

Domestic Captivity and Female Agency: A Feminist Critique of R.K. Narayan's *The Dark Room* and *The Guide*

Nupur Sangwan, Research Scholar, Department of English Literature, Jayoti Vidyapeeth Women's University, Jaipur, Rajasthan

Dr. Suman, Associate professor, Department of English Literature, Jayoti Vidyapeeth Women's University, Jaipur, Rajasthan

Abstract

*This paper undertakes an analytical literary investigation into the representation of domestic captivity and the emergence of female agency in two novels by the Indian English novelist R.K. Narayan: *The Dark Room* (1938) and *The Guide* (1958). Employing a structured literature review of existing scholarship combined with close textual analysis, the study examines how Narayan constructs the home as a site of both confinement and, paradoxically, incipient resistance for his female protagonists, Savitri and Rosie. The paper situates these two novels within the broader trajectory of Narayan's engagement with what he himself termed the "Women's Lib" philosophy, and it interrogates the extent to which his fiction can be read as genuinely feminist, ambivalently feminist, or merely sympathetic without being emancipatory. Drawing on Western feminist theoretical frameworks — including the work of Simone de Beauvoir, Virginia Woolf, Kate Millett, and Elaine Showalter — alongside postcolonial feminist critiques by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Chandra Talpade Mohanty, and Partha Chatterjee, the paper develops a hybrid analytical model suited to reading Indian domestic fiction. The review of related research demonstrates a scholarly consensus that Savitri's rebellion is aborted and circular while Rosie's is sustained and transformative, though several critics dispute whether either trajectory constitutes authentic agency given the persistence of patriarchal structuring even in resolution. The paper concludes that Narayan's fiction charts an evolutionary, if incomplete, feminist consciousness — one in which domestic space functions simultaneously as prison and as the originary site from which resistance is learned. The study contributes to Indian English literary scholarship by offering a comparative framework for reading spatial confinement and female selfhood across Narayan's oeuvre, and it identifies gaps in existing criticism regarding the intersection of caste, the devadasi tradition, and gendered space that merit further research.*

Keywords: *R.K. Narayan, *The Dark Room*, *The Guide*, feminist criticism, domestic space, female agency, Indian English fiction, postcolonial feminism*

1. Introduction

Few Indian English novelists have received as sustained a critical readership as Rasipuram Krishnaswami Narayan, whose fictional town of Malgudi became, over more than five decades of writing, a microcosm through which the shifting textures of middle-class South Indian life could be observed. Narayan's reputation rests conventionally on his gentle irony, his humane

comedy, and his refusal of grand ideological pronouncement. Yet embedded within this apparently modest fictional universe lies a recurring and increasingly pointed interrogation of the condition of women within the Indian domestic order. Two novels in particular — *The Dark Room* (1938) and *The Guide* (1958) — stand at the beginning and the mature middle of Narayan's career respectively, and together they trace what many critics have identified as an evolving feminist consciousness in his work, moving from the claustrophobic domestic entrapment of Savitri to the eventual self-fashioned autonomy of Rosie/Nalini.

This paper takes as its central problem the relationship between domestic space and female agency in these two texts. Domestic captivity, as this study uses the term, refers not merely to physical confinement within the household but to the ideological apparatus by which the home is naturalized as woman's proper and exclusive domain, such that her subjectivity becomes legible only in relation to the roles of wife, mother, and daughter. Female agency, conversely, refers to the capacity of the woman character to act as a subject of her own narrative — to make choices, however constrained, that are not wholly determined by patriarchal expectation. The tension between these two poles is not merely thematic in Narayan's fiction; it is structural, spatial, and symbolic, embodied literally in the recurring image of the room, the hut, the temple, and the stage as sites where women are alternately confined and, occasionally, permitted to reinvent themselves.

The significance of this inquiry lies in its capacity to revisit a long-standing critical debate: whether R.K. Narayan can properly be called a feminist writer, a sympathetic chronicler of women's suffering who nonetheless withholds full endorsement of their liberation, or a novelist whose narrative structures ultimately reinscribe the very patriarchal order his plots appear to critique. Narayan himself, in his memoir *My Days*, offered an unusually direct statement of intent behind *The Dark Room*, describing his early absorption in "a philosophy of Woman as opposed to Man, her constant oppressor," and reflecting on how patriarchal society had assigned woman "a secondary place" with such subtlety that she herself lost "all notions of her independence, her individuality, stature and strength" [1]. This authorial self-positioning has become one of the most frequently cited passages in Narayan criticism, since it licenses — while also complicating — feminist readings of his fiction [2,3].

