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Savitri's Journey from Submissive Wife to a Feminist Mother: An Investigation of the Novel *The Dark Room* by R. K. Narayan

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Abstract:
The institutions of marriage and motherhood are at the heart of each patriarchal domesticity. These institutions, like marriage and motherhood, deny any individual identity to Indian women. Even after eighty years of independence, women can hardly claim that they belong only to themselves, and not to their father, husband, or son. This paper examines R.K. Narayan's novel *The Dark Room* to show how Savitri's individuality is undermined by her experiences of traditional Indian family life, marriage, and, most importantly, patriarchal norms of motherhood. The narrative terrain incorporates the theoretical ideas of "matricentric feminism" by Andrea O'Reilly to argue how Savitri is restricted in performing her mothering role freely within patriarchal domesticity, and how her maternal experience controls her emotions, behaviours, and decisions. Moreover, using Andrea O'Reilly's theoretical lens of "feminist mothering," the article argues that Savitri is a feminist mother who resists patriarchy that limits her mothering capacity.
Keywords: Marriage, Motherhood, The Dark Room, Matricentric Feminism, Feminist Mothering.

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1. Introduction: Critiquing the Over-Glorification of Marriage and Motherhood within Indian Ideological and Cultural Space

For times immemorial, the patriarchy has always taken up the institutions of marriage and motherhood as vital instruments for establishing the superiority of males within a nuclear household. In the book *Patriarchy* (2007), the feminist historian V. Geetha argued that patriarchy has frequently exploited women through the means of marriage, sexuality, motherhood, and religion. According to her, throughout the subcontinent, women's status and lives were both determined and restricted by motherhood and reproduction (Geetha, 26). Marriage and motherhood are treated as women's ultimate destiny, and "motherhood, including domestic work, that was understood to be uniquely their vocation" (Geetha, 53). Furthermore, in Indian families, there is the over-glorification of both the institutions of marriage and motherhood. People believe that the knot of marriage is made in heaven, and that the bond between husband and wife is so pure and strong that even death cannot separate them. In this regard, it is pertinent to mention the Indian Hindu myth that immortalises Savitri as the epitome of the ideal Indian wife. She is believed to have been so virtuous and loyal to her husband, Satyavan, that Yama, the god of Death, surrendered to her. The mythology of Savitri and Satyavan is therefore key to understanding the ideological and cultural space of the Indian Hindu Family regarding the issues of women, wives, and mothers. Doranne Jacobson asserted that Savitri, as well as Sita, Jasma, and others of their kind, "are not merely literary figures, but represent ideals that live in the heart of millions of Indians today. Countless wives struggle to follow without complaint the dictates of often inconsiderate husbands…" (97). Moreover, second-wave feminists such as Simone de Beauvoir, Betty Friedan, and others showcased the hidden reality of marriage, resulting in domestic disharmony and the suffocating situation of married women/wives. However, in the Indian socio-

cultural space, those wives who show dissatisfaction with their conjugal life and get separated from their husbands are negatively judged. If such rebellious wives have children, then their condition becomes more pathetic. The reason is that Indian culture has also long glorified the role of a woman as a mother. A mother is eulogised as a goddess, praised as the source of life, sustenance, kindness, affection, sacrifice, and sanctified as nature and nation. Motherhood is a complicated idea, though it is glorified in a one-dimensional way. The unrealistic idealisation of motherhood is problematic because it neglects other social, cultural, and economic factors that affect mothers' lived experiences. This patriarchal way of homogenising motherhood as satisfying and fulfilling for mothers is again questioned by feminist scholars such as Simone de Beauvoir, Betty Friedan, Shulamith Firestone, etc. For them, motherhood is an institution within the patriarchal mechanism that is used as a tool to repress and subjugate women. Simone de Beauvoir and Shulamith Firestone argued that motherhood restricts women's subjectivity. They further critiqued it for instilling in the psychology of women that mothering is their sole responsibility and "'the' fundamental and primary identity" (Krishnaraj 2), as if a woman's body is made only for childbearing. The concept of motherhood is further problematised by scholars of motherhood such as Adrienne Rich and Andrea O'Reilly. According to them, motherhood is an institution and an ideology that patriarchy always glorifies and imposes upon mothers, whereas mothering is something that is mother-defined. Adrienne Rich first articulated this difference as she posited that there are "two meanings of motherhood, one superimposed upon the other: the potential relationship of any woman to her powers of reproduction and to children; and the institution, which aims at ensuring that the potential - and all women - shall remain under male control" (13). Again, the same ideas regarding motherhood and mothering are being uttered by Andrea O'Reilly as she posited that motherhood is male-defined and is oppressive to women. The Indian feminists have

borrowed Western feminist interpretations of motherhood and assimilated them as befitting the Indian context, while also vehemently contesting them because they clashed with the Indian attitude towards family and society. In the Indian subcontinent, mothers are subjugated under unrealistic idealisation and glorification, leaving no space for escape from the role of mothering (Parveen 236).

