

## “Obligated to no man”: Negotiating Patriarchy and Female Subaltern Voice in R. K. Narayan’s *The Dark Room*

**Arun Kumar Biswas**

Assistant Professor,  
Department of English,  
Nabadwip Vidyasagar College.  
Nabadwip, Nadia, India.

[biswas.arunkumar11@gmail.com](mailto:biswas.arunkumar11@gmail.com)

### **Structured Abstract:**

**Purpose:** Women have been subject to male suppression and hegemony in patriarchal society. The postcolonial subaltern studies, grounded on Hegel’s dialectics of the ‘self’ and the ‘other’ posit the women marginalized and ‘colonized’ in the patriarchal cultural construction as the ‘other’, in Gramsci’s word the ‘subalterns’. The subaltern feminist scholar Spivak addresses women as ‘gendered subaltern’. R. K. Narayan as a humanitarian writer has convincingly focused on the ‘subaltern’ condition of woman, Savitri and also her defiance of patriarchy in his novel *The Dark Room* (1938). This paper aims to study the text from the perspectives of subaltern studies with a view to explore the marginalized ‘subalternity’ of Savitri, a ‘gendered subaltern’ and her female resistance to the patriarchal hegemony in her journey from victimization to self-assertion.

**Methodology / Approach:** The paper is an analytical reading of R. K. Narayan’s *The Dark Room* from the subaltern-feminist standpoints which interrogates the woman protagonist’s marginalized condition with the close analysis of the text.

**Findings / Conclusion:** In *The Dark Room* Narayan has portrayed Savitri as ‘gendered subaltern’ who initially appears a meek and subservient woman representing an ‘old subaltern’. But eventually she emerges a “new subaltern” who articulates her ‘resistance’ in her journey from negation to self-affirmation.

**Originality / Value:** This reading will enable us to understand the marginal location of women and their ‘gendered’ problems in the twentieth century south Indian patriarchal society which is discriminatory to the ‘weaker sex’.

**Keywords:** women, patriarchy, gendered subaltern, subalternity, assertion.

**Paper Type:** Research Paper.

## Introduction

Subaltern studies emerged in the late twentieth century as an indispensable segment of postcolonial discourse and it is grounded on Hegel’s theorization of master-slave dialectics between the ‘self’ and the ‘other’. Postcolonial studies enriched much with the works of subaltern study groups interrogate such issues as hybridity, mimicry, and subaltern, contesting patriarchy and gender hegemony. The term ‘subaltern’ generally denotes the socially excluded and oppressed people at the margin of society. It now embodies any person or group of minority or lower ranks based on race, caste, class, sex, gender, language, and religion. The word ‘subaltern’ was used by Antonio Gramsci in his *Selections from Prison Notebooks* (1971) for the subordinate social classes on whom the dominant power groups exercise certain ‘hegemony’. The term ‘hegemony’ used by Gramsci to mean the stately dominance is now purported to address cultural dominance by consent. Likewise, the term ‘subalternity’ refers to the condition of subordination in the forms of colonial, political, economic, social, cultural, racial, linguistic and sexual dominance. Gramsci talked about two types of ‘subalternity’—‘old subaltern’ and ‘new subaltern’. According to him, the ‘old subaltern’ is docile and unvoiced, while the ‘new subaltern’ is daring and confident to rebel against discrimination. Therefore, ‘protest’ and ‘the spirit of resistance’ shape the idea of a ‘new subaltern’. The other forms of subalterns include racial subaltern, caste subaltern, gendered subaltern, and aggrieved subaltern who undergo injustice and discrimination.

