within its Orthodox Brahminical underpinnings. Juxtaposing the text against its translation we observe the collision of two worlds, Narayan's world using ironic distance for the comfortable, yet dissimulating surface while the regional translators lean towards the authentic, local social experience; notably, Narayan did nothing to deter any move that foregrounded these Brahminical textures more clearly to local readership. Story Outline and Spatial Hierarchies At the heart of The Dark Room is Ramani, an insecure and upwardly striving executive working for the British-owned Engladia Insurance Company. He dominates his household that consists of a subservient wife, Savitri, three children, and a strict social ordering that



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falls to pieces with his infatuation for his office typist, Shanta Bai, a wholly modern and liberated woman who is completely antithetical to Savitri.

When he carries out this deeply public and blatant act of seduction, humiliation overwhelms Savitri, a humiliation that she is then unable to redress in the face of his complete patriarchal indifference. So, Savitri engages in an act of rebellion that is as complete and radical as it is ultimately disastrous: she abandons house and family without so much as a coin to her name leaving behind her wealth and all of her possessions. Nevertheless, this rebellion collapses upon collision with reality: as she struggles to find financial footing as a single woman in society designed, from a modern, postcolonial perspective, to disenfranchise her, Savitri crawls back into that same marital household and withdraws into literally and metaphorically “dark room” wherein she once habitually retreats during minor family tiffs.

The story arc draws largely on existing Indian myths and epic structures, with its symbolic underpinnings directly rooted in those established works of myths. The writing career of RK Narayan began in honour of the day, Vijaya Dasami, following his mother’s decision, a day to invoke divine blessings upon his scholastic pursuits.

The town of Malgudi itself, locals report, rests upon the land consecrated by Lord Rama during his exilic jungle treks. As Meenakshi Mukherjee, in “Narrating a Nation,” writes “Narratives shape our culture as culture shapes our narratives and the relationship is so intimate that it is difficult to separate the two acts.” Because of Narayan’s embedded cultural conditioning, his unstated beliefs are the underlying infrastructure of his narrative, assuming that, implicitly, the reader too will validate these underlying tenets. When the modern and the postcolonial reader (with different, i.e. Modern) Feminist notions about female agency reads the narrative, however, he or she may be surprised by its conservative resolution, for while navigating Malgudi’s culturally mediated landscape, the reader navigates a culturally coded and traditional mapped view of South India.

In reality, the physical geography of Malgudi also reflects ancient Hindu traditions with caste being codified through layout of space; the elite Lawley



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Extension is physically separated by distance and the presence of a sacred boundary-- the Sarayu River-- from the stigmatized poor of Sukkur Village:

Spatial Segregation in Malgudi

In Lawley Extension, the affluent, high-caste elite live lives dictated by corporate schedules and bureaucratic order. On the flip side, Sukkur Village houses the working-class, untouchable underclass represented by the independent Ponni and her husband Mari a wandering tinkerer.

Even a casual reader can see how food and dress codes are weaponized to police these social borders. Inside Ramani's home, the children swallow their resentment along with their ritualistic portions of curd rice, a symbol of the cold rigidity of their domestic life. Meanwhile, when Mari tries his luck breaking into an empty house, his plunder amounts to nothing but a stale crust of bread and a bit of sour curd—the universal diet of the dispossessed.

The Ritualistic Waters of Sarayu: Suicide, Submersion, and Spiritual Purification

After a tumultuous departure from the claustrophobic walls of the house, Savitri arrives at the threshold of Malgudi - the Sarayu River. Distraught, deeply shaken to the core of her soul by Ramani's palpable remorse and absolute lack of regard, she walks towards the Sarayu, longing for utter oblivion, complete erasure. Savitri reaches her breaking point on the bank of the Sarayu: “Sarayu was flowing in the dark with subdued ramble.”..

“The last sensation that she felt was a sharp sting as the water shot up her nostrils...” (Narayan, 1938, p.121). However, in the mythical universe of Narayan's writings, this is no mundane suicide born of mere depression, rather, it's an intense and agonising cleansing ceremony, an act of spiritually ‘pure’ disintegration. In theological discourse, immersion in rivers is ritual death in its essence, an act of washing away earthly filth (snana), that cleanses and sanctifies, regenerating social strata. Since her marriage is riddled with the impersonal commerciality and transaction, Savitri



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perceives the Sarayu as more than just her final resting place; it is a space that can scrub off the impurities she has accumulated.