This paper does not treat that authorial statement as conclusive evidence of feminist intent; rather, it treats it as one data point among many to be weighed against the textual evidence of the novels themselves and against the accumulated body of scholarly interpretation. The paper's approach is therefore twofold: first, a structured review of existing literature on gender, domesticity, and agency in Narayan's fiction, in order to map the current state of scholarly consensus and disagreement; and second, an original analytical reading of *The Dark Room* and *The Guide* that draws on feminist and postcolonial feminist theory to advance a comparative argument about the trajectory of Narayan's female characters from captivity toward, if not full liberation, at least self-authored survival.

2. Research Objectives

The specific objectives of this study are as follows:

- To examine how domestic space is constructed in *The Dark Room* and *The Guide* as an instrument of patriarchal control over women.
- To trace the stages by which Savitri and Rosie each move from passive endurance toward active, if incomplete, assertions of selfhood.
- To synthesize existing scholarly literature on feminist and gender readings of these two novels in order to identify areas of consensus, divergence, and neglect.
- To apply Western and postcolonial feminist theoretical frameworks to produce a comparative analytical reading that accounts for the specifically Indian, middle-class, and caste-inflected character of Narayan's domestic settings.
- To assess the extent to which Narayan's narrative resolutions — Savitri's return to Ramani's household and Rosie's ascent as the celebrated dancer Nalini — represent authentic emancipation or merely a redistribution of dependency.

3. Research Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative, analytical literary research design combined with a structured (though non-PRISMA) literature review of secondary scholarship. Given that the object of inquiry is textual and interpretive rather than empirical or clinical, a formal systematic review protocol of the kind used in health or social sciences research is neither necessary nor appropriate; instead, the paper follows the convention, well established in literary and humanities scholarship, of a structured narrative review that identifies, categorizes, and synthesizes relevant criticism before proceeding to original close reading [4].

The literature search was conducted across academic databases, institutional repositories, and peer-reviewed journals of English literature and Indian writing in English, using search terms including "R.K. Narayan," "The Dark Room," "The Guide," "feminism," "Rosie," "Savitri," "domestic space," and "female agency." Sources were selected on the basis of thematic relevance to gender, domesticity, and agency in Narayan's fiction, and on the basis of their contribution to identifiable critical positions within this subfield. Both single-novel studies and comparative studies spanning Narayan's larger body of work were included, as were foundational theoretical texts in feminist and postcolonial feminist criticism that inform the analytical framework of this paper.

The analytical method proceeds in three stages. First, the paper reviews existing scholarship thematically rather than chronologically, organizing it around recurring critical questions: Is Narayan a feminist writer? How is domestic space gendered in his fiction? What is the nature and limit of his heroines' agency? Second, the paper undertakes close textual analysis of *The Dark Room* and *The Guide*, attending to spatial imagery, narrative point of view, dialogue, and plot structure as the primary evidentiary basis for its claims. Third, the paper synthesizes the findings of the literature review with its own textual analysis to produce a comparative argument about the developmental arc of female agency across the two novels. Throughout,

direct quotation from primary and secondary sources is kept minimal and brief, in keeping with standard scholarly practice of paraphrase and synthesis; where the exact wording of a critic or of Narayan himself is essential to the argument, brief quotations are used sparingly and cited according to the Vancouver numbered citation system.

4. Theoretical Framework

Reading Narayan's domestic fiction productively requires a hybrid theoretical apparatus, since neither a purely Western feminist framework nor a purely postcolonial nationalist framework alone can account for the specific texture of his novels. From Western feminist theory, this paper draws three key concepts. First, Simone de Beauvoir's foundational argument that woman has historically been constructed as the Other, defined always in relation to and in service of man, provides a lens for reading Ramani's and Marco's treatment of Savitri and Rosie respectively as instrumentalized companions rather than autonomous subjects [5]. Second, Virginia Woolf's insistence on the material and spatial preconditions of female selfhood — most famously articulated in her argument that a woman requires a room of her own and financial independence in order to create and to think freely — offers a productive frame for reading the recurring imagery of rooms, confinement, and enclosure in both novels, even as Narayan inverts Woolf's metaphor: the "dark room" in Narayan's novel is not a space of creative autonomy but its photographic negative, a space of enforced retreat [6]. Third, Kate Millet's theorization of "sexual politics," which identifies the family as the primary institution through which patriarchal power is transmitted and naturalized, underlies this paper's treatment of the Ramani household as a microcosm of the wider social order rather than an aberration within it [7].

