

The Thistle Still Blooms

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Abstract

This paper examines whether colonialism contributed to the decline in the social status of women in India by comparing women of the Vedic tradition with the female characters of R. K. Narayan's fiction. Drawing on figures such as Gargi, Maitreyi, Lopamudra and Arundhati, along with representations of feminine divinity in the Saptamatrikas and the Lalita Sahasranama, the study outlines an early Vedic ideal in which women took part as scholars, philosophers and intellectual partners. These figures are read against Savitri (The Dark Room), Rosie (The Guide), Bharati (Waiting for the Mahatma) and Grace (The Vendor of Sweets), whose lives are shaped by domestic confinement, marital dominance and male-centred narratives. Through a postcolonial lens, the paper argues that Victorian ideals of modesty and domesticity, reinforced through colonial institutions and dress codes, narrowed the social space available to women, a shift also seen in the historical case of Rakhmabai. By placing ancient and modern representations side by side, a comparison not previously undertaken, the study challenges the assumption that women's liberation is solely a twentieth-century achievement and calls for renewed engagement with ancient texts in contemporary debates on gender equality.

Thistle, a thorny yet delicate flower, protects itself with sharp thorns while thriving in harsh environments. Despite its toughness, its soft pink hue reflects grace, compassion, and distinctly feminine strength. Similarly, the women examined in this research embody a balance of fierceness and softness. They endure societal constraints and adversities, yet continue to bloom with intellect, dignity, and emotional depth. From the intellectual freedom in the Vedic age to the restrictive domesticity of colonial and postcolonial India, the position of women in Indian society has undergone a profound transformation. This research explores whether colonialism played a vital role in the degradation of women's social status by comparing the empowered women of the Vedic era, with the fictional women of R.K. Narayan's novels. Through this comparative lens, the study examines how women's voices, once celebrated as symbols of knowledge and strength, became subdued under the burden of patriarchy and colonial morality. This research highlights the transition from female philosophers and educators to characters confined by societal and marital expectations. Ultimately, this research also argues that true progress lies in rediscovering the balance that was once celebrated in the Vedic age where women were seen not as dependents, but as embodiments of Shakti, wisdom, and resilience.

Vedic women, colonialism, postcolonial literature, status, gender, society, empowerment, deterioration, identity, violence.

The position of women in Indian society has been historically dynamic, shifting from empowerment in the Vedic age to subjugation during colonial and postcolonial times. Women in the Rigveda, such as Lopamudra and Gargi, illustrate an era where women were philosophers, intellectual partners, and active participants in public life. The research question guiding this study is: Did colonialism cause the

degradation of the social status of women? Through a comparative study, this research paper studies if R.K. Narayan's female characters reflect the intellectual and social status of Vedic women, or do they represent regression shaped by colonial and patriarchal frameworks? By drawing parallels and contrasts between these empowered Vedic women and Narayan's fictional female characters (Savitri, Rosie, Bharati, and Daisy) the research highlights the historical shifts in women's autonomy. In short, this research paper is an attempted study of R.K. Narayan's novels through a postcolonial lens, seeing them as products of postcolonial India. It explores how Victorian ideas of modesty and domesticity, introduced during colonial era, reduced women's freedom compared to the relative equality they once enjoyed in the Vedic era. Although studies were done on Vedic women before, it hasn't been compared to Narayan's work before. Hence, this paper addresses this gap by placing Narayan's female characters side by side with the empowered women of the Vedic age, showing gradual decline of their social status under the colonial invasions and influence. This research paper is relevant as Future researchers can build on this by exploring how other ancient texts have influenced portrayals of women in literature, cinema, and even popular culture. At the same time, this study helps preserve the voices of Vedic women, reminding us that these ancient texts are still relevant today and far ahead of their time. Encouraging more engagement with them ensures they are not forgotten and allows us to draw strength and insight from them for contemporary debates on gender equality.