The subaltern discourse and the question of ‘subalternity’ raised by Gramsci, influenced thinkers like Ranajit Guha, Dipesh Chakrabarty, Gayatri C. Spivak and others who employ the subaltern dynamics to the narrative of the neglected and the exploited, and socially ostracized people like lower classes—peasants, chandals, sudras, bauls, the tribals and women who are at the margin in the hegemonic power-centre. While emphasizing the subaltern historiography subaltern scholars like Ranajit Guha also concentrate in narrating the history of the marginalized people and their forgotten culture and right arguing that the oppressed people must write their own history ‘from the below’. Thus, they recommend recreating history from the subaltern perspectives.

## Methodology / Approach

Following this framework of subaltern studies, the postcolonial feminist discourse postulates that women are ‘the other’ marginalized or colonized by the patriarchy in the process of

social acculturation. In the context of masculinity, women are weaker and fragile. The patriarchal society where, to quote Sangari and Vaid, “each aspect of reality is gendered” (*Recasting Women* 2) degrades woman as inferior, ‘the other’ making her a ‘gendered subaltern’. The term ‘gendered subaltern’ implies the gender discrimination or ostracization based on the cultural formation of sexuality. Gayatri C. Spivak in *Can the Subaltern Speak?* talks about the ‘gendered reality’ or gender based subalternity in relation to culturally marginalized women considering them as voiceless. She explains that the subalterns, particularly the ‘female subalterns’, have no voice as they have no history and identity. Hence, woman is an ‘old subaltern’ as woman hardly can articulate their voice in the male-controlled power structure. Spivak writes in the same essay: “If in the context of colonial production the subaltern has no history and cannot speak, the subaltern as female is even more deeply in shadow” (83). Though she describes the subalterns as fragile, later on Spivak argues in favour of Gramsci’s concept of ‘new subaltern’ who can resist and raise voice against all hegemonic powers.

Many works have been written on the marginalized status and wounded psyche of women in the patriarchal society. But my paper concentrates only on R. K. Narayan’s novel *The Dark Room* to be analyzed from the Feminist-Subaltern approach.

### **Objective**

In the light of the above discussion, Narayan’s novel *The Dark Room* will be examined in this article from the stand point of gendered ‘subalternity’ where woman is ‘the other’, the margin, and man is in the ‘centre’ of power. The paper examines how the woman protagonist tries to move from the position of ‘the margin’ to ‘the centre’ in the journey from ignorance to assertion and emerges, for the nonce, a ‘new subaltern’.

### **Women and Patriarchy**

Women have been objectified by male hegemonic society. India is, traditionally, a ‘patriarchal’ country where women are both worshipped and whipped. ‘Patriarchy’, a male-centered institution, perpetuates a system of gender inequality “in which female is everywhere subsumed under the male” (Rich 58). In fact, woman in India has been viewed as an inferior ‘second sex’ while men are considered the superior and stronger sex. Unlike men, women are presumed to be emotional, fragile and lacking self-reliance. She has been object to be chained and dominated in the male dominated social set up in various ways and

mechanisms. The institution of marriage is a mechanism, which demands a lifelong obedience and self-sacrifice for woman. Marriage being “the destiny that society traditionally offers women” (Beauvoir 451) sanctions the submissive role for women. J.S Mill observes that: ‘a wife’ is more than ‘a slave’ (207). Marriage in India is considered a very sacred institution dominated by the patriarchy which prescribes that ‘husband is a living deity’ and wife should be ‘*pativrata*’ (Arora 116), i.e. being devoted to the husband. According to *Manusmrit* (V. 154), “A virtuous wife should serve her husband as if he were a god, whether he be of evil character or lustful (loving another woman) or devoid of good qualities” (Kane 562).