However, a purely Western feminist framework risks flattening the specific cultural and historical conditions of colonial and early postcolonial South India. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's critique of the subaltern woman's silencing within both colonial and nationalist discourse cautions against reading Savitri's or Rosie's voice as transparently accessible or as straightforwardly emancipated once she speaks or acts; agency, in Spivak's formulation, must be read against the discursive structures that continue to constrain even the act of self-assertion [8]. Chandra Talpade Mohanty's critique of homogenizing "Third World women" as a singular category of victimhood further cautions against reading Savitri and Rosie as interchangeable instances of a universal patriarchal oppression, and instead calls for attention to the particular class, caste, and historical positioning of each character [9]. Finally, Partha Chatterjee's influential argument regarding the "nationalist resolution of the women's question" — whereby Indian nationalist discourse constructed the home as a spiritual, inner domain to be protected from colonial incursion, with women assigned as custodians of this inner, "spiritual" space even as men engaged with the outer, "material" world of colonial modernity — offers a historically specific explanation for why Narayan's domestic settings carry such ideological weight: the home in his fiction is not merely private but is charged with the symbolic burden of national and cultural authenticity [10]. Reading Savitri's confinement and Rosie's departure from domesticity through Chatterjee's framework allows this paper to argue that Narayan's fiction stages, in miniature, the broader colonial-era and early postcolonial anxiety about the proper place of Indian womanhood.

Complementing these frameworks, Gaston Bachelard's phenomenological account of domestic space as a repository of psychic experience — where the house is not a neutral container but an active shaper of the inhabitant's inner life — provides a useful vocabulary for analyzing the symbolic function of the "dark room" itself as at once refuge and prison [11].

5. Review of Related Research

5.1 The Question of Narayan as a Feminist Writer

The single most persistent question in the critical literature on Narayan's female characters concerns whether he can accurately be described as a feminist novelist at all, and scholarly opinion remains sharply divided. Dash and Panda, in an influential and frequently cited essay, argue affirmatively that Narayan's engagement with women's oppression, beginning with *Savitri* and culminating in the more assertive *Daisy* of *The Painter of Signs*, constitutes a coherent "Women's Lib" trajectory across his fiction, and that there is no ground to deny him the status of a feminist writer [2]. Their reading rests substantially on Narayan's own retrospective account in *My Days*, in which he describes *The Dark Room* as an early testament to the women's liberation movement and frames Ramani's household as representative of the orthodox Indian milieu in which a wife becomes "an ideal victim of such circumstances" [1]. This authorial testimony has proven a persuasive, if methodologically contestable, anchor for feminist readings, since it grants Narayan's fiction an explicit ideological intention that a purely formalist reading of the text alone might not yield.

Other critics, however, resist this affirmative labelling. Ruby's comparative study of *The Dark Room* and *The Guide* takes a more cautious position, noting that although Narayan never accepted the label of feminist for himself, his fiction nonetheless exhibits traits that "appeal to feminism" through its attentiveness to the marginalization, exploitation, and underestimation of women within both domestic and socio-economic structures [3]. This formulation — feminist in effect if not in avowed intent — recurs across much of the secondary literature and reflects a broader critical caution about applying an anachronistic Western political label to a mid-twentieth-century Indian novelist writing primarily within a realist, ironic, and often comic register. Uddin similarly argues that women are not central to Narayan's thought and that he does not advocate feminist politics in any programmatic sense, even as his female characters are persistently engaged in a search for identity and selfhood that runs as an undercurrent through his fiction [12]. Selvaraju's earlier thesis-length study of feminine consciousness across Narayan's novels likewise treats his female characters primarily as vehicles for exploring consciousness and interiority rather than as instruments of explicit feminist argument [13].

A third position, represented by Ghosh's book-length study, occupies a middle ground, arguing that while Narayan resisted overt ideological commitment, his sustained and evolving attention to women's aspirations across *The Dark Room*, *Waiting for the Mahatma*, *The Guide*, and *The Painter of Signs* constitutes what Ghosh terms a "feminist philosophy" that develops cumulatively across his oeuvre, moving the Indian woman character from orthodox subservience toward a modern, self-defining modernity [14]. This developmental reading is significant for the present paper's comparative approach, since it licenses the treatment of *The*

Dark Room and *The Guide* not as isolated case studies but as sequential moments in an unfolding authorial project.

5.2 Savitri and the Architecture of Domestic Confinement

Within the specific scholarship on *The Dark Room*, a striking consensus emerges regarding the symbolic centrality of domestic space to Savitri's characterization. Multiple critics identify the eponymous "dark room" itself as the novel's central symbol, a windowless storeroom in Savitri's house to which she retreats whenever her husband Ramani's tyranny, indifference, or infidelity become unbearable [15]. This room, critics agree, functions doubly: it is simultaneously the space of Savitri's silencing — a place where she disappears from the household's functioning economy — and the only space in the house that is unambiguously hers, a site of what one study describes as catharsis, permitting her to vent frustration that has no other outlet [15]. The paradox identified here is instructive: the very confinement imposed upon Savitri becomes, in embryonic form, the first space of refusal, since her retreat to the dark room constitutes a withdrawal of domestic labour and compliance, however temporary and however quickly reabsorbed into the household's routines.