Gargi was born to Sage Vachaknu, from the respected lineage of the great Sage Garga. From a young age, she was deeply drawn to the Vedic scriptures and spent countless hours studying them with dedication and curiosity. Her hard work and passion for learning soon made her known as a brilliant scholar. Gargi often took part in thoughtful philosophical debates with other learned sages, never afraid to ask bold questions or share her views. One of the most famous moments in her life was when she participated in a grand debate where eight renowned sages challenged the wise Sage Yajnavalkya, who was known for his mastery of Kundalini yoga. Gargi was the only woman among them, yet she stood with confidence and questioned Yajnavalkya on profound topics like the nature of the soul, the supreme being, and the universe. Their dialogue is remembered even today as a shining example of intellectual courage and depth. Gargi was even honoured as one of the 'Navaratnas' (nine gems) in King Janaka's court (where the debate took place). She is a pioneer of women's education and social equality. For Gargi it was her intellect, not her gender, that defined her place in society. In contrast, R.K. Narayan's *The Dark Room*, written in the postcolonial context, Savitri represents a regressed state of womanhood. Despite being a wife and mother, she has almost no agency in her own household. Her husband, Ramani, is dominating and emotionally abusive, deciding everything from what she cooks to how she dresses. Savitri's voice is silenced; her appeals for her children's wellbeing are ignored, and her only identity is reduced to a victim of domestic violence. She is called derogatory names, treated as a child, and constantly reminded of her inferiority. Even their son, Babu, absorbs this patriarchal bias, believing himself superior simply because he is male. The contrast is striking: Gargi debated philosophy with sages as an equal in the Vedic period, while Savitri, in Narayan's novel, cannot even question her husband's decisions without ridicule or violence. Gargi's story embodies empowerment and intellectual contribution; Savitri's reflects subjugation and dependency. As a result, this comparison highlights how the status of women deteriorated from Vedic times to colonial modernity. Women were once acknowledged as thinkers, debaters, and co-creators of knowledge, but later became trapped in domesticity, silenced, and made invisible.

In R.K. Narayan's *The Guide*, Rosie is introduced as a devadasi, a dancer by tradition, who is married to Marco, a cold and dismissive husband. Marco sees her art as vulgar and treats her with contempt, never

acknowledging her desires or individuality. Rosie, accepts this injustice silently for a long time, trying to adjust to her husband's indifference. Her dignity is constantly undermined by the patriarchal gaze, where her worth is measured by men's approval. Rosie's journey reflects the plight of a woman caught between male dominance. She is tossed between Marco and Raju and then back again to Marco. By contrast, Lopamudra, the learned wife of Sage Agastya from the Rig Veda and Mahabharata, stands as an emblem of women's self-respect and agency in the Vedic age. Raised in luxury and given the best education, she willingly married Agastya but refused to let his austerity reduce her to neglect. In the 179th hymn of the Rig Veda, she speaks openly of her desires, urging her husband to give her companionship and intimacy rather than expect endless sacrifice. Her refusal to conceive children until Agastya treated her with the respect she deserved shows a remarkable assertion. Thus, Rosie in a 20th-century novel, suffers silently under her husband's dominance and is only remembered through the lens of male judgment, while Lopamudra, in the ancient Vedic tradition, could speak her mind, follow her passion of writing hymns unlike Rosie who couldn't continue her dancing while she was married, and demand respect within marriage. For a woman in the Vedic age to speak so openly about her desires, was an act of remarkable boldness. It shows not only her personal strength but also the cultural space that allowed women to claim dignity and respect.

Bharati in 'Waiting for the Mahatma' embodies political activism through her involvement in Gandhi's Quit India Movement. Yet the reader's journey of political awakening is tied to Sriram's personal growth. Bharati's activism becomes a plot device for Sriram's maturation rather than an end in itself. In other words, Bharati is just a side character and a catalyst for the hero's development, a classic patriarchal trope where the female character's primary function is to help the male protagonist grow. Maitreyi, however, engaged her husband Yajnavalkya in profound philosophical debates, her intellectual identity was not diminished by his presence. She was portrayed so spiritually strong that after marriage, she contributed to her husband's spiritual enhancement by broadening his perspective. This comparison highlights how post-colonial texts often portrays women's development into male-centred narratives.

In 'The Vendor of Sweets', Grace is the only female character and is portrayed primarily as a wife, her identity reduced to her foreignness. This limited portrayal contrasts with the goddesses that were worshipped in ancient India. The 'Saptamatrikas' or Seven Divine Mothers, symbolised the many forms of feminine energy, each representing a power essential to the triumph of truth and balance. Brahmi embodied knowledge and the management of one's karmic field; Vaishnavi protected against the spread of negativity; Maheshwari guarded innocence and enthusiasm; Kaumari invoked hidden strength and courage; Varahi purified and elevated consciousness; Indrani focused the mind and safeguarded the lineage; and Chamundi infused life and drive by destroying lethargy. Together, they reflected a worldview where feminine power was seen as vital for creation, protection, and transformation. Similarly, texts like Lalita Sahasranama, celebrates the Divine mother, Tripurasundari in thousand forms.

"One should meditate upon tripurasundari

Who is radiant like infinite rising suns,

With three-eyes, garbed in red,

Adorned with all jewellery,

And the crescent moon on her crown,

Holding a bow of sugarcane and arrows of flowers,

A goad and a noose,

Seated on the mighty sri chakra,

She is the substratum of three worlds”- (1)

Similarly, Arundhati from the Ramayana is another important example. She was known not only as a devoted wife but also as a wise scholar whose knowledge surpassed that of the rishis. She was known for her calm strength and wisdom, often stepping in as a voice of reason and peace, like when she helped ease the tension between Rama and King Janaka. In a similar way, Anjana, mother of Hanuman, displayed remarkable intelligence and courage during battle. When the fight between the demon and her husband reached a deadlock, it was her quick thinking (suggesting to dip the arrow in the demon’s own blood) that led to victory. Both women show that in ancient India, a woman’s strength lay not just in devotion, but in her ability to think, act, and lead with both heart and intellect.