Theologian David Kinsley explains the 'theology' of such rivers; as: "Submersion in the sacred river is a return to the primordial womb of the cosmos; it simultaneously dissolves the individual's corrupted social identity and purifies the soul for its next cosmic iteration." (Kinsley, 1998, p.55). It is no coincidence that after her attempt to end her 'life' in the Sarayu - an aquatic death ritual reminiscent of Lord Rama's own 'Jal Samadhi' - Savitri is saved by Mari, a low-caste blacksmith. This particular instance of salvation across caste barriers is critical; in taking a dive into the Sarayu, she simultaneously purifies and regenerates herself via a process of limbo-like-death; yet at the same time, her physical return to 'life' comes as "She opened her eyes and found herself in a small room... She felt a severe pain in the chest and her body was cold." (Narayan, 1938, p.124). It signifies the unmaking and re-unmaking of her being; for: "The act of entering the river allows the Narayanean heroine to temporarily cast off the rigid vestments of caste and wifhood. The water purges her of her domestic contamination, even if the socio-economic realities of her world eventually necessitate a return to the shore." (Mukherjee, 2000, p.112).

So, in Savitri's experience, the Sarayu functions as a melting crucible; having effectively burnt away the dust of Ramani's betrayal from her spirit and leaving her detached from her conjugal delusions, it offers no alternative but to go back to her domestic cage, for "The act of entering the river cleanses her of contamination, for while the water allows one to escape one's worldly bonds, one cannot indefinitely inhabit the waters".¹¹⁷ Ultimately, despite this spiritual rejuvenation, Savitri is forced back to the same prison that induced her suicidal tendency in the first place. Back home, back to her 'husband', back to the exact scenario which compelled her to abort herself on the Sarayu. This retracing of her steps makes her suicidal endeavour the clearest illustration possible of scriptural constraints, showing us that not only are women ultimately made powerless and utterly dependent on men by ancient Hindu traditions, they have also internalized their subjugation, making it appear to be their ineluctable divine duty: "In childhood a female must be subject to her father, in youth



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to her husband, when her lord is dead to her sons; a woman must never be independent.” (Manu smriti, Ch.V, S.148).

With Savitri's defeat and return, the Author cleverly highlights not only scriptural subjugation but also internal subjugation: “The structure of Hindu patriarchy ensures compliance by rendering female dependence a spiritual virtue. The woman's absolute subordination to her husband is elevated to the rank of sacred dharma (duty), making any path of sustained secular rebellion an impossibility within her cultural epistemology.” (Chakravarti, 1993, p.57). Narayan demonstrates how these doctrines serve as an encumbrance that impedes all chances of women's liberation, how her life is intrinsically linked to the possession by some form of masculine control.

The Epic Tradition and the Choice of English

Narayan was acutely aware of his own reliance on such archetypal moulds. Considering the immense weight of the classic epics in Indian fiction he remarked “All imaginative writing in India has come from the ancient epics, from the Ramayana and the Mahabharata... Characters in the epics are prototypes and moulds in which all humanity is cast and remain valid for all time.” Writing in The Atlantic Monthly in 1953 he stated, ‘Indian literature itself... has always looked at life from a point of vantage outside it-to the ancient epics... They remain the corner stones of our literature... ‘There are so many stories, so much symbolism, so much imagery.

That’s where we should start...The heroes of the epics are remembered as individuals, but their part in the search for Truth ‘against the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune’ is more pervasive.’

It seems for Narayan, Rama and Sita were no mere distant, mythic figures, no statues for idol worship, but psychologically charged beings, models for present day behaviour... Savitri’s retreat into the dark room is not simply psychological disintegration, but a direct echo of Queen Kaikeyi’s retreat into the Krodhagar (the room of rage) in the Ramayana, thus confirming Narayan’s notion that all contemporary struggles were simply a restating of old mythical programmes.



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However, on a closer examination of the writer's linguistic preferences the irony of a postcolonial condition seems apparent. Having grown up in Tamil and spent years in Mysore conversing in Kannada, why has Narayan's written output been predominantly in English? Narayan's frequent explanation is the pervasive influence of British Colonial schooling which rendered him more comfortable with the Imported language.

He admits in his interview with Susan E. Croft "I've been reading and writing in English for many years."

Ironically, despite using the language of the coloniser Narayan contemptuously dismisses secularised, Western education, romanticising, as he does, the Sanskrit gurukul tradition - an intense twelve year course for the retention of memory and reflection - and mocking the western system of schooling as one designed to "rotting the brain, memorizing by rote, and vomiting information in the examination halls."