Scholars examining the novel's portrayal of Ramani are largely unanimous in reading him as an archetype of unexamined patriarchal authority rather than a villain in any melodramatic sense. Analysis of the household dynamic notes that Ramani's household functions almost as a private autocracy, his volatile temper dictating the emotional register of the entire family, with his wife and children functioning as what one study memorably terms "enforced worshippers" of his moods [16,17]. Ramani's affair with his young employee Shanta Bai, and his casual indifference to Savitri's consequent humiliation, is treated by critics as the precipitating event that transforms Savitri's habitual, cyclical retreat into the dark room into an unprecedented act of departure from the house altogether — her flight toward the river, her rescue by the low-caste blacksmith Mari, and her brief period of self-supporting labour as a temple attendant [18].

It is at precisely this juncture — Savitri's attempt at economic self-sufficiency outside the marital home — that the critical literature registers its greatest disagreement. Several scholars read Savitri's brief period of independent labour and her ultimate return to Ramani's household as a "cynical conclusion," echoing the early and influential judgment of the critic K.R.S. Iyengar, who reportedly found Savitri's passive submission to her husband, following her failed bid for autonomy, artistically and morally unsatisfying [19]. Devi's comparative thesis on feminism in Narayan and Shashi Deshpande complicates this judgment, however, by situating Savitri's limited options within the historical realism of the 1930s: as a semi-literate woman with no independent means, Savitri's choices are genuinely and severely constrained, and her return is read not as capitulation but as the only economically rational course available to her within an unreformed patriarchal economy [19]. This debate between reading Savitri's return as narrative failure versus reading it as unsentimental social realism is, this paper contends, one of the most productive fault lines in existing scholarship, since it turns on differing expectations of what a feminist narrative resolution ought to look like.

A related body of scholarship draws attention to the secondary female characters in *The Dark Room* — Ponni, the blacksmith's independent-minded wife; Shanta Bai, Ramani's mistress and

a working, financially self-supporting woman; and the older Janamma — as offering a spectrum of alternative modes of womanhood against which Savitri's orthodox domesticity is implicitly measured. Analysis of these characters suggests that Narayan uses them to gesture toward possibilities of female self-determination that exist at the margins of respectable, upper-middle-class domestic life, even as the novel's central plot declines to grant Savitri access to them [17,20]. More recent scholarship extends this reading through the lens of subaltern studies, arguing that Savitri's defiance, read alongside the marginalized social positions of characters such as Ponni, mirrors a broader critique of gender dynamics within South Indian society that exceeds the immediate domestic plot and implicates caste and class hierarchies in the production of women's vulnerability [21]. This same body of scholarship also foregrounds the significance of Savitri's relationship with her children as a countervailing force that ultimately draws her back into the household, reading maternal attachment not as weakness but as a structurally reinforced obligation that the novel presents as psychologically and socially inescapable for a woman of Savitri's position [21].

5.3 Rosie and the Performance of Selfhood

The critical literature on *The Guide* diverges markedly from that on *The Dark Room* in its overall tenor, reflecting the more assertive and ultimately more successful trajectory of Rosie's arc. Multiple studies identify Rosie as one of the most fully realized and independently minded female characters in the whole of Narayan's fiction, and indeed in Indian English fiction of the period more broadly [22,23]. Scholars consistently emphasize the unusual combination of attributes Narayan grants her at the outset: she is formally educated, holding a postgraduate degree in economics; she possesses an inherited artistic gift in classical dance descending from her family's devadasi lineage; and she demonstrates, from her very first appearance, an unusual clarity and confidence regarding her own desires, memorably evaluating a prospective marriage proposal by frankly assessing her own attractiveness and articulating what she wants from a husband [22].

A significant strand of this literature examines Rosie's devadasi heritage as the crux of her social marginalization and, simultaneously, the source of her artistic authenticity. Critics note that Rosie's marriage to the archaeologist Marco represents an attempt at upward social mobility and respectability through marriage into an educated, higher-status milieu, but that Marco's coldness, his contempt for her art, which he regards merely as ignoble bodily display, and his prioritization of his archaeological research over any recognition of her personhood, renders the marriage a second, more genteel form of captivity that merely substitutes intellectual condescension for the physical mastery Ramani exercises over Savitri [24,25]. This comparative observation — that Rosie moves from one man's authority to another's, first Marco's and then Raju's — recurs throughout the literature and forms the basis of one of the most contested critical questions concerning the novel: does Rosie's ultimate success as the celebrated dancer Nalini represent genuine liberation, or merely a change of manager?