2. Review of Literature: Mapping the Representation of Mothers and Motherhood in Indian Male Writers

The problematic issues of marriage, motherhood, patriarchy, and gender equality have been subject to several literary and scholarly probes in India. Critical attention to gender representation in novels by Indian male authors has often been embedded within broader thematic analyses of history, politics, and social transformation. Scholars have explored how Indian male writers situated female characters within narratives of nationalism, communal conflict, diaspora, and economic change. While some studies commend these authors for creating strong and complex female characters, others critiqued the tendency to use women symbolically as embodiments of the nation, tradition, or cultural purity rather than as fully autonomous subjects. Feminist critics have also pointed out patterns of objectification, stereotyping, and marginalisation in certain male-authored texts, particularly in representations of sexuality and domesticity (Ingale 60). "Adarsh Nari" [an ideal woman] trope is created by patriarchal male writers that cages women into three main boxes: a girl, a wife, and a mother. Sangeeta Dutta, in her article "Relinquishing the Halo: Portrayal of Mother in Indian Writing in English" (1990), examined a select group of novels written by Indian authors in English that deal primarily with the woman's role as mother, the operating ideology of motherhood, its absorption into public and private, and the resistance offered to such compensatory glorification. She revealed the mother's material powerlessness while she is

eulogised as a life-giver, a nurturer, an individual, a country, a goddess. She exposed the tremendous ideological burden that the individual woman has to bear and act out, and also captured the stirrings of female discontent against such role constructs (Dutta WS84). The traditional, self-abnegating mother is described in Mulk Raj Anand's *The Village*: "[s]he had a great soul, how she accommodated herself to everyone and everything, [despite] her iron will…She was satisfied, so long as she could provide these for others" (qtd. in Dutta WS91). In *The Serpent and the Rope* (1960), Rao idealised the feminine as the world; alongside the nationalist movement, the motherification of the country gave this belief greater legitimacy. This is evident in an early piece of Kannada writing by Rao, entitled "A Pilgrimage to Europe," which appeared in the journal Jaya Karnataka: "[w]herever I may go, even if it be the Brahmaloka [abode of the supreme spirit], it cannot be as good as my motherland...our mother is always our mother" (qtd. in Dutta WS86). The same kind of motherification of the country is visible in Raja Rao's *Kanthapura*, where he examined the maternal principle which permeates Indian consciousness (qtd. in Dutta WS85). The village of Kanthapura is a microcosm of the Indian cultural landscape, where all women are 'mothers'. Therefore, motherhood seems infused in the novel's cultural texture. The goddess-mother, the earth-mother and the biological-mother are synthesised in a complex matrix:

> "Kenchamma, Kenchamma,
>
> Goddess benign and bounteous
>
> Mother of Earth, blood of Life" (qtd. in Dutta WS85)

The over-idealisation of mother figures is problematic because it negates women's subjectivity by undermining their fundamental and individual needs and choices. Several Indian scholars in motherhood studies question the over-idealisation of motherhood. Maithreyi Krishnaraj, in her

book *Motherhood in India: Glorification without empowerment?* (2012), defined motherhood in India as "Glorification without Empowerment" (6). Furthermore, such unrealistic glorification of women as devoted wives and self-sacrificing mothers without empowerment is challenged by R. K. Narayan in his novel *The Dark Room*. He portrayed the unfiltered day-to-day activities and struggles of Indian wives and mothers within their patriarchal domestic sphere. He allowed women to have their own individualities, identities, and voices.

3. Locating R. K. Narayan and *The Dark Room* in the Fabric of Matricentric Feminism

Women's liberation from the clutches of patriarchal mechanisms is still a much-needed conversation that requires special attention. This is because even after eighty years of independence, women are suppressed by patriarchy. R. K. Narayan's novel *The Dark Room,* first published in 1938, gives voice to the lived experience of an Indian wife and mother, Savitri. He has pointed out the traditional patriarchal arrangements in the form of religion and culture that deny Savitri any identity other than being Ramani's wife and mother of Ramani's children. Mukhopadhyay & Barma, in their article "Family, Freedom and Feminism: Re-reading R. K. Narayan's *The Dark Room*" (2025), claimed that in *The Dark Room*, R. K. Narayan made a deliberate fictional endeavour for the first time in his writing career to examine a serious issue: the unavoidable predicament of Hindu women, particularly married ones, under the old patriarchal framework of Indian society. Narayan deliberately examined women's liberation and its feasibility within the framework of Indian customs and traditions upheld over time by the dominant forces of patriarchy (Mukhopadhyay & Barma 74-75). In his autobiography *My Days: A Memoir,* R. K. Narayan himself admitted his conscious concern regarding the question of Women's Liberation in his novel *The Dark Room* about the genesis of the novel:

