

Malathi Rao's 'Disorderly Women' an Encounter

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Abstract:

Malathi Rao's Disorderly Women offers a compelling narrative that challenges traditional gender roles and social expectations in post-independence Indian society. This research article critically examines the novel through a feminist lens, highlighting the lives and struggles of its central female characters—Saraswati, Kamala, and Rani—who resist the limitations imposed by patriarchal norms. The study explores how Rao portrays women's agency, rebellion, and inner conflict, revealing the complexities of identity, freedom, and self-expression. By engaging with socio-cultural, historical, and literary contexts, this paper investigates the novel's contribution to Indian feminist literature and its relevance in contemporary gender discourse. Ultimately, Disorderly Women emerges as a powerful narrative of resistance and redefinition of womanhood.

Keywords: Malathi Rao, Disorderly Women, Feminism, Patriarchy, Indian English Literature

Introduction

Malathi Rao's *Disorderly Women* stands out as a powerful literary work rooted in the narrow yet intense milieu of orthodox Brahmin society in pre-independence India. The novel is significant not only for its social commentary but also for the way it captures the rigid cultural frameworks within which women lived. Set in an era when girls were married off as early as twelve and domestic violence was normalized, *Disorderly Women* presents the struggles of four women who dare to

challenge the social order and transgress the boundaries of domesticity.

Rao's narrative repeatedly questions the god-like status traditionally attributed to husbands, shedding light on the deeply entrenched patriarchy of the time. Yet, the women often find themselves internalizing the belief that they are not strong or brave enough to survive without a husband—regardless of how they are treated. This contradiction reflects the psychological burden of generations conditioned to accept submission as destiny. As we

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journey through the text, it becomes imperative to reflect on the broader social and religious structures of the time that shaped and constrained women's lives.

The novel explores the inner worlds of its protagonists—Saraswati, Kamala, Rani, and others—women born into conservative Brahmin families, bound by orthodoxy and social norms. Despite being battered emotionally and psychologically by a male-dominated system, they do not collapse entirely, revealing an inner strength that defies silent suffering. *Disorderly Women* is not a story of triumphant emancipation; rather, it presents a realist portrayal of women's lives caught in an unyielding web of tradition, with few avenues for escape.

The Sahitya Akademi Award-winning novel (2007) carries the cultural essence of Karnataka while being written in English—a language historically alien to its local setting. This juxtaposition of local experience and global language adds depth to the narrative. Publisher Jamuna Rao's suggestion to tell the story from a contemporary perspective led to the emergence of Ila, a narrator from the next generation, who carries the "burden of remembering." Through Ila's eyes, the reader is given a layered account of the past, filtered through memory and emotion.

The novel is structured around the metaphor of a house named "Himalaya," once a cherished home and now up for sale. For Ila, Himalaya is not just a place,

but a symbol of rootedness and identity. It evokes memories of her aunt Kamala, the central figure in the story, who lived her entire life within its walls. Kamala's life, as reconstructed through letters and a diary, reveals her inner torment and suppressed desires. Her writings become a window into the complexities of womanhood in a deeply patriarchal society.

Disorderly Women attempts to explore the dimensions of female bondage, the tyranny of tradition, and the elusive hope of emancipation. Yet, as critics have noted—including *The Hindu*—Rao does not offer a redemptive ending. Her narrative style resembles that of Thomas Hardy, where melancholy and resignation prevail, and happiness remains out of reach. The emotional weight of the novel lies in its honest portrayal of lives lived in silence, resignation, and restrained rebellion.

In essence, *Disorderly Women* is a woman-centric novel that offers an intimate look into the personal and collective lives of Brahmin women, caught between tradition and transformation. It urges the reader to contemplate not only the cultural past but also the continued relevance of such narratives in the discourse on gender and social change.

Memory, Gender Roles, and Patriarchy in *Disorderly Women*

In *Disorderly Women*, the ancestral home *Himalaya* becomes a powerful metaphor of identity, nostalgia, and

inheritance. For Ila, the narrator, *Himalaya* is not just a physical space but an emotional anchor. While her brother Pradyumna sees it as a "cashable" property, Ila dreams of preserving it—even converting it into an old-age home where she herself, as a pensioner, could be its first resident. Whether she deserves the house or not, she envisions *Himalaya* as her permanent home, a symbol of memory, history, and belonging. Ila carries the "burden of remembering." The novel unfolds through her recollections—memories passed down from her mother Rukmini and others. For Ila, these stories and characters cannot die; they live on in her consciousness. Rao masterfully uses this narrative frame to blend personal history with cultural memory, giving voice to generations of women often silenced by tradition.

Ila's mother, Rukmini, is portrayed as a gentle yet emotionally resilient woman. From an early age, Rukmini experienced solitude, but never allowed it to make her bitter or fearful. Raised by her grandmother Achakka, a widow, Rukmini was taught religious songs and moral stories—especially those of Sita and Savitri. These early teachings emphasized obedience, chastity, and devotion, laying the foundation for a life shaped by traditional feminine virtues. Even as a child, Rukmini was socialized to believe that a husband is the avatar of God. This early indoctrination reveals how deeply the culture ingrained the idea of

submission and self-sacrifice into girlhood.

The physical appearance of a girl, too, had societal consequences. Rukmini's dark complexion became a source of anguish when she overheard her mother's friends speak disparagingly of her skin color. Her pain deepens when she learns that her father has already begun searching for a suitable match by distributing her horoscope. The word *karma*, derived from the Sanskrit root *kri* ("to do"), captures the idea of inherited duty or fate—a concept that looms large in the characters' lives. Women were expected to accept their destiny without question.