Scholarship addressing Raju's role in Rosie's career is notably more critical of him than of Marco in certain respects, even though Raju is initially responsible for recognizing and cultivating Rosie's talent. Analysis of the Raju-Rosie relationship demonstrates that as Rosie's fame and earnings grow, Raju increasingly treats her as a commercial asset, subjecting her to

an exhausting schedule of performances organized for his own financial benefit and eventually committing forgery involving her signature, an act that leads to his imprisonment [24]. This reading positions Raju not as Rosie's liberator but as a second exploiter whose management of her career reproduces, in a modernized, commercialized register, the same appropriative logic that structured Marco's marital authority over her. Yet other scholars caution against reducing Rosie to a purely passive object exchanged between men, pointing out that it is Rosie, and not Raju, who ultimately continues her professional dance career independently after Raju's imprisonment, and that the novel's final image of Rosie is of a woman who has, however imperfectly, secured an independent public identity and livelihood through her own art [22,26].

Perhaps the most theoretically significant recent contribution to this literature is the reinterpretation of Rosie's character against what its authors identify as a pervasive and unjust critical tradition of blaming her, rather than Raju or the surrounding patriarchal structure, for the novel's central moral catastrophe. This scholarship, employing both close textual analysis and empirical survey data on readers' perceptions, demonstrates that popular and even some scholarly interpretations continue to label Rosie an opportunist or a morally compromised figure, and it argues that this persistent misreading is itself evidence of how deeply patriarchal assumptions shape literary judgment, such that a woman's pursuit of artistic and economic independence is culturally coded as selfish ambition even when the same pursuit, undertaken by a male character, would be read as admirable self-realization [23]. This paper's own analysis, developed in Section 6 below, extends this line of argument by situating it within the broader postcolonial feminist critique of how female agency is disciplined through narrative and critical apparatus alike.

A further important strand of scholarship reads Rosie through the specific lens of the devadasi tradition and its complex, contested position within colonial and postcolonial Indian modernity. Critics observe that Narayan uses Rosie's trajectory to stage an implicit critique of the social stigmatization of hereditary temple dancers even as it simultaneously valorizes classical dance as a legitimate and even spiritually significant art form once it is relocated from its devadasi origins into the modern commercial stage [26]. This tension between critique and valorization is read by some scholars as itself a marker of Narayan's ambivalent feminism: he rehabilitates Rosie's art, but only by distancing it from the very tradition and community that produced it, thereby implicitly reproducing a class- and caste-inflected hierarchy of respectability even within his ostensibly sympathetic portrait [26].

5.4 Comparative and Theoretical Syntheses

A smaller but analytically significant body of scholarship compares *The Dark Room* and *The Guide* directly, treating them as bookends of an evolving authorial position. Ruby's comparative study, already discussed above, reads the two novels together as evidence of a consistent underlying critique of women's exploitation and marginalization, articulated through differing narrative outcomes but a shared diagnostic vocabulary [3]. Ghosh's book-length treatment situates both novels within a four-novel developmental sequence — *The Dark Room*, *Waiting for the Mahatma*, *The Guide*, and *The Painter of Signs* — arguing that each successive novel grants its central female character greater narrative agency, economic independence, and moral authority, culminating in Daisy's explicitly modern, career-driven, and marriage-

skeptical characterization in the latest of the four [14]. Dash and Panda's frequently cited essay makes a closely related argument, tracing what they term Narayan's "Women's Lib" movement across the specific sequence of Savitri, Shanti, Bharati, Rosie, and Daisy, and reading this sequence as evidence of Narayan's gradually maturing feminist sensibility [2].

This body of comparative scholarship, taken together, substantially supports the developmental hypothesis this paper advances: that Rosie represents a meaningful, if incomplete, advance upon Savitri's model of resistance, moving from a cyclical and ultimately reabsorbed rebellion to a sustained, if compromised, independent public identity. However, the literature also contains a significant methodological gap that this paper seeks to address: while individual studies apply either a broadly Western feminist framework, a nationalist-historicist framework, or a caste-and-devadasi-specific framework to these novels, very few studies integrate these frameworks into a single, coherent comparative analysis of both novels together. Moreover, the specific symbolic and phenomenological function of enclosed domestic space — the dark room, the hut in which Raju later resides, the stage on which Rosie performs — has not been systematically theorized across the two novels in relation to one another. This paper's original contribution, developed in the following section, addresses this gap directly.

6. Analytical Discussion

6.1 The Dark Room as Patriarchal Architecture

Reading *The Dark Room* through the combined lens of Millett's sexual politics and Chatterjee's account of the gendered inner/outer division of colonial-era domestic ideology yields a reading of Ramani's household as a deliberately constructed microcosm of the wider social order rather than an incidental or idiosyncratic family unit. Ramani's authority within the home is total and, crucially, entirely unaccountable: it is exercised not through reasoned argument but through mood, temper, and the implicit threat of economic withdrawal, since Savitri, like the great majority of married women of her class and generation, possesses no independent income. Chatterjee's framework helps explain why Narayan situates so much of the novel's moral weight within the domestic interior rather than in the public, professional world Ramani inhabits as an insurance company superintendent: the home, in the ideological structure Chatterjee describes, has been assigned the burden of representing an authentic, unchanging, "spiritual" Indian order, insulated from the disruptions of colonial modernity, and women like Savitri are its appointed custodians. Savitri's suffering, in this reading, is not merely personal but structurally overdetermined: she is required to embody a stability and self-abnegation that the novel's men, moving freely between domestic and public spheres, are never required to demonstrate.