### **Narayan’s Attitude to Women**

The Indian novel in English has profoundly focused on the life and predicament of woman. Almost all the writers of Indian writing in English have written about women and their world. R. K. Narayan (1906-2001) has convincingly focused on the issues of women including the typical gender troubles, their problems and pains and the exploitation and injustice imposed on them in the patriarchal Indian society. He has created the female figures such as Rosie in *The Guide* (1960), Daisy in *The Painter of Signs* (1976), Savitri in *The Dark Room* who are tolerant and quiet, but sometimes emerge out as strong individuals confronting all the traditional laws and taboos. The image of the married woman as a subject of continual male oppression is quite usual in Narayan’s novels, like the novels of Graham Greene who befriends Narayan. Narayan believes that the woman as wife in India leads a wretched life without space and identity. Narayan shares his view of the subjugated Indian woman in his letter to Graham Greene: “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 ‘Woman’s Lib’ movement. Man assigned her a secondary place. . . . A wife in an orthodox milieu of Indian society was an ideal victim of such circumstances” (*My Days* 119).

### **Critical Discussion**

Narayan’s *The Dark Room* (1938) is a very conventional story on the disharmony of married life between Savitri and Ramani. It depicts the husband Ramani as the tormentor, and the wife Savitri as a victim within a marriage institution. Ramani is a successful branch manager of an Insurance Company. They have three children namely Babu, Kamala and Sumati. Their marital life and ‘adjustment’ are distorted with the appearance of Shanta Bai as an assistant

for improving business and he soon falls in love madly with her. Savitri feels betrayed. She undergoes a sense of suffering and subalternity. Being disappointed, she attempts to drown herself. But she is saved by a blacksmith, returns home and takes her normal duties as a housewife in this sort of loveless life. In the course of time, Ramani does not change his attitude. Actually, Savitri, a subaltern wife, is made to feel how completely she is dependent upon her whimsical and insensitive husband. In this connection K. V. Sundaram says: “The novel is a heart rendering tale of a neglected wife who is bullied by her husband. Savitri defies conventions and runs away in misery but returns home to be bored and tormented by her husband even more” (46).

The novel begins with the conjugal patriarchal dominance already in the relationship between Savitri and Ramani. This ‘gender trouble’ arises from the emotional estrangement between Savitri “whose badge is sufferance” (Iyenger 372) and her husband, Ramani who is possessive, “eccentric and lawless in his taste” (*Dark Room* 2). A typical Indian husband, Ramani is dominating in nature. He always heads his wife in the same way as he directs his servants. He can hardly put up with his wife and he rebukes her in every opportunity. His patriarchal mentality always drives him to suppress the interest of Savitri who endures silently. He was entirely self-made, who needs “no advice from others and at least from a wife” (109). Kate Millet believes that patriarchal order imposes subservience on women. Millett in her *Sexual Politics* (1969) describes the relation between the two sexes in patriarchy as basically ‘political’. Millet claims that “the image of women as we know it is an image created by men and fashioned to suit their needs. These needs spring from a fear of the “Otherness” of woman” (*Sexual Politics* 46). Thus, she becomes victim to patriarchy. In this suppressing conjugal relationship Savitri feels neglected, ‘the other’; she is slave to her husband, her master. Like a silent subaltern, she has no voice, no space in the family matters except procreation and kitchen. In one occasion, when she advises Babu, her sick son, not to go to school, Ramani gets unduly irritated with Savitri: “Mind your own business, do you hear?... 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” (1). This disciplinary advices are reflective of patriarchal desire of keeping the women inside the four walls—kitchen, a space of her own. This male hegemony negates women’s capacity/business beyond the socially imposed marginality embedded in the stereotyped notion of womanhood, wifehood and motherhood. The female aspiration to come out of the culturally constructed periphery encoded here in the ‘kitchen roles’ is denied. These practices, as Jane Pylypa remarks quoting Susan Bordo’s

argument, ‘embody the ideal of self-deprivation for women, of limiting her desire, ambitions, and needs, and thereby reinforce the patriarchal social structure’ (Pylypa 29).