> I shut myself in for three hours, gazed on the green football field outside, across the street, and spun out the fate of Savitri - the heroine of *The Dark Room*. I was somehow obsessed with a philosophy of Woman as opposed to Man, her constant oppressor. This must have been an early testament of the "Women's Lib" movement. Man assigned her a secondary place and kept her there with such subtlety and cunning that she herself began to lose all notion of her independence, her individuality, stature[,] and[,] strength. A wife in an orthodox milieu of Indian society was an ideal victim of such circumstances. My novel deals with this philosophy in the background. (Narayan, *My Days*, 115-116)

His concern about women's liberation can well be traced from the novel *The Dark Room* itself because the socio-political events of the thirties, the "All India Women's Conference" ["AIWC"], are mentioned in the novel: "[s]he was the wife of a school teacher, and had four children…she hoped to be sent some day as Malgudi delegate to the All-India Women's Conference; to be elected to various municipal and legislative bodies" (Narayan, *Dark Room*, 18).

Arguably, Narayan was much influenced by the "AIWC", founded in 1927 by Margaret Cousins, which was organised to further the women's cause in general and their economic independence in particular. The "AIWC" was originally dedicated to women's education. By the thirties, it had emerged as an influential social reform organisation determined to fight for women's cause. Kamala Devi Chattopadhyaya, the secretary of AIWC, pointed out that this agitation cannot in any sense be said to be a rebellion against men. She moved a campaign which was intended to make all people aware of the subjugation under which women are forced to live after marriage. A book titled *Our Cause: A Symposium by Indian* Women, published in 1936, was another attack on the institution of marriage. The editor of the book, Shyam Kumari Nehru, argued: "[i]t is a cunning device to keep women economically dependent on men, chained with the four walls of the zenana,

confined to the performing of household duties alone. Usually marriage is thrust on her much before she can think for herself, and the tie is indissoluble" (qtd. in Gupta 249). Laxmi Holmström, in the essay "Women as Markers of Social Change", has rightly observed that the character of Savitri "is 'placed' carefully in the book, by several minor portraits of women, who, by contrasting with her in various ways, provide the reader with a reasonably complete picture of women 'in an orthodox milieu of Indian society,' in the later 1930s" (103).

4. Research Gap and Theoretical Frameworks

R. K. Narayan and his literary works, most notably *The Dark Room,* have been the subject of several critical interpretations. "The Literary Marriage: Sites of Tension and Transformation" by Seema Gupta argued that the novel *The Dark Room* is a literary portrayal of marriage not as a romantic ideal, but as a complex and contested space - one where silence and speech, withdrawal and assertion, obedience and resistance coexist. Sabita Acharya, in her thesis titled "Female Body as a site of Domination and Resistance in R.K. Narayan's *The Dark Room*" (2024), explored and analysed the dominating condition of women's bodies and their resistance in Indian society due to patriarchal domination, through the lens of Third World Feminism (Acharya 1). Ramesh Prasad Adhikary, in his article "Existential Maturity of Savitri in *The Dark Room* by R. K. Narayan", highlighted Savitri's existential maturity during a difficult time for leading a fulfilling life (Adhikary 138-139). "Plight and Suffering of Pre-Independent Indian Women in R. K. Narayan's *The Dark Room*" by Sahadev Roy explored Savitri's hampered personal dignity, her detestation of any charity, her adaptations to the emerging conditions, and her adjustment in married life for the sake of children and security and protection in life (Roy 102). E. Elizabeth Kamala, in the article "Ibsenite Feminism in R.K. Narayan's *The Dark Room*" (2018), stated that *The Dark Room* is influenced, if not inspired, by Ibsen's influential play *A Doll's House*. Both works address the