Bhudevi, goddess of the Earth reflects a powerful balance of compassion and ferocity. She was forced to make the painful decision of killing her own son, Narkasura, as he was so drunk with the power bestowed on him, that he abducted thousands of women. “Bhudevi has the ability to withstand any problems that occur on Earth. We pray to her for patience, knowledge, wisdom, wealth, courage and boldness in our lives”- (2). Throughout history, women have shown a rare balance of intellect, empathy, and strategy, they possess a balance of qualities that allow them to lead with both heart and reason. While men have often been linked to their animalistic instincts and physical power, women have embodied a deeper, steadier kind of wisdom: one that nurtures, protects, and endures. As a result, they were both worshipped and feared.

Moving on to the colonial period in India, the image of Indian women began to change under Western influence. Traditionally, women in India wore sarees without blouses or with a simple angavastram, and this was considered both graceful and dignified. Temple sculptures and early cave paintings reflect this cultural norm, celebrating the female form as natural and divine, not something to be hidden or feel disgusted of. However, due to the British and Mughal invasions, modesty and morality began to reshape Indian clothing especially for women. They started covering their faces with a long veil as a shield against the evil male gaze and as a form of protection from harassment and abduction. What began as a means of safety eventually led to the social expectation on women, limiting their freedom. “The emergence of the blouse and the petticoat (two modern-day essentials of sari wearing), a colonial piece of clothing, is deeply rooted in colonial elitism”- (3). Jnanadanandini Devi, sister of Rabindranath Tagore, was denied entry into a British Club in Calcutta because of the traditional blouse-less saree style. Another example is of an unsung Indian Feminist who had to mask her identity behind the pen name ‘A Hindu lady’ to be the voice of change and resistance. Born in 1864, she was married off at the age of 11 to a 19 year old relative, a practice that was tragically common during that time. But unlike most child brides, she refused to submit and did not move into her husband’s home. He subsequently filed a case in the Bombay court seeking restitution of conjugal rights (force spouses to live with each other), court gave her an option to live with the husband or face imprisonment. To which the girl said that she would rather be in prison for six months, than be a slave for the rest of her life. She started writing articles on the everyday struggles of women in society and demanding reforms under the pseudonym ‘A Hindu lady’. Because of her efforts, in 1891, the government passed a new law called the ‘AGE OF CONSENT ACT’. Her name was Rakhmabai. She studied at the London school of medicine for women. Returned to India as one of the first woman Doctor in India. She devoted the rest of her life devoting to the health of women.

In conclusion, the evolution of women’s status in Indian society has been dynamic. It highlights how patriarchy evolved from Vedic to colonial/post-colonial India and how it is reflected in literature. The Vedic era marked a period of remarkable respect and independence for women, especially during its early

phase. They were educated, economically active, and played vital roles in both family and public life. Through examples of Vedic women like Gargi, Lopamudra, Maitreyi, Arundhati we can see that they stood shoulder to shoulder with men in learning and debate. They were not confined by gender norms but defined by their wisdom and ability to balance empathy and bravery. As the later Vedic period progressed, societal structures became increasingly patriarchal, leading to a gradual decline in women's freedom and status. In contrast, R.K. Narayan's novels portrays women like Savitri, Rosie, Bharati and Grace within the framework of a conservative, small-town Indian society and reflects rigid patriarchy shaped by colonial influence. Despite this shift, the legacy of the Early Vedic period remains a powerful reminder of the prominent and respected position women once held in ancient Indian society. This paper reawakens respect for the ancient texts that celebrated feminine intellect and divinity. It also strongly validates the hypothesis that colonialism played a major role in the decline of women's social status in India. Before colonial influence, the Vedic age celebrated women, who were revered as scholars, philosophers, and teachers. "To know shiva, shakti is needed. The chairs, the walls are all there but you see them only when light falls upon them. Shakti is that light. Shiva is experienced only through shakti," Quoted by Sri Sri Ravishankar – (1). True societal progress can only be achieved when women stand on equal par with men. The colonisers not only plundered our wealth but also robbed us of our greatest treasure: culture and status of women. History bears witness to a time when women were empowered and regarded as equals, actively contributing to politics, warfare, and finance. Their strength and wisdom were encouraged and celebrated. The scope of this research goes beyond comparing two time periods, it connects ancient cultural ideals with modern literary depictions. It encourages re-thinking of whether modernity truly liberated women or whether they had greater freedom in ancient times. This can push sociologists, historians, and gender scholars to re-examine the assumption that women's liberation is purely a product of the 20th century.

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