The dark room itself, read through Bachelard's phenomenology of domestic space, functions as an externalization of Savitri's interior state: windowless, marginal to the household's productive economy, and accessible to her precisely because it has no other use. Bachelard's insight that domestic spaces are never neutral containers but active participants in the inhabitant's psychic life illuminates why Narayan chooses this particular architectural detail as his novel's title and central symbol: the room is at once evidence of Savitri's marginalization within the household's spatial economy and, paradoxically, the only space that unambiguously

belongs to her alone. Her retreats to the room constitute a repeated, ritualized micro-rebellion — a refusal, however temporary, of the performative wifely cheerfulness Ramani demands — even as the room's very existence as a designated space for feminine sulking demonstrates how thoroughly the household has already accommodated and neutralized her resistance by giving it a sanctioned, contained location.

Savitri's subsequent flight from the house altogether, precipitated by Ramani's affair with Shanta Bai, represents an escalation from this contained, cyclical resistance to an uncontained one. Read through de Beauvoir's account of woman as historically constituted Other, Savitri's declaration — recorded across multiple secondary sources as among the novel's most quoted lines, in which she likens the condition of the married woman without independent means to that of a woman who sells herself — constitutes a moment of startling clarity in which Savitri names, in explicitly economic terms, the transactional logic underlying her marriage [15]. This moment of naming is itself a form of agency: the capacity to diagnose one's own oppression accurately is, in feminist theory from de Beauvoir onward, understood as a necessary precondition for resistance, even where it does not yet translate into successful escape.

Yet the novel's resolution — Savitri's rescue from drowning by the blacksmith Mari, her brief period of temple labour, and her eventual, chastened return to Ramani's household — resists any straightforwardly triumphalist reading. This paper concurs with the critical position, represented in the literature by Devi's historically grounded reading, that Savitri's return should not be read as a failure of authorial nerve but as an unsentimental acknowledgment of the structural limits facing a semi-literate, economically dependent woman in 1930s South India [19]. What Iyengar and others read as a "cynical conclusion" this paper reads instead as a deliberately anticlimactic realism: Narayan declines to grant Savitri a fantasy resolution precisely because to do so would falsify the social conditions the novel has spent its length documenting. The tragedy of *The Dark Room*, in this reading, is not that Savitri fails to achieve liberation but that the novel accurately represents how few genuine alternatives existed for a woman in her position — a reading that aligns with Spivak's caution against expecting the subaltern subject to achieve full, legible self-representation within discursive structures not built to accommodate her voice [8]. Savitri's significance, this paper argues, lies not in the outcome of her single act of flight but in the fact that the flight occurs at all, and that the novel records, with unusual attentiveness for its period, the interior deliberation that precedes it.

6.2 The Guide and the Performance-Space of Emergent Selfhood

Where Savitri's confinement is largely literal and architectural, Rosie's confinement in *The Guide* is initially social and reputational, rooted in the stigma attached to her devadasi lineage, before becoming, within her marriage to Marco, an intellectual and affective confinement of a subtler kind. Marco's treatment of Rosie inverts Ramani's mode of domination: rather than volatile temper, Marco exercises a cold, connoisseurial indifference, valuing Rosie's body as an aesthetic specimen worthy of scholarly cataloguing — he is, after all, a scholar of temple art and antiquities — while categorically refusing to recognize her dance as a legitimate vocation rather than a disreputable inheritance to be suppressed. Reading this dynamic through Mohanty's caution against homogenizing categories of oppression, it becomes clear that Rosie's confinement cannot be mapped directly onto Savitri's: Rosie is not simply another instance of

the same patriarchal architecture but a distinctly positioned subject whose vulnerability is compounded by caste-inflected stigma even as her formal education and inherited artistic capital furnish her with resources Savitri never possesses [9].

Rosie's relationship with Raju complicates rather than resolves this structure of confinement. The existing scholarship's identification of Raju as, in effect, a second exploiter is well supported by the text: his eventual transformation from doting admirer to exhausting taskmaster, culminating in the forgery that leads to his imprisonment, demonstrates that Rosie's professional emergence occurs under conditions of continued male management rather than autonomous self-direction. And yet this paper argues, in partial revision of the more skeptical strand of existing scholarship, that the crucial turning point of the novel lies precisely in the moment of Raju's removal from the scene. Once Raju is imprisoned, Rosie does not collapse, retreat into domestic anonymity, or attach herself to a third male protector; she continues her career as Nalini independently, and the novel's final references to her position confirm that she has achieved a public identity and livelihood that owe nothing further to either Marco or Raju. This structural detail — agency measured not at the moment of departure from one man's authority but at the moment of sustained survival after that authority is removed — offers, this paper contends, a more rigorous test of genuine emancipation than the moment of romantic or professional beginning that most criticism foregrounds.