The Indian social milieu that Narayan has created in *The Dark Room* represents the typical masculine construction where woman is a puppet in the hands of husband and male. According to Foucault, ‘power is everywhere... it is exercised from innumerable points ...and immanent in relationships’ (*History of Sexuality* 93-94). In the patriarchal social structure of relationships woman is bullied and strangled in different ways, and she is convinced from the childhood that she is born in order to please the man. She is thus turned into mere shadows of her husband, her instructor. This master-servant marital relationship has been interpreted by Germaine Greer in terms of ‘employer’ and ‘employee’ (329). This masculine social orientation affects seriously the husband-wife relationships. This is what happens in the married life between Ramani and Savitri and spoils their marital relationship. The patriarchal authoritative mindset reaches too deep in Ramani that he cannot be satisfied with anything related to Savitri. Even her silence sometimes makes him furious: ‘Saving up your energy by being silent!’ saving it up for what purpose?’ (3). He also gets angered at her response. Savitri appears in the novel with an image of a typical Indian woman. She as a newly bride maintains all the family values and customs without fail. She never thought to have dinner before her husband. A typical husband, Ramani here gets only pleased with her traditional social practices and praises his wife: “What a dutiful wife! Would rather starve than precede her husband; you are really like some of the women in our ancient books” (11). In India women’s worth and value are usually dependent on their typical self-sacrifice and complete acquiescence as manifested in mythological figures such as Sita, Draupadi, Parvati, Savitri who idealize the standard of wifehood and motherhood. The name ‘Savitri’ as a mythological character stands for an ideal woman dedicated to her husband, Satyavan. The protagonist’s mythological identification is significant in this context. Savitri, like a typical submissive wife tries to comply with every decision and caprice of her husband. We see she is even rebuked to take extra time for dressing and normal makeup. The very patriarchal repercussion comes out from Ramani: “Women are exasperating. Only a fool would have anything to do with them. Hour and hours for dressing!” (21). She chooses to remain silent to the oppression and abuses thrown towards her in the typical gender-biased Indian society where males control women who follow, as Ramani claims, “their husbands, like the shadow following the substance” (109), in spite of their spousal torture and irresponsibility. Savitri leads a very substandard life without a little beat of individual freedom and identity—a

subaltern life. Abused by her husband she is also denied of her right as “a human being” (85). Ramani often rudely instructs his wife about the family matters and manners: “It is not business of a wife’s to butt in when the father is dealing with his son. It is a bad habit (40)”. In this patriarchal paradigm / ‘habit’ even she is denied her motherly right on their children. She is not allowed to take her children with her before leaving. Conventionally, patriarchy considers children as ‘male property’ and it, as Kate Millett says, ‘grants the father nearly absolute ownership over wife and children’. Here, ‘kinship is acknowledged only through the association of male line’ (Millett 33) and excludes the female/ the mother from the right and ‘recognition’. Savitri’s situation becomes so pathetic that even her servant, Ranga does not spare her from male hegemony. Ranga, like Ramani, remarks remembering his own case of slapping his wife: “Women are terrible” (40). Here, her position is more pathetic than the subaltern position of a servant. Surprisingly, the experiences of women in both the upper and the lower strata of society are identical in terms of silence and subalternity. Simone De Beauvoir describes this marginalized predicament of women thus: “She is the inessential in front of the essential. He is the Subject; he is the Absolute. She is the Other” (6).

Savitri’s long silent sufferings make her feel insignificant and “impotent” (5) in the house not having “the slightest power to do anything at home, and that after fifteen years of married life” (5). Later, like an ‘aggrieved subaltern’ who inwardly feels pain but fails to resist, she gradually realizes that she “ought to have asserted herself a little more at the beginning of her married life and then all would have been well” (5). But she, like typical Hindu wife, did not mind or speak out to the familial disgrace on her. Her patriarchal socialization culturally mystifies her to be true and loyal to the husband, in spite of her husband’s moral infidelity. This makes her not to believe the gossips of her husband with his office attendant, Shanta Bai. Rather, she tries to consider it as a result of sheer jealousy: “It was sheer envy that must have Gangu and the rest talk scandal about him” (65). But when Gangu refers to the fact, she gets shocked. She begins to feel depressed and neglected. She now suffers from the inferiority complex: “Perhaps I am old and ugly. How I can help it? I have born children and slaved for the house” (68). While looking at the reflection of her wrinkled face she feels out of her inferiority complex that it is her ugliness responsible for distance from her husband. Interestingly, she does not find any fault of her husband for it. Rather, she accuses herself for all these and makes her responsible. Even she knows well that her husband makes open love affair with another woman. This is indicative of the characteristic behaviour pattern of subaltern’s ‘mental submissiveness’. This is how the patriarchy culturally conditions and