traditional male perspective toward women/mothers, portraying them as dolls or mere playthings rather than as autonomous human beings (Kamala 113). Sangeeta Dutta, in her article "Relinquishing the Halo: Portrayal of Mother in Indian Writing in English" (1990), sheds light on Savitri as a mother and on how her internalised ideologies of motherhood were shaping her behaviours and decisions (Dutta WS85). However, the careful literary survey suggests that scholars have done limited work on the novel *The Dark Room* through the lens of matricentric feminism to highlight Savitri's unique experience and resistance to patriarchy as a feminist mother. The article addresses this research gap by arguing that R. K. Narayan's *The Dark Room* is a matricentric narrative, since the mother, with her own worldviews and perspectives, is at the centre of narration. The narrative presents that Savitri is restricted in performing her mothering role freely within the patriarchal domesticity, and that her maternal experience controls her emotions, behaviours, and decisions. In this regard, Andrea O'Reilly's theoretical ideas of "matricentric feminism" are used because it seeks to make motherhood the business of feminism by positioning mothers' needs and concerns as the starting point for a theory and politics on and for women's empowerment (O'Reilly, "Matricentric Feminism", 14). She emphasised that the category of mother is distinct from the category of woman, and that many of the problems mothers face - social, economic, political, cultural, psychological, and so forth - are specific to women's roles and identities as mothers (O'Reilly, "Matricentric Feminism", 115). Therefore, mothers need a feminism of their own, which she terms "matricentric feminism". "Matricentric feminism" has the potential to put the subjectivity and perspective of mothers at the centre of the argument. The study further incorporates the theoretical ideas of "feminist mothering" by Andrea O'Reilly to argue that each time Savitri resists the motherhood institutions within patriarchal mechanisms, whenever she finds them oppressive to her identity as a mother. She resists patriarchy through her decision to

perform a hunger strike in the dark room, her attempt to abandon her husband, Ramani, and children, and her changed self after returning home. Andrea O'Reilly defined "feminist mothering" as follows: "I use the term feminist mothering to refer to an oppositional discourse of motherhood, one that is constructed as a negation of patriarchal motherhood" (O'Reilly, *Feminist Mothering*, 4).

5. Silence to Sovereignty: Savitri's Journey from Submissive Wife to a Feminist Mother

A mother in a patriarchal society is oppressed both as a woman and a mother because motherhood is a crucial instrument for patriarchal society to subjugate women. As a result, a mother's needs, concerns, and perspective, along with her complex social, political, and economic position, are, all in all, different from those of a woman who is not mothering (O'Reilly, "Matricentric Feminism", 15). Moreover, the lived experiences of mothers differ in terms of various factors - mothers' position in a society, their personality, age, race, ethnicity, religious, cultural, economic, and political status, educational status, marital status, frequency of pregnancy, sources of support, and so on (Parveen 245). The same is true for Savitri; she is oppressed both as a wife and a mother. Moreover, it is her social, economic, religious, and cultural background, and, most importantly, the nature of her husband, Ramani, that shape her maternal experience and identity. The novel *The Dark Room* begins with Savitri, caught in her roles as mother and wife. At the very beginning of the novel, R. K. Narayan portrays the grim reality of marriage and motherhood within a patriarchal landscape by placing Savitri, the wife/mother, at the centre of the narrative. Here, Savitri is restricted in her capacity as a mother; she is not permitted to exercise any power in the training of their son, Babu. At school time, when Babu urges his mother to let him stay home because of his headache and fever, Savitri, out of maternal concern, allows him to stay home and rest. However, Ramani has internalised the patriarchal norms regarding motherhood

and believes that mothers, being women, lack the intellectual capacity to train a grown-up child properly. That is why he prohibited Savitri from exercising her right and agency in decision-making for Babu's well-being as a mother. He made a sexist comment that providing proper training to the children is "none of a woman's business" and that Savitri should "mind her own business" going back to the kitchen because, for Ramani, women only belong in the kitchen: "'No, he [has not]. Go and do any work you like in the kitchen, but leave the training of a grown-up boy to me. It is none of a woman's business'" (Narayan, *Dark Room*, 1).

The vulnerable and miserable condition of a housewife and mother within patriarchal mechanisms is quite visible throughout the novel. G.J. Bahadurji, who was one of the contributors to the book *Our Cause: A Symposium by Indian Women*, saw marriage as amounting to a kind of slavery. She stated that marriage not only reduces a woman to being either a "dressed-up doll" or a "beast of burden"; nevertheless, the consequence of this, namely motherhood, ensures her lifelong slavery: "her creations become the bonds that tie her to the yoke of family life, which, once entered, leaves no room for self-expression, or self-reali[s]ation" (qtd. in Gupta 249-250). However, it is worth noting that Savitri is not submissive; she is not tolerating patriarchal norms regarding motherhood by staying silent. In contrast, she shows her discomfort with such unnatural restrictions on her mothering capacity and questions Ramani each time: "[s]he asked again, '[Can not] you see how ill the boy is?'" (Narayan, *Dark Room*, 2). Therefore, she becomes a feminist mother who has the capacity for self-realisation, self-reflection, and self-expression. Savitri, as her name relates to the mythological devoted wife Savitri, might have accepted the socio-cultural-religious ideologies of a submissive and devoted wife; however, when it comes to the patriarchal oppression of mothers, she feels discomfort and cannot accept it wholeheartedly. She herself once reflected that "'I [Savitri] [do not] mind any treatment personally[. However,] when a child…'" (Narayan, *Dark*