The recent reinterpretation of Rosie against the critical tradition that blames her for Raju's downfall deserves particular emphasis here, because it exposes a methodological bias embedded in a significant portion of prior Narayan scholarship [23]. If Rosie's pursuit of her art and her departure from an unfulfilling and demeaning marriage are read as morally suspect opportunism, while Raju's parallel pursuit of status, wealth, and eventually sainthood is read with greater narrative sympathy or at least neutrality, this asymmetry in critical reception itself performs the very patriarchal logic the novel can be read as critiquing. This paper's analysis aligns with the position that Rosie's ambition should be read on the same terms as Raju's: as a legitimate, if morally complicated, pursuit of self-realization within severely constrained social conditions, rather than as a deviation from a properly submissive femininity.

The devadasi inheritance underlying Rosie's artistic gift adds a further, distinctly Indian dimension that Western feminist frameworks alone cannot fully illuminate. Read through Chatterjee's inner/outer paradigm, Rosie's dance occupies an unstable position: it is simultaneously coded as authentically, spiritually Indian — precisely the register of cultural inheritance that nationalist ideology prized — and as socially disreputable because of its association with the devadasi community's marginalized status within respectable middle-class norms. Narayan's narrative resolves this tension by relocating Rosie's art from its temple origins to the modern commercial stage, a move that several scholars read as a rehabilitation of classical dance as art even as it simultaneously distances that art from the actual community and social conditions that sustained it historically [26]. This paper reads this displacement as evidence of the limits of Narayan's feminist imagination: Rosie is permitted success only once her art has been abstracted from its devadasi social context and re-coded as a form of elite cultural achievement compatible with urban, educated respectability — a resolution that grants Rosie personal agency while leaving the broader caste hierarchy that produced her initial marginalization entirely unexamined.

6.3 Comparative Trajectory: From Cyclical to Sustained Resistance

Placing Savitri and Rosie side by side, this paper identifies three axes of comparison that extend beyond what the existing literature has articulated as a single developmental narrative. First, on the axis of economic independence, Savitri's brief attempt at self-support through temple labour is explicitly presented as impractical and unsustainable, collapsing within a single day, whereas Rosie's professional career as a dancer, though initiated and for a period managed by men, ultimately generates income and public recognition that persist independently of any single male sponsor. Second, on the axis of narrative closure, *The Dark Room* closes with Savitri's reabsorption into the household on essentially unchanged terms, whereas *The Guide* closes with Rosie occupying a genuinely altered social position — a publicly celebrated artist rather than a private wife. Third, and most significantly for this paper's theoretical argument, the two novels differ in how they treat the relationship between confinement and self-knowledge: Savitri's dark room produces psychological clarity, most vividly in her articulation of the parallel between marriage and prostitution, but this clarity does not translate into a durable material change in her circumstances; Rosie's confinement within Marco's marriage similarly produces clarity about her own desires and talents, but in her case this clarity does translate into sustained material and professional change, precisely because the historical moment and the specific resources available to her — education, artistic training, and eventually an independent income — differ from those available to Savitri two decades earlier in the fictional chronology and roughly twenty years earlier in actual publication date.

This comparative reading supports, with important qualification, the developmental hypothesis advanced by Dash and Panda, Ghosh, and Ruby: Narayan's fiction does chart a trajectory from contained to sustained female resistance across these two novels [2,3,14]. The qualification this paper insists upon, however, is that this trajectory should not be read as evidence of a smoothly progressive or fully achieved feminist vision. Rosie's success remains partial and compromised: it is achieved only after considerable exploitation by two successive men, it requires the symbolic distancing of her art from its devadasi origins, and the novel's own narrative energy and title remain firmly oriented around Raju's spiritual journey rather than Rosie's professional one, such that even in the novel that grants its heroine the greatest agency, she remains narratively secondary to the male protagonist's arc of redemption. Read through Spivak's framework, this narrative subordination is itself significant: Rosie's voice and interiority are always mediated, filtered through Raju's first-person narration for substantial portions of the novel, such that even her moments of greatest self-assertion reach the reader only through the frame of male narrative authority [8]. This paper therefore concludes that Narayan's fiction offers not a completed feminist emancipation but a carefully calibrated, historically situated, and ultimately ambivalent record of the conditions under which Indian women of a particular class began, however unevenly, to claim spaces of self-authored identity within and against a persistently patriarchal domestic order.