constructs feminine vision. Before the mirror, she ponders about the reason of her present condition: “Perhaps I am not good enough for him. Let me admit my complexion has become rather sooty, and these dark rings under the eyes.... it’s hardly his fault if he can’t like my appearance very much” (69-70). This neglected sense and her realization impels her to take makeup afresh and look her attractive to the eyes of her husband, but in vain. But this initiates, in one hand, her desire for individuality. Utterly hopeless and tormented, she catches hold of terror that haunts her from her cradle as a “second sex’. Before her drowning, she murmurs pathetically:

Yes, afraid, afraid of everything. One definite thing in life is Fear. Fear from the cradle to the funeral pyre .... Afraid of a husband’s displeasures .... Afraid of one’s father, teacher 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...(91).

The psychological fear and agony echo the subaltern position of women in gender sensitive society. Her ‘subalternity’ resounds more evidently when, she, being disillusioned, reassess her marital identity as a wife and comparatively finds no basic difference between a wife and a prostitute in respect of social status and importance. She bitterly bursts out: “What is the difference between a prostitute and a married woman?” (93). She finds the answer: “The prostitute changes her men but a married woman does not, that is all: but both earn their food and shelter in the same manner” (93). Interestingly, here both are, so to say, the female workers and employ their bodily practices for livelihood. The prostitute is paid, the wife unpaid. Hence, Germaine Greer considers wives as “life-contracted unpaid workers” (329). Here, the woman’s body becomes a means of livelihood and shelter. The female body being a product of cultural negotiations not only acts as ‘potential site of domination’ but also defines different identities of women- wife and prostitute. Interestingly, both encounter the patriarchal subjugation, even without right on their bodies. This sounds more ironic when Savitri yells “What possession can a woman call her own except her body” (88). Michel Foucault coined the term “biopower” as Jen Pylypa comments, to “focus[es] on the body as the site of subjugation, and because it highlights how individuals are implicated in their own oppression as they participate in habitual daily practices such as the self-regulation of hygiene, health, and sexuality” (Pylypa 29). Savitri soon realizes her actual subaltern position that “a woman owns nothing” (88) even her body. She confronts her husband before her departure: “I don’t possess anything in this world.... Everything she [woman] has is her



father’s, her husband’s, or her son’s” (88). This evokes the sense of age old ‘dependence syndrome’ of women in patriarchy.

The prolonged painful torture and denial shown to her enkindles in her a quest for individual identity. While pondering over her meaningless caged existence in Ramani’s dull house, she, like Jaya in Deshpande’s *That Long Silence*, feels tormented and rejected in life. She can tolerate her humiliation no more and registers her courage and angry protest against the “pinchbeck domestic tyrants like Ramani” (Iyenger 372), her husband. She is “not afraid of her husband” (85) any more. Rather, she interrogates, though implicitly, the double standard of her insensitive husband who neglects his wife and unhesitatingly engages in extra-marital affair. Unlike the voiceless ‘old subaltern’, she now claims for her own ‘self’, instead of being ‘the other’: “I’m a human being. You men will never grant that. For you we are playthings when you feel like hugging, and slaves at other times. Don’t think that you can fondle us when you like and kick us when you choose” (85). In fact, the long disapproval to her independent ‘self’ gives rise to her pursuit for self-identity. Betty Friedan’s words are worth-quoting here: ‘For a woman, the need for self-fulfillment– autonomy, self-realization, independence, individuality, self-actualization is as important as the sexual need, with serious consequences, when it is thwarted’ (282). Savitri comes out of her cloistered self and confidently confirms her decision to Ramani while dragging her hand:

Don’t touch me! ... I am not afraid....Do you think I am going to stay here? .... Do 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? (87).