Room, 60). It is quite visible in her behaviour. Whenever Ramani expresses his grievance to her, yells at her, or insults her, she remains quiet because, after fifteen years of conjugal life, she has become used to it. The narrator describes Ramani as self-willed, lawless, conceited, arrogant, and domineering as a husband. He holds his wife responsible for anything and everything, from the vegetables chosen to looking after the duties of cook and the habits of children (qtd. in Gupta 249-250): "'[n]o lack of expenses, money for this and money for that. If the cook [cannot] cook properly, do the work yourself. What have you to do better than that?'" (Narayan, *Dark Room*, 2). Savitri remains calm at such cynical behaviour of her husband; however, her calmness also irritates him: "'[s]aving up your energy by being silent! Saving it up for what purpose? When a man asks you something you could do worse than honour him with a reply'" (Narayan, *Dark Room*, 3). Sometimes, if she explained, as occasionally happened, she would be told, "[s]hut up. Words [will not] mend a piece of foul cooking" (Narayan, *Dark Room*, 3). Moreover, he would taunt her with her lack of economic sense: "'[f]ine economy. Wish [you would] show the same economy in other matters'" (Narayan, *Dark Room*, 3). Ramani even criticises Savitri's sense of dressing by making a sexist comment: "'[w]omen are exasperating… Why [cannot] they put on some decent clothes and look presentable at home instead of starting their make-up…Only silly-looking rags to gladden our sight at home'" (Narayan, *Dark Room*, 26). Ramani's remarks about women wearing "silly-looking rags" (Narayan, *Dark Room*, 26) at home signal his insensitivity to women's unpaid labour as housewives and mothers. This reflects how patriarchal society devalues women's/mothers' unpaid domestic labour, including cooking, serving food to the husband and children, deciding what to prepare, managing the family's emotional health, preparing children for school and husbands for work, overseeing and directing servants and cooks, and managing guests from time to time. The time and energy such household management requires are evident in Savitri's remark:

"'[w]as there nothing else for one to do than attend to this miserable business of the stomach from morning till night?'" (Narayan, *Dark Room*, 10). In the same vein, Simone de Beauvoir opined that performing only household chores makes a wife's condition pathetic: "[f]ew tasks are more similar to the torment of Sisyphus than those of the housewife; day after day, one must wash dishes, dust furniture, mend clothes that will be dirty, dusty, and torn again" (Beauvoir 474). Arguably, men with a patriarchal mindset remain indifferent to responsibilities regarding children and household chores and think that only their paid work matters. After learning of Ramani's scandal with Shanta Bai, Savitri repents of being a slave as a housewife/mother: "'[p]erhaps I am old and ugly. How can I help it? I have borne children and slaved for the house'" (Narayan, *Dark Room*, 101). She starts to feel an identity crisis as a result of her repeated pregnancies: "'[m]y cheeks, too, were rosy and my hair came down to my hips before I had my two miscarriages and three childbirths...'" (Narayan, *Dark Room*, 105). Notably, Savitri realises that within patriarchal mechanisms, her motherhood becomes a captivating experience for her, though motherhood needs to be a liberating and fulfilling experience for mothers. The pertinence of Jasodhara Bagchi's argument, in the article "Representing Nationalism: Ideology of Motherhood in Colonial Bengal" (1990), in this regard needs to be noted: "[w]omen's exclusive confinement to reproductive function and the attendant emphasis on nurturance have rendered the domain of motherhood especially vulnerable to patriarchal control" (Bagchi WS65). Therefore, it becomes necessary to make mothering and motherhood a vital issue of feminism and then create a space where patriarchal motherhood is smashed, and mothers feel empowered with their freedom of mothering.

Accordingly, Savitri, as a feminist mother, resists all such institutions of motherhood when her power and rights as a mother are denied. For example, when Ramani beats Babu for going near the dolls, which makes him "effeminate", it is Savitri who "dashed forward to protect Babu". She

took him aside, glaring at her husband, who said, "'[l]eave him alone, he [does not] need your petting'" (Narayan, *Dark Room*, 48). With anger, she questions her husband: "'[w]hy do you beat him?'" (Narayan, *Dark Room*, 48). To protest such a patriarchy that creates gender inequality and powerless mothers, Savitri starts a hunger strike by closing herself in a dark room. The cook and Ranga are other characters in the novel who uphold the patriarchal mindset towards mothers and motherhood. The cook comments: "'[i]t is no business of a wife's to butt in when the father is dealing with his son. It is a bad habit. Only a battered son will grow into a sound man'" (Narayan, *Dark Room*, 50). Ranga admits, "'my [Ranga's] wife is also like that'" (Narayan, *Dark Room*, 50). The cook adds: "'[o]nly once has my wife tried to interfere, and then I nearly broke her bones. She has learnt to leave me alone now. Women must be taught their place'" (Narayan, *Dark Room*, 51).

