The Criterion: An International Journal in English
Bi-Monthly Peer-Reviewed Open Access e-Journal
(ISSN: 0976-8165) Vol. 17, Issue-V, October 2026
www.the-criterion.com

The Dark Room: A Symbol of Patriarchy and Female Awakening in R. K. Narayan's *The Dark Room*

Arti Rani
Assistant Professor,
Department of English,
Government Degree College, Indora,
Himachal Pradesh.
007.artee@gmail.com

https://doi.org/10.66376/criterion.v17.n5.31

Abstract:
This paper explores *The Dark Room* by R. K. Narayan as a study of male authority and women's awakening within patriarchal family structures. It also examines the oppression of women in a family as a social institution, where the dark room becomes a site of refuge and respite, culmination in awakening of the self. The present article explores the text through a feminist lens. It investigates domestic oppression within the patriarchal structure and the journey of the protagonist from subjugation to self-discovery. It also interprets the text as a site of domestic marginalisation of women, patriarchal conditioning, and self-realisation.
Keywords: Patriarchy, Female Awakening, Subjugation, Agency, Authority.

Article History: Submitted-21/09/2026, Revised-07/10/2026, Accepted-13/10/2026, Published-31/10/2026.
Copyright vests with the author. Licensing: Distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/)

Various critics have analysed R. K. Narayan's *The Dark Room* in relation to the prevalence of patriarchy within familial structures and gender discrimination in Indian society. Sundar Singh, Roland Rencewiggn P., and Pressila Daissy S. argue that Savitri's role as a mother prevents her from resisting patriarchal supremacy (318). Seema Chaudhary interprets the novel as a legitimization of female submission in the domestic sphere (9). Rajesh Kumar Lamsal reads there is temporary awakening of Savitri in the novel, who later succumb to the male-centric social order again (34). Similarly, Sonia Saini and Vandana Srivastava analyse the text as a site of power imbalance and the neglect of women's emotions within social structures, creating a symbolic space of female consciousness (375). Hence, the current paper examines the dark room as a place of retreat and self-discovery. The paper expresses how this dark room serves as a space that reflects Savitri's fight against patriarchy. It also reveals psychological liberation and suffering she endures within the patriarchal setup.

The title of the novel, *The Dark Room,* has layered symbolic relevance for Savitri as a reflection of patriarchal oppression and gradual self-awakening. The novel also examines the role of men and women in a domestic household. This novel deals with protagonist's life, Savitri, a victim at the hands of a quintessential patriarchal husband. Savitri's husband, Ramani, a morally corrupt man, always upholds conventional gender roles and expects the same from his wife and his children. The story follows Savitri as she moves from being quiet and obedient to understanding her position and limitations imposed by patriarchal gender roles.

R. K. Narayan's *The Dark Room*, published in 1938 during British Colonial rule, presents the life of women who struggle for authority and autonomy within a patriarchal structure. The novel explores the situation of women in an Indian household through the sufferings of its protagonist, Savitri.

Traditionally and socially established gender roles and norms within a patriarchal structure are such that men dominate, and women are submissive. Marital happiness is only

attained by adhering to such gender roles. The novel foregrounds prevalent stereotypes in its characterisation. All the male characters, across caste and class, believe that they maintain the sanctity and order of familial and social structures; women must be submissive, and it is the men's duty to regulate female autonomy. This patriarchal framework is not only represented by men but also by women.

Savitri, the protagonist of the novel, represents all that a "good wife" stands for. She forgets herself in her role as a loving wife and mother. She cooks according to her husband Ramani's desires, dresses as he chooses, and does everything to please him. She takes it upon herself each time her husband is angry. However, her inner self reminds her that she does not have a voice in her house; society silences her and makes her accept that the ideal wife is an obedient one. Simone de Beauvoir observes in *The Second Sex*, "One is not born, but rather becomes, woman" (293). This idea reveals that patriarchal society forces Savitri to become a good mother and ideal wife, denying her any agency or autonomy within the domestic institution.