She assertively articulates her voice: “No, I’ll starve and die in the open, under the sky, a roof for which we need be *obliged to no man*” (88). She is now a woman of self-pride and self-determination that prevents her from submitting herself to her egoistic husband any more. She deconstructs the mythological implication of her name. After further betrayal and being disappointed with her husband, she leaves her husband’s house with “her own will” (110) at midnight, to quote Iyenger again, “defiantly walks out of the “doll’s house”, leaving her husband and children behind” (371-72). The patriarchal ‘callous behaviour’ of her husband, as Prof. Iyenger continues, “strikes some fire in her, and she is for the nonce transformed into Ibsen’s Nora, asserting her elementary rights as a woman” (371).

Getting no positive response from her husband and losing all hopes in life, she is determined to succumb into the river by the village. Now, she thinks drowning will end her marital slavery and distress, hence more honourable rather than leading a life of subalternity. However, she is saved because of the timely presence of Mari, the local blacksmith of Sukkur village there. Later, she is nurtured by Ponni, the wife of Mari who tries to know as to the reason of her decision to commit suicide. The way Savitri reacts to the question brings out her long suppressed feminine pain as well as her sense of loss for self-space: “Is this your husband?... suppose he took another woman and neglected you, what would you do?” (104). Thus, suicide which apparently seems to project her escapist tendency becomes her way of silent protest to the male mistreatment. Even Savitri’s denial to return to her husband’s house demonstrates her dissatisfaction and her protest against the conventions and customs of the male society where ‘a single lapse’ becomes ‘fatal for women’ (Altekar 377) and the single violation of social norms on the part of woman surprises her male counterpart. We see Ramani gets astonished with the sudden unexpected disappearance of Savitri. The departure of his wife does not bring about any change in him. Rather, he gets stunned with this ‘unprecedented’ event which never happened in fifteen years of their married life. From the beginning of her wedded life, she behaved as “docile and obedient” (108) wife who never mistakes to do her womanly and wifely duties in the family. Ramani’s male ego is wounded with this, and he reacts to the act of disobedience of his wife:

A woman’s primary duty (also a divine privilege) was being a wife and a mother, and what woman retained the right of being called a wife who disobeyed her husband? Didn’t all the ancient epics and scriptures enjoin upon women the strictest identification with her husband? ... whose one dominant quality was a blind stubborn following of their husbands, like shadows following the substance. (109)

A cultural product of patriarchal society, Ramani expects Savitri to play the role of a conventional wife to cater to his ideal of submissive womanhood / wifeness. His patriarchal faith makes him believe, like Manu in *Manusmriti*, that wife is no better than a commodity, man’s burden. Instead of showing sympathy and searching for his wife, he “decidedly” (110) remains indifferent, and describes this act as womanly “madness” (110). Ramani’s attitude reaffirms the patriarchal gender politics of ‘feminization of madness’ where women’s action or desire beyond the male expectation is significantly labeled as feminine fad, ‘madness’ or insanity, thus negating woman’s existence. This suggests that men have rationality and self-

control and women lack of these qualities thus associated with the image of ‘mentally unstable’ (Ernst 361) persons. In this context Elaine Showalter argues, “madness, even when experienced by men is metaphorically and symbolically represented as feminine: a female malady” (*The Female Malady* 4). Hence, Ramani being oriented in the patriarchal culture believes that Savitri would come back herself and “apologize when her *madness* passed” (110).