The dominance of patriarchy is exemplified by Ila's grandfather, Seshagiri Rao—a pompous and authoritarian figure who served as Superintendent Engineer. At home, his anger was legendary; his outbursts could be heard three houses away. His wife, Venku Bai, accepted his temper and decisions without protest. She considered herself a part of him, with no independent identity or voice. Rao presents Venku Bai as a symbol of extreme endurance, a woman who internalized the belief that her husband was a godlike figure whose words and actions could never be questioned.

Venku Bai and Nagamma, another character from the Brahmin community, were bound to strict notions of purity and pollution. Their daily lives were governed

by rituals of purification—bathing, wearing clean clothes, avoiding certain foods and interactions. These customs, while upheld in the name of religious sanctity, essentially reinforced women's subjugation. Their bodies were policed not just by social norms but also by caste and gender ideologies. This was especially true for widows.

Widows in the orthodox Brahmin community were treated as symbols of impurity and bad omen. They were barred from participating in religious ceremonies, festivals, or even family events. Their bodies were stripped of joy—heads tonsured, jewelry removed, colorful clothing forbidden. They were forced into emotional and social isolation. Rao presents characters like Achakka and Subbi, both widows, who—whether willingly or not—conform to these oppressive practices. Their lives reflect how ritualistic purity became a tool of gendered control.

Despite these suffocating conditions, Rao's characters are not entirely devoid of agency. There is a quiet resilience in their submission, a survival instinct that compels them to keep living. Venku Bai is idealized as a wife and mother full of patience. After her death, Seshagiri Rao finally recognizes her value and is overwhelmed by loneliness. His realization, however belated, underscores the emotional void left behind by the silent, suffering women who were the backbone of the household.

Rukmini, though modeled on Venku Bai in her domesticity, experiences a more nurturing relationship with her husband, Krishna Rao. Unlike his father, Krishna is gentle, loving, and progressive. He actively rejects his father's cruelty and treats Rukmini with respect. Their marriage, grounded in mutual affection, represents a glimmer of hope amidst the darkness of patriarchal repression. Rukmini brings "greenery" into the barren grounds of *Himalaya*, symbolizing emotional renewal and quiet rebellion.

Rukmini also shares a deep emotional bond with Kamala, Krishna Rao's sister and one of the central characters of the novel. Kamala, deeply cherished by her father and brother, becomes attracted in her youth to Vasudeva—a student living under her father's roof. This relationship hints at Kamala's inner desires and emotional complexity, often denied by the strict moral codes of her society.

In those days, it was common in orthodox Brahmin households to offer charity by feeding one or two orphan Brahmin boys. Vasudeva, one such boy, lived in the house of Seshagiri Rao, dependent on his patronage while pursuing his education. Despite the benevolence offered in the name of religion and dharma, this system often perpetuated a deep power imbalance between the benefactor and the recipient, reducing the latter to a position of silent gratitude.

Kamala, who had grown emotionally attached to Vasudeva, eventually expresses her feelings openly—a bold act for a young Brahmin girl of that time. She later shouts in frustration that the family is conspiring to ruin Vasudeva's name and humiliate him. Her love is dismissed as shameful, and her voice is silenced in the name of family honor. When her brother Krishna dares to speak out against their father, saying that Seshagiri Rao does not treat Venku Bai properly, the reaction is swift and violent. Seshagiri Rao, enraged, drags Krishna to his feet. But Krishna, refusing to submit, glares back in anger and impulsively charges at his father with clenched fists—an act of rebellion rare in such a strictly hierarchical household.

Krishna is portrayed throughout the novel as a feminist figure—someone who questions the authority of his domineering father and empathizes deeply with the women around him. He is disturbed not just by the injustice inflicted upon Kamala, but also by his mother's blind acceptance of her suffering. He wonders whether his mother's silence is a virtue or simply a consequence of his father's unchallenged power.

Kamala, meanwhile, is emotionally torn. She blames herself for the outburst and regrets the past, yet her spirit is not entirely broken. Despite her fearlessness, her father restricts her, asserting that "a marriageable girl should not talk to strange men." This patriarchal mindset reveals how women's desires were stifled, and their emotional expressions deemed

immoral. Kamala confesses that Vasudeva makes her laugh until her sides ache and tears run from her eyes—a powerful admission of youthful joy and love. Yet this very joy is framed as disorderly and unacceptable by the rigid codes of her household.

When Vasudeva finally gathers the courage to formally propose marriage to Kamala, he approaches Mr. Rao with respect. However, Mr. Rao reacts with fury. He insults Vasudeva, mocking his poverty and ridiculing his audacity to dream of marrying into a family that considers itself socially superior. Sensitive and humiliated, Vasudeva is thrown out of the house, his voice silenced before it could even be heard. His love for Kamala—and his affection for Venku Bai, whom he regarded as a mother—turns into bitterness and sorrow. As he walks away, Kamala's heart breaks. Her grief lingers, and her love for Vasudeva becomes a quiet ache that never leaves her. Krishna, seeing her pain, is deeply affected. His heart stands still when he sees Kamala's large, tear-filled eyes—a poignant image of loss and helplessness.

This episode in *Disorderly Women* powerfully illustrates the emotional costs of patriarchy. Love, agency, and empathy are repeatedly crushed under the weight of tradition, reputation, and hierarchical pride. Malathi Rao's narrative does not merely condemn the patriarchal order—it captures the human wreckage it leaves behind in the form of unfulfilled lives,

silent suffering, and emotional scars that never heal.

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