Savitri, when she learns about Ramani's affair with Shanta Bai, blames herself even in that moment of crisis and says, "Perhaps I am old and ugly. How can I help it?" (Narayan 78). When she decides to confront him, she finds it absurd to ask idiotic questions of her husband, who considers himself busy and sensible. Why should he answer her baseless questions? Later, she finds Ramani unremorseful about his moral transgression; she stands up to him and says, "You are not having her and me at the same time, understand? I'm going out of this house this minute" (Narayan 86). The confrontation makes her realise that she is dispossessed in the gendered power structure and says:

> "Things? I don't possess anything in this world. What possession can a woman call her own except her body? Everything else that she has is her father's, her husband's, or her son's. So, take these too" She removed her diamond earrings, the diamond studs

> on her nose, her necklace, gold bangles and rings, and threw them at him. "Now, come on, children, get up! Let us get out." She tried to go near the children. He barred her way. "Don't touch them or talk to them. Go yourself, if you want. They are my children." She hesitated for a moment and then said, "Yes, you are right. They are yours, absolutely. You paid the midwife and the nurse. You pay for their clothes and teachers. You are right. Didn't I say that a woman owns nothing?" (Narayan 88)

Ultimately, she abandons the house once she becomes aware of her lack of ownership and self-worth within the household. After leaving the house, she meets Ponni, a woman from the marginalised section of society, who is not very privileged but empowered in her own way. She helps Savitri get a job and teaches her how to live with dignity within the patriarchal family system. As Savitri decides to reject any charity, even in the form of food or shelter, and vows to accept only what she has earned, she experiences various fears and discomforts. She decides to return to her family, but with psychological awakening, which resonates with the idea of scholar Rajesh Kumar Lamsal (34). She soon realises she requires her husband, a figure of protection, to survive in such a world. Then she decides to return to her family. This novel presents Savitri, a character dominated by her husband and the gender biased thinking of those around her, and Ramani, the key character who leads her to make a decision.

Ramani, Savitri's husband, embodies a conventional masculine authority, upholds rigid gender roles, and often preaches to his wife about her role in domestic chores and in raising their daughters. He makes all the decisions as the family's breadwinner, thereby denying his wife the power to make minor ones, such as whether to send his son to school. He constantly reminds his son to maintain his masculine identity.

He always seems to be correcting others and projecting himself as a perfectionist. He is also very particular about little things and sees everything critically, scolding his wife and servant over minor details and for not doing things correctly.

He also tries to legitimise his wife's submissive and docile behaviour by comparing her to sacred women characters from mythology. He even at times tells her if she is still waiting for him for a meal, "What a dutiful wife! Would rather starve than precede her husband. You are really like some of the women in our ancient books" (Narayan 11). Sometimes he calls his wife a precocious child who still has much to learn. Such patronising remarks reveal his true nature, thereby keeping his authority unquestioned. This suggests that he uses mythology to naturalise women's submissiveness within the domestic sphere.

He constantly declares that he cares for and provides for his family, yet he gives his wife's favourite piece of furniture to Shanta Bai. He also asserts that men and women are equal and should be treated accordingly. This shows the double standards he maintains. When it comes to Shanta Bai, his views are different; he feels bad when he hears that her husband was harsh with her. He has all the sympathy for Shanta Bai, but when it comes to his own wife, he has none.

He invariably asks for obedience and deference from his wife and children, as he is the family's breadwinner. He even expects such subservience regardless of his own mistakes. However, his behaviour completely changes when it comes to his extramarital relationship with his colleague Shanta Bai. When Shanta Bai wants to thank him, he simply says, "When I know I like a person, I like the person, that is all, and I will do anything for the person. Please don't talk of repayment on any account" (Narayan 118). Through Ramani's character, the novel exposes the embedded double standards within the patriarchal structure, which grant freedom to men but completely deny it to women, and despite that, expect women to be obedient and subservient.

When children express fear of their mother, Ramani shows no concern for his wife's well-being. He realises that this could damage his social status, and he must leave Malgudi if anything happened to Savitri and people found out. This suggests that Ramani represents a moral patriarch, considering his wife a trophy to display in society because of her good looks and docility, yet remains indifferent to her emotions. All these circumstances and characters lead Savitri into inner conflict and turmoil.