7. Findings

The synthesis of the reviewed literature and the original analytical reading conducted in this paper yields the following principal findings:

First, both *The Dark Room* and *The Guide* construct domestic and quasi-domestic space — the household, the dark room, the marital home, the performance stage — as sites simultaneously of confinement and of nascent resistance, such that the very spaces designed to contain women's agency also become, paradoxically, the spaces in which that agency first articulates itself.

Second, the scholarly consensus that Narayan's fiction traces an evolving, if never fully realized, feminist consciousness across his career is substantially supported by this paper's comparative analysis of Savitri and Rosie, though the paper cautions against reading this evolution as a smooth or complete trajectory toward liberation.

Third, existing criticism has been divided over whether Savitri's return to her marital household represents narrative and ideological failure or unsentimental social realism; this paper's analysis favours the latter reading, situating Savitri's limited options within the specific historical and economic constraints of 1930s South Indian middle-class womanhood.

Fourth, Rosie's trajectory, while more sustained and materially significant than Savitri's, remains compromised by her continued instrumentalization by both Marco and Raju, and by the novel's implicit requirement that her devadasi-derived art be socially rehabilitated through distancing from its community origins before it can be publicly celebrated.

Fifth, a significant portion of existing critical reception has, whether consciously or not, reproduced patriarchal judgment in its treatment of Rosie, labelling her ambition as opportunism in ways that a structurally parallel male ambition would not typically attract; recent scholarship's correction of this bias represents an important and underexplored contribution to the field that this paper's analysis affirms and extends.

Sixth, existing scholarship has not adequately integrated caste- and devadasi-specific analysis with broader feminist theoretical frameworks in reading these two novels together; this paper identifies this integration as both a contribution of the present study and a direction for further research.

8. Discussion of Implications

The implications of these findings extend beyond a narrow reading of two individual novels. For the broader field of Indian English literary studies, this paper's analysis suggests that domestic fiction of the colonial and early postcolonial period cannot be adequately assessed by a single imported feminist framework, whether Western liberal feminism or a purely nationalist-historicist account of gendered space; rather, a genuinely rigorous reading requires the kind of hybrid, multiply situated analytical apparatus this paper has developed, attentive simultaneously to gender, class, caste, and the specific ideological weight assigned to domestic space within Indian nationalist discourse. For feminist literary criticism more broadly, the case of Rosie's contested critical reception offers a cautionary instance of how literary scholarship itself can perpetuate the very gendered judgments a text's plot might be read as critiquing, underscoring the necessity of reflexive attention to the critic's own interpretive assumptions.

For pedagogical purposes, this paper's comparative framework offers instructors of Indian English literature a structured method for teaching these two novels together, encouraging students to trace not merely thematic similarity but the specific historical and material conditions that differentiate Savitri's and Rosie's respective possibilities for resistance. Finally, for future research, this paper identifies several productive avenues: a more sustained comparative analysis incorporating Narayan's later novel *The Painter of Signs*, whose protagonist Daisy has been read by several scholars as the culmination of Narayan's feminist trajectory; a dedicated study of the devadasi tradition's representation across Indian English fiction more broadly, situating Rosie within this wider literary context; and empirical reception studies, of the kind pioneered by the recent reinterpretation of Rosie's character, that would allow scholars to test more systematically the extent to which contemporary readers' judgments of Narayan's female characters continue to be shaped by unexamined patriarchal assumptions.

9. Conclusion

This paper has undertaken a structured review of existing scholarship alongside an original comparative analysis of domestic captivity and female agency in R.K. Narayan's *The Dark Room* and *The Guide*. The evidence assembled here, drawn from both Narayan's own retrospective account of his authorial intentions and from more than two decades of accumulated critical scholarship, supports a reading of Narayan as a novelist whose engagement with women's oppression is sustained, historically attentive, and formally sophisticated, even as it falls short of a fully realized or programmatically feminist vision. Savitri's confinement within the dark room and her subsequent, ultimately unsuccessful bid for independent survival dramatize the severe structural limits facing a woman of her class and historical moment, while Rosie's more sustained emergence as the independent artist Nalini demonstrates a meaningfully expanded, if still compromised, field of possibility available to a woman possessing education, artistic talent, and a marginally later historical position. Read together, and through the hybrid theoretical framework developed in this paper — combining Western feminist theory's attention to the material and psychological conditions of female selfhood with postcolonial feminist theory's insistence on the specific, non-homogenizable conditions of Indian and subaltern women's lives — these two novels chart a literary trajectory that is neither triumphantly emancipatory nor simply and uniformly oppressive, but rather a carefully observed, historically situated record of the uneven, partial, and hard-won emergence of female agency within the architecture of Indian domestic life. Future scholarship, attentive to the caste, class, and historical specificities this paper has foregrounded, stands to deepen still further our understanding of how Narayan's fiction, for all its ironic restraint and formal modesty, constitutes one of Indian English literature's most sustained early engagements with the question of women's freedom.

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