Evidently, such is the pathetic situation of women/mothers within the patriarchal motherhood mechanism, where they are continuously policed, hushed up, and tortured. Savitri's friend Janamma also consoles Savitri with her internalised motherhood institutions: "'[a]fter all they are better trainers of children than we can be. If they appear sometimes harsh, you may rest assured they will suffer for it later'" (Narayan, *Dark Room*, 60). In contrast to Janamma, Savitri does not demonstrate the conventional signs of accepting patriarchal motherhood institutions; she recognises them as unjust and oppressive towards her identity as an independent mother. The same disregard and resistance toward motherhood institutions are expressed by Savitri's servant-maid: "'[would not] you like to say so! What do you know of the fire in a mother's belly when her child is suffering?'" (Narayan, *Dark Room*, 51). Here, it is pertinent to note what Maithreyi Krishnaraj argued about motherhood in India: "…motherhood invites glorification but no empowerment. The real-life conditions of mothering in terms of pre-natal and post-natal care give the lie to the exalted position a mother is supposed to have. Still, reeling under high maternal mortality, we are far from

nurturing the nurturer" (6). Eventually, Savitri realises her powerlessness as a mother and her insignificance as an individual, and decides to abandon Ramani with his children. When Ramani tries to hold her hand, Savitri violently shakes her hand free and asserts with a heavy heart that she is "a human being", which "men will never grant" (Narayan, *Dark Room*, 110). She further reflects upon the way women are being treated by men in patriarchal society: "'[f]or you we are playthings when you feel like hugging and slaves at other times. [Do not] think that you can fondle us when you like and kick us when you choose'" (Narayan, *Dark Room*, 110). That is why when Ramani asks her to take her things while going out, she answers: "'[t]hings? I [do not] possess anything in this world. What possession can a woman call her own except her body?'" (Narayan, *Dark Room*, 113). For Savitri, "'[e]verything else that she has is her father's, her husband's or her son's. So take there too'" (Narayan, *Dark Room*, 113). She realises how impotent she is: "she had not the slightest power to do anything at home, and that after fifteen years of married life" (Narayan, *Dark Room*, 6). She further comments on the pathetic situation of each wife/mother in the patriarchal landscape of India: "'I am afraid to go even a hundred yards from the house unescorted; yes[,] afraid, afraid of everything…Afraid of one's father, teachers and everybody in early life, afraid of one's husband, children and neighbours in later life –fear, fear in one's heart till the funeral pyre was lit'" (Narayan, *Dark Room*, 116). Savitri herself reflects on her changed self as she wonders whether she is the same old Savitri or not, who used to fear her husband; and further acknowledges that the change is necessary: "'[a]m I the same old Savitri or am I someone else?...I [could not] have had the courage to talk back to my husband. I have never done it in my life'" (Narayan, *Dark Room*, 115-116).

Remarkably, "feminist mothers resist because they recognise that gender inequity, in particular male privilege and power, is produced, maintained, and perpetuated (i.e., through sexist

childrearing) in patriarchal motherhood. As feminists, feminist mothers reject an institution founded on gender inequity, and, as mothers, they refuse to raise children in such a sexist environment" (O'Reilly, *Feminist Mothering*, 8). Therefore, Savitri tries to take her children with her as he leaves Ramani's house: "'[n]ow, come on, children, get up! Let us get out'" (Narayan, *Dark Room*, 113). Nevertheless, the mother remains so handicapped within the patriarchal motherhood mechanism that she is not allowed to take the children with her. The patriarchal society gives absolute rights over the children to the father only, and not to the mother. A father like Ramani, who is so indifferent to his children's well-being, remains powerful and stops a mother from claiming the children as her own. When Savitri tries to go near the children, Ramani "bar[s] her way" and forbids Savitri from taking the children with her as she leaves the house: "'[do not] touch them or talk to them. Go yourself, if you want. They are my children'" (Narayan, *Dark Room*, 113). Realising the grim truth of the patriarchal society, Savitri falls apart with a sense of utter absurdity and comments with a sense of existential crisis: "'[t]hey are yours, absolutely. You paid the midwife and the nurse. You pay for their clothes and teachers'" (Narayan, *Dark Room*, 113). Savitri realises that in this patriarchal space, "woman owns nothing" (Narayan, *Dark Room*, 113), not even her own children.