This is the ultimate contradiction in his literary career, utilizing a western, colonial apparatus to lament the decline of a rigidly hierarchic, ancient, mythic world. Critical Gaps in *The Dark Room: Gender, Space and Resistance* We can chart Savitri's spiral fall only by examining the domestic space of her life. The dark room is not a gratuitous piece of architecture, but a psychologized and gendering of domestic exclusion.

In the South Indian context, Iruttu Arai refers to spaces of female exclusion from the social gaze, for example, confinement during menstruation or childbirth or a prolonged spell of mourning.

When Ramani introduces Shantha Bai into his professional life he is enabling her into the public realm of money and agency – a sphere which remains wholly locked off from Savitri. Savitri's struggle disintegrates precisely because of her utter lack of economic independence. The moment she sets her foot outside the doorstep her utter vulnerability as a high caste woman lacking male protection becomes



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terrifyingly apparent. While characters like Ponni possess a raw, localised power born from the imperatives of daily labour, Savitri's privileged upbringing has conditioned her to conform to female decorum, rendering her return to the marital cell a chilling acknowledgement of how a single woman's will is subsumed within a rigid and oppressive family structure; and indeed, so is its starkest irony, home becomes the abusive chamber while the world beyond the door poses a threat of social death.

Conclusion

Raja Rao, Mulk Raj Anand and R.K Narayan constitute the golden “trio” on which the corpus of Indian fiction in English was sustained for close to four decades in the age of independence. Each in his own way strove to capture within his English idiom the pungent native perfume of Indian soil. In spite of the immense world reputation, they gained, Narayan, however, had a difficult time contending with the radical sentiments of his regional constituency in Tamil Nadu and Karnataka. In a scathing 1937 review of Narayan’s *The Bachelor of Arts in Manikodi*, the radical Tamil journalist Pudhumaipithan lashed out at the alienation of Narayan from his roots: “The English readership in England can applaud the success of Mr. R.K. Narayan for the novel in English, viz., *The Bachelor of Arts*. But alas! A well-received writer to English critics like Mr. E.M.Forster is a total stranger to the land of his birth. The expression that closest to the nature of men is to be done in a tongue closest to them Sri Narayan has done nothing more than to show our land through an Englishman’s perspective. I have deviated from my usual line in this solely with the intention that Sri Narayan be introduced to his own fellow countrymen”.

Indeed, critics such as Pudhumaipithan have argued, the internationally celebrated Narayan has writing from a sterile and distant centre – divorced as he was from the furious struggles around issues of language and caste which then raged in his neighbourhood – albeit Narayan has been fiercely faithful to the urban and English-educated middle class, who were comfortably positioned within the bounds of his genial safe irony. Indeed, the distinguished critic, Prema Nandakumar, identifies this precise regional lacuna: “We cannot pretend that the translation of *The Dark Room* into Tamil makes any appreciable difference either to the novel or to the



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writer... The novel in Tamil is a memorable delineation of the psychology of a typical housewife... It is a lucid poem in Tamil... The Indian writer in English is allowed to be 'Indian' in descriptions only.... He cannot reflect genuine Indianism in his timbre of writing." We are, nevertheless, forced to concede, this kind of neglect is not due to any deficiency or malignancy on Narayan's part but is a natural consequence of an intuitive creative outpouring – a writer can never create while constantly looking over his shoulder for future politico-linguistic censure - but the fact that the Tamil version did not seem to arouse any significant interest within his own region leads us to wonder who indeed it catered to - and whether its existence did not merely underscore the deep cultural divide separating his audience of Westernised elites from those who lived at home in their respective states .

Narayan's personal, casteist political stance aside, he offers a peculiar postcolonial coda in Nandakumar's concluding comment, which is as good as any answer we can ever hope to arrive at regarding Narayan's plight: "Is an Indian to write in English or in his mother tongue? Is he able to maintain authenticity in English writing? Are these questions never to cease?

They seem to fall away as trite...." The Dark Room remains a magnificent and woefully incomplete testament to this gridlock: the quintessential regional text forever encased in a foreign frame, whose ancient narrative references provide no relief to the protagonist who remains imprisoned in the iron bars of her gender and by an education which leaves her as a stranger in a strange land that, for better or for worse, continues to refer back to scripture for a basis of patriarchal legitimation. By demonstrating that her attempts at liberation lead either to the icy embrace of the ocean or a return to her desolate room, Narayan clearly illustrates the crushing power of scriptural discourse-that women's subordination is both the normative and ultimate destiny woven into the fabric of reality within this tradition'.

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