Ramani can be seen as an embodiment of toxic masculinity, the one who believes it is the duty of women to rear female children, the kitchen and household chores. It is within this patriarchal framework created by Ramani and other patriarchal characters that Savitri's inner conflict and struggle emerge.

Pandit, a religious preacher, an archetype of religious dominion, even upholds the idea of the subjugation of women. He believes that a woman who holds an opinion is like a disorder, which can be cured by her husband merely thrashing her. Mari, when he goes to the priest, sent by his wife to get any work for Savitri in the temple, hears the priest first ridicule the idea of obeying his wife and then responds, "If she won't let you rest, thrash her; that is the way to keep a woman sane. In these days, you fellows are impotent mugs, and let your women ride you about" (Narayan 129). Even for him, the husband is an absolute authority; if anything is wrong in the family, the wife is the cause. Further, he strengthened the idea that the husband has the agency to drive the wife away from his house only when she is immoral. As he said, "There must be something wrong with her if she has no home and must seek a livelihood outside; her husband must have driven her out. Why will a husband drive a wife out?" (Narayan 129). Thus, the Pandit becomes a representative of religion itself, which legitimises women's suffering and denies the autonomy of women in a patriarchal structure.

The ideology of women's subjugation is not only confined to the higher strata but also prevalent in the lower classes of society. The housekeeper, Ranga, turns out to be a strong

believer in women's subordination and an advocate of the view that it is not the business of a wife to interfere when the father is dealing with the son.

The cook too upholds the same idea by narrating his own experience: how he once beat his wife when she tried to interfere while disciplining his son, and he rather applauds and validates the use of violence as a tool to teach women their lessons whenever they trespass on their authority. Such instances reveal that patriarchal attitudes are not only restricted to the educated or privileged class but also to the socially marginalised sections, which have also internalised the patriarchal norms and reproduce and legitimise women's exploitation by men. Even Janamma, a female character, supports this idea that it is the duty of a wife to make her husband feel that whatever decision they have taken is right.

The patriarchal society always tries to impose gender roles because they believe this is the only way marital peace can be attained, in which the patriarch keeps the authority to make the major decisions, especially the ways kids are to be reared: not to make the boys effeminate and not to make the girls authoritative, just meek and docile, as only such girls are loved by society. Also, it is the husband's duty to tame the wife; otherwise, it will be unbecoming of the woman.

Ponni is one of the characters in the novel who talks beyond gender norms. She holds the decisive authority in her family, knowing how to get things done, even when men cannot. Mari could not persuade the temple priest to provide Savitri with a job at the temple. Then she presents her case to the priest and convinces him, who had earlier refused her, believing Savitri is morally corrupt. Ponni never hesitates to articulate her rationality in a patriarchal society. She openly shows how society treats women, even when the man is at fault. She asserts that women can do well without men too. As she says,

> There are hundreds of reasons for a person to leave home. If this man by my side tries any new tricks, I will walk out of my home, and that will be the last he will see of

> me, and people who ask why, what, how and when will get the proper reply from me. You want us to do all sorts of things for you. Why should we do it? Just for the sake of friendship. And yet you won't do us a little good turn for the same friendship (Narayan 136).

Also, she is the one who teaches Savitri that "men are good creatures, but you must never give way to them. Be firm, and they will behave" (Narayan 148). Thus, Ponni emerges as a figure of resistance and is the only character who brings Savitri genuine strength and clarity in her crisis.

Shanta Bai is portrayed as an independent and unconventional woman. As she was the victim of a harsh husband in marriage, this made her oppose such men who do not care about women's honour. She also defies the idea of a submissive wife and believes in equality in marriage. Although she holds revolutionary and modern ideas, she lacks sympathy towards other women. Her affair with Ramani is also objectionable. Thus, the character of Shanta Bai presents the complex role of the modern woman in patriarchal society. Also, it highlights the tension that modernity would bring to a traditional framework.