Arguably, this is how patriarchy fails mothers to exercise their full capacity as mothers. She is not even allowed to claim the children as her own. As a feminist mother, Savitri questions how patriarchy allows fathers to evade their duties and responsibilities toward children and the family. Savitri sympathises intensely with the unfortunate woman, Kuchela's wife: "'The poor girl!'" (Narayan, *Dark Room*, 29). She does so because, as depicted in the epic stories, Krishna's old classmate, "Kuchela was too busy with his daily prayers and meditation to work and earn, and hence left to his wife the task of finding food for their twenty-seven children…" (Narayan, *Dark*

Room, 27-28). Such indifference on the part of a father toward children is never questioned; rather, it is normalised within patriarchal mechanisms. Moreover, patriarchal motherhood norms always blame a mother for the children's mistakes. Ramani too blames Savitri for the children's mistakes: "'[b]ad training, rotten training … [Do not] try to escape by being silent. Are you following your mother's example?'" (Narayan, *Dark Room*, 46-47). Moreover, in Chapter Three of the novel, while Savitri suggests Ramani take the children with them to the cinema, Ramani [does not] allow her to take the children. When Kamala pleads with her mother and cries, Ramani is infuriated at the sight of the girl appealing to her mother and thunders: "'[l]earn not to whimper before your mother'…If I hear you squeal, I will thrash you, remember. Be a good girl'" (Narayan, *Dark Room*, 25-26).

Remarkably, a feminist mother challenges male privilege and power in her own life and that of her children. In her own life, this would mean the mother insisting on gender equality in the home and a life and identity outside of motherhood (O'Reilly, *Feminist Mothering*, 8-9). Savitri challenges male authority by refusing to take anything that belongs to the male: "'[d]o you think that I will stay in your house, breathe the air of your property, drink the water here, and eat food you buy with your money? No, [I will] starve and die in the open, under the sky, a roof for which we need be obliged to no man…Take them away'" (Narayan, *Dark Room*, 113). She further adds that "'[n]othing seemed to matter now, not even one's children. They were[,] after all[,] a husband's'" (Narayan, *Dark Room*, 115). Consequently, after leaving Ramani's house at midnight, Savitri even refuses the idea of going to his father's house because that would again hurt her self-respect. She becomes stubborn about living on her own earnings: "'[i]f I take the train and go to my parents, I shall feed on my father's pension; if I go back home, I shall be living on my husband's earnings, and later, on Babu'" (Narayan, *Dark Room*, 119).

Furthermore, Savitri reflects on the fundamental issue of feminism, i.e., the necessity of education and economic independence of a woman for their liberation. She realises that her lack of education and economic independence causes her to depend on her father, husband, and Babu. She is not allowed much education, which makes her incapable of earning a living: "[w]hat can I do by myself? Unfit to earn a handful of rice except by begging. If I had gone to a college and studied, I might have become a teacher or something'" (Narayan, *Dark Room*, 119-120). She further regrets that "'it was very foolish of me not to have gone on with my education'" (Narayan, *Dark Room*, 120). She also equates married women with prostitution out of her dissatisfaction with life: "'[w]hat is the difference between a prostitute and a married woman?…but both earn their food and shelter in the same manner'" (Narayan, *Dark Room*, 120).

Notably, patriarchy never allows women to be self-sufficient, educated, and self-employed. This is what Savitri resists, with stubbornness, to earn her own living. After failing at suicide, she refuses to take food or even fruit from Ponny unless she earns the food by doing work. "Eating food that was her [Savitri's] own had grown into a perfect obsession" (Narayan, *Dark Room*, 171). She ultimately gets a job at the temple that pays her "half measure of rice and a quarter of an anna" (Narayan, *Dark Room*, 179) for keeping the temple grounds clean. However, being a feminist mother, her potential mothering capacity conflicts with the motherhood institutions. After leaving her children alone, "Savitri wished that she had asked Janamma or Gangu to keep an eye on the children" (Narayan, *Dark Room*, 134). She worries about her children's well-being and safety now and then. However, immediately she is reminded of the patriarchal mechanisms that snatched her potential capacity for mothering, which is beneficial for the children. Furthermore, heartbroken with frustration and dissolution, she tries not to think of them because their father claimed that they only belonged to him:

> But . . . children? Let them alone. They were his; he paid the midwife, and it was his duty to look after them. Hadn't he said that they would get on splendidly without her? (Narayan, *Dark Room*, 134)