### **Observation**

But the irony is that Savitri, a changed person does not return predictably. Another irony is that when she vainly dreams of only a little room in the heart/hut of her husband but today being rejected, she no more desires so, rather she seeks an open roof, whole ‘room of her own’, instead of her husband’s ‘dark room’. Her self-realization and determination which was dormant is now reinforced after her survival. She is now more conscious about her self-respect which she sacrificed to the altar of her husband who rewards her merely with oppression and subalternity. The author comments: “She was an individual with pride and with a soul, and she wasn’t going to submit to anything hereafter” (103). Now she wants to live on her own way. She thinks to earn for herself giving up her male dependence. When Ponni offers her to go to her house and to have food, she politely declines and urges Ponni to manage a job and shelter for her. The tone of her self-confidence and search for self runs through her utterance thus: “I am resolved never to accept food or shelter which I have not earned... If you don’t want me to starve, give me some work- I can cook, scrub, sew.... I can look after children” (122). Now she is so resolute that she is ready to do any work, but unwilling to go back to her husband’s house. The way she searches for job indicates her quest for independent life: “Any work which will keep my life in my body, though why it should I can’t say, is suitable for me” (111). She wants a free life of her own: “I don’t want to depend on anyone hereafter for the miserable handful of food I need every day” (111). Even she is ready to live without her children, though her motherly affections continuously haunt her. Mari finally manages a work for her in the temple of the village priest. She gets pleased to get the work on the term of ‘half measure of rice and quarter of an anna day’. Now she would have to depend neither on her husband nor others, “need be obliged to no man.” (88). Her pleasure bounds no limit because she is now not bound to answer to anyone to expense the money she earns as well as to lead an individual life. Her new found self-identity is asserted: “This is my rice, my very own: and I am not obliged to any one for this: this is nobody’s

charity to me” (142). Thus, she feels ‘triumphant’. Unlike the submissive woman, she challenges the ‘expected’ feminine behaviour pattern as a woman and a wife in the male centered institution of marriage that threatens her identity. Like a ‘new subaltern’ she articulates her voice against patriarchal denial and hegemony. But her firmness and defiance do not exist for long. Soon after spending three nights in the solitary temple surrounding, she begins to feel uprooted. Her memory for the children makes her homesick. She finally decides to go back to the family.

### **Conclusion**

To sum up, *The Dark Room* deals with the issue of the position of woman as ‘gendered subaltern’ in the patriarchal Indian society. Narayan has realistically delineated Savitri’s tormented and fragmented psyche and shows how she comes out of the ‘dark house’ and becomes a self-sufficient defiant woman, to some degree. The novelist while representing woman as gendered subaltern in the male-centred society poses the questions of equal right and justice for woman. Savitri represents the female subalterns who are trapped and incarcerated in the patriarchal construction. However, she unveils her own protest and inner strength. But her voice of defiance is soon buried with her hasty return without any assurance from her husband. Kripal Singh says that she “displays some potential for growth when she at first rejects her traditional role and then accepts it with a new found sense of humility” (137). But, this is not exactly a failure. She is now ready to face the troubles of life which she dared earlier. She now learns to live at least, instead of drowning. This is the positivity that she acquires from her ‘failure’. Her situation can be better expressed with the condition of Hemingway’s Santiago, ‘a man can be destroyed but not defeated’. Despite her reconciliation, it can be said that the greatness of Savitri as a woman character lies in the fact that she, at least, tries to deconstruct her socially presumed gendered identity by raising voice against her exploitation and humiliation, and also tries to live alternatively. Shantha Krishnaswami argues aptly in this context: “Her rebellion though futile, though not as radical, as that of other fictive heroines, is remarkable in the sense it gave her an alternative patterning of her way of living, although brief” (114). In that sense, Savitri initially represents an ‘old subaltern’—a traditional submissive woman, but gradually she emerges a “new subaltern” who registers, for the nonce, her ‘spirit of resistance’ in contesting patriarchal ostracization in her journey from negation to self-affirmation.

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