The dark room stands for Savitri's identity inside the patriarchal household. As the darkness obscures visibility, Savitri is also unable to recognise her own identity within the household. The people around Savitri, including her husband, reinforce the idea that supressing her conscience is right, as it is a wife's duty to never challenge her husband's authority. Whenever her husband is angry, everyone makes her believe she is at fault, because a man is regarded as an ultimate authority in a family. Her roles as a mother and an ideal wife leave no space for her consciousness to awaken. Therefore, the darkness of the room is not limited to the household but extends into society, leaving no space for her self-awareness.

This 'dark room' also serves as a space for Savitri, where she takes temporary respite and moments of self-actualisation. In such moments, she realises that she holds neither agency

nor decisive power to settle even a petty issue in the household, and expresses her sense of powerlessness when she states,

> How impotent she was, she thought; she had not the slightest power to do anything at home, and that after fifteen years of married life. Babu did look very ill, and she was powerless to keep him in bed; she felt she ought to have asserted herself a little more at the beginning of her married life, and then all would have been well. There were girls nowadays who took charge of their husbands the moment they were married; there was her own friend Gangu who had absolutely tethered up her poor man (Narayan 5).

The 'dark room' also becomes an instrument for marking a transitional phase in Savitri's life. This space helps her step outside the patriarchal boundaries of the household and embark on a new journey of awakening. After her departure, she comes across Ponni, a figure of female empowerment in her own way. Ponni emerges as an embodiment of enlightenment in Savitri's life, strengthening her and showing her how to deal with men and patriarchy by living within society. She is the only character who tells her that survival without men is also possible.

After meeting Ponni, Savitri begins living her life on her own, refusing to accept any help or charity, as she is tired of being a recipient of male benevolence, first from her father and later from her husband. Nevertheless, very soon, she is overwhelmed by the fear of living independently in society, as the threat of being intruded upon at night makes her apprehensive. Living independently in the temple, she realised that women need protection from men in the patriarchal world. She needs constant support to survive, as if she is "like a bamboo pole which cannot stand without a wall to support it" (Narayan 146). She finds herself defeated after realising that she is not fit for this fight alone.

Ultimately, she decides to return home to her children and her husband. Her return does not signify a return to her former self, who believes in the absolute authority of males in the

household, but the return of an awakened individual. Although she reintegrates in the same social structure within the same gendered conventions, she experiences psychological liberation. Thus, the *Dark Room* provides respite and later helps her develop agency. She also learns from Ponni that one can live with awareness without changing the patriarchal world.

Works Cited:

Beauvoir, Simone de. *The Second Sex*. Translated by Constance Borde and Sheila Malovany-Chevallier, Vintage Books, 2011.

Chaudhary, Seema. "The Unfair Conservatism of a Patriarchal Society in R. K. Narayan's *The Dark Room*." *The English Research Express*, 2020, pp. 1–9. https://www.issnjournals.com/issn-journals/international-journals/110-language-literature-linguistics-and-allied-journals/the-english-research-express/the-unfair-conservatism-of-a-patriarchal-society-in-r-k-narayan-s-the-dark-room-pages-01-09. Accessed 4 July 2026.

Lamsal, Rajesh Kumar. "Victimisation of Women in R. K. Narayan's The Dark Room." Master's thesis, Tribhuvan University, Ratna Rajyalaxmi Campus, 2009. https://hdl.handle.net/20.500.14540/5985. Accessed 4 July 2026.

Narayan, R. K. *The Dark Room*. Indian Thought Publications, 1938.

Saini, Sonia, and Vandana Srivastava. "An Analysis of Domestic Struggle in R. K. Narayan's *The Dark Room*." *International Journal of Applied Research*, vol. 12, no. 1, pt. E, 2026, pp. 374–377. https://www.allresearchjournal.com/archives/2026/vol12issue1/PartE/12-1-80-449.pdf. Accessed 4 July 2026.

Singh, Sundar, et al. "Child and Family: A Perspective on R.K. Narayan's *The Dark Room*." *RUDN Journal of Literary Criticism*, vol. 30, no. 2, 2025, pp. 310-320. https://doi.org/10.22363/2312-9220-2025-30-2-357-366. Accessed 4 July 2026.