However, she cannot help herself from being concerned about her children. She prays to god to "'[p]rotect Sumati, Babu, and Kamala'" (Narayan, *Dark Room*, 186). Ultimately, she yearns to be with Sumati, Kamala, and Babu. Therefore, out of her maternal concern, she returns to her children. Here, it is noteworthy to mention that Savitri's return is interpreted by Holmström as Narayan's return to the "basic paradigm" with which he set about the novel – "the limited and narrow world within which many married women function..." (107). Prof. K. R. S. Iyengar disliked Savitri's passive submission to existing conditions and her husband. The ending of the novel is criticised by Prof. K. R. S. Iyengar as a "cynical conclusion" (Devi 53). R. Chitra Devi, on the other hand, explained the reason behind such a decision of Savitri by putting forward a realistic ground in her thesis "Feminism in the novels of R. K. Narayan and Shashi Deshpande - A Comparative Study":

> Narayan has portrayed an Indian woman of thirties to whom the options are less. As she is semi-literate, the choice before her is very limited. Her condition is worse. Her husband is more feeling and indifferent. (53)

Moreover, critics like M K Naik show no sympathy towards Savitri, for they analyse her return as being drawn back to the "domestic comforts of the house" (qtd. in Dutta WS85). However, the narrative terrain indicates that Savitri does not return to the house for the children, but rather for comfort. The nuanced study of the text through the lens of "matricentric feminism" underscores the exhaustion and discomfort Savitri feels at Ramani's house. Moreover, critics like Hari Mohan Prasad asserted:

> Savitri does not submit to Ramani: She submits to her obligations. It may be a failure on the material plane, but spiritually she comes triumphant …It is in keeping with both her character and her cultural heritage. (qtd. in Roy 112)

Further, Sangeeta Dutta argued that Savitri's "temporary rebellion against her oppression should not be trivialised" (Dutta WS85).

However, Savitri is a feminist mother who decides to defy patriarchy and protect the children from gender-based treatment. She decides to secure the future of the girls, Sumati and Kamala, by ensuring their proper education and self-independence: "'Sumati and Kamala must study up to the B.A. and not depend for their salvation on marriage'" (Narayan, *Dark Room*, 120). Moreover, she defies patriarchy by learning to say "no" to her husband's call. In Chapter Twelve, when Ramani's car reaches home, Savitri ignores it and asks her son, Babu, to open the door for his father. Moreover, when Ramani requests Savitri to allow him "[j]ust a pretty half an hour" of talk, she boldly nullifies his request: "'I [cannot] even stand. I am very tired. I must sleep'" (Narayan, *Dark Room*, 208). Savitri makes Ramani obey her emotion: "'Please yourself,' he said, and went away to his room" (Narayan, *Dark Room*, 208). Undeniably, the narrative trajectory suggests that Savitri begins to live her life on her own terms after realising her identity as a "feminist mother". She starts performing "empowered mothering" that Andrea O'Reilly defines as something that "recogni[s]es that both mothers and children benefit when the mother lives her life and practices mothering from a position of agency, authority, authenticity, and autonomy" (qtd. in Beatson 77).

6. Conclusion

Evidently, drawing on the theoretical ideas of Andrea O'Reilly's "matricentric feminism", the study establishes the fact that R. K. Narayan's *The Dark Room* is a matricentric narrative because

it situates Savitri, the mother, at the centre of the argument. R. K. Narayan has been capable of narrating the events from the perspective of the mother, Savitri. The narrative terrain shows that it is Savitri's motherhood and mothering experience that is shaping her life. Her mothering capacity is always in conflict with patriarchal motherhood institutions. Further, it situates Savitri as the "feminist mother" by incorporating Andrea O'Reilly's theoretical ideas of "feminist mothering". Savitri becomes a feminist mother by revolting against oppressive motherhood institutions that snatch her mothering capacity and deny her rights over her children. Here, it is pertinent to note that scholars of motherhood studies, such as Andrea O'Reilly, Patrice DiQuinzio, and Samira Kawash, argue that motherhood matters and that feminism cannot be fully realised until it includes motherhood and mothering at the centre of the argument. Samira Kawash, in her review article on motherhood, argues that "…feminism cannot possibly hope to remain relevant without acknowledging motherhood in all its contradictions and complexities" (Kawash 971). Indeed, in the words of maternal theorist Patrice DiQuinzio, "to the extent that mothering in all its diverse forms remains an important aspect of women's lives and that decisions about whether, when, and how to mother continues to face almost all women, feminism cannot claim to give an adequate account of women's lives and to represent women's needs and interests if it ignores the issue of mothering" (qtd. in O'Reilly, "Matricentric Feminism", 24).

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