
Interpretation of Angel in The House in Rajam Krishnan's '*Lamps In The Whirlpool*'

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Abstract:

The situation of a South Indian Brahmin daughter-in-law is the focus of this article's discussion of Indian culture. However, any woman anywhere in the globe can benefit from reading the article. Cultural differences may exist in social norms, surroundings, and circumstances, but when we observe that women are treated similarly everywhere, we can conclude that these factors are universal. It is indisputable that the idea of an angel in the home has persisted throughout history and is similar in practically all civilizations. As a result, it is now necessary to uphold women's beliefs, acknowledge their worth and dignity, and acknowledge the unique contributions that women make to their families and cultures.

Keywords: Angel, Culture, Domesticity, Family, Harmony

Introduction:

'Ratna, please do not make things awkward for me. Domestic harmony is my priority. 'What a disgrace! They treat you like a worm and make you work like a machine. Harmony is achieved only when all the notes are in perfect accord. A single note, however melodious, does not create harmony. (Rajam Krishnan 13)

This is the dialogue between Girija and Ratna in the novella '*Lamps in the Whirlpool*,' a Tamil text by Uma Narayanan and Prema Seetharaman.

She was intensely charming. She was utterly unselfish. She excelled in the complex arts of family life. She sacrificed herself daily. If there was chicken, she took the leg; if there was a draught, she sat in it – in short, she was so constituted that she never had a mind or wish of her own but preferred to sympathize always with the minds and wishes of others. Above all – I need not say it – she was pure.

Virginia Woolf writes this in *Professions for Women* about the 'Angel in the House.'The Indian woman in the family is worshipped as an angel if she annihilates herself for the sake of others, or else, she is cast away as monstrous, if not demonic. Rajam Krishnan is so irate at the self-righteous middle/upper-middle-class Brahmin community (the point of focus in the novel) that she dares to put its very citadel-

family- in a dubious light. She challenges the legitimization of the atrocities perpetrated in the name of this institution through the central crisis of the story.

The article explores the role of women in a South Indian Brahmin community and its parallels in the Western world.

DIFFERENT ROLES OF A WOMAN FOR HOUSEHOLD HARMONY:

A woman is supposedly expected to play different roles in her lifetime, as a daughter, wife, mother, and most of all, daughter-in-law, and make a harmonious family. The woman of the house 'toils like a slave for its upkeep'. In this novella, we see a painful dawning of self-knowledge in the protagonist, Girija. However, she sincerely works for her family, almost self-effacing herself; her efforts are neither appreciated by her mother-in-law nor her husband. Realizing her painful existence, she transforms into a new woman. She becomes a sort of an Indian Nora.

'How much longer could she go round and round in the cage? This question germinated in her mind and soon took root' (30)

Girija is married off to Swaminathan (Samu) to be a dutiful wife and good daughter-in-law, the angel in the house. Although Samu's mother appears to be good to her on the eve of the wedding by giving her a pair of diamond earrings and a pair of nose studs, little does Girija realize that she would be one of the leading causes of spoiling the harmony in the family. Her mother-in-law becomes essential in shaping her daughter-in-law after marriage according to her strict rules of austerity and piety described in Tamil as 'made' and 'aacharam.' She is a symbol of authority in the household.

Worst of all, Girija's husband does not even consider her a person in the house. She becomes an unpaid servant in her own house. She realizes that her life is void, and she knows that her husband and mother-in-law are exploiting her docility. She wonders why she does not have a room of one's own in her own family.

'From time immemorial, the family has been an institution which imperceptibly bound man to his kith and kin, and it has been woven into the fabric of tradition. However, some families had become like monstrous thorn bushes that inflict pain on womankind. Could the concept of family then be wrong?' (34)

Girija is forced to follow the 'austere' rules. On one of her visits, she is awakened by the talk of 'consciousness raising' by Ratna, her husband's niece (Ratna is engaged with Abu in feminist research at Delhi University). Ratna asks her,

'You are part of this society; you are not an isolated individual. You are not utilizing your talents as a teacher. Do you have to sacrifice yourself to this idiotic concept of madi? The observance of Madi cannot be justified as it creates barriers between people. Those who observe it are self-righteous and arrogant and trample on those who do not. Observance and nonobservance of it alienate one woman from another. (21)

AMBIVALENCE IN DOMESTIC RELATIONSHIPS:

Girija asks herself for the first time, 'Why am I afraid? Don't I have rights in my own house?'. She realizes, 'I seem to have forgotten what I once was. I cannot even help my children with their studies. (25)

She is shocked by her husband's crude behavior when he returns from an extended tour only to pack his things and leave for another professional trip. Though she is fuming with rage inside, as a wife, she is expected to tolerate her husband's behavior to maintain harmony in the house and harmony in their 'sacred' relationship. 'She knew that once she shattered the wall of restraint she had so carefully built around herself, there would be no more peace in the house. Once again, the wall closed around her, confining her... Like the snail, which wanted to be free of its shell, she longed to be herself. Thunder roared, the sky turned dark, and suddenly, lightning flashes of fear as sharp as diamond needles began to stab her. (16-17)

Here, we see the ambivalence in Girija. Most discussions of ambivalence treat it as a temporary and unfortunate state of feeling. That may be the problem. There might be something healthy about claiming the right of ambivalence. Alternatively, there may be something deadening about renouncing one's ambivalence too soon on someone else's terms. If resistance is always the sign of a counter-story, ambivalence is the state of holding on to more than one story at a time.

We live in a culture that makes it seem like having contradictions is considered a flaw. Most of us try to represent ourselves in ways that suggest we are without contradictions. Contradictions are perceived as chaos, not orderly, and not rational. We must be willing as women to work with those contradictions and almost celebrate their existence because they mean we are in a process of change and transformation. Girija has contradictions in her mind unless she is forced to decide.

What this internalization indicates is that there is repression of ambivalence in a woman. The woman is not allowed to have mixed feelings, to be "composite" or "interwoven ."She must renounce everything about which she has negative feelings that are internalized from the opinions of others. Ultimately, the "thing" she feels ambivalent about and renounces are herself to be the ever-smiling house angel.

Samu is totally insensitive towards his wife and insults her by throwing away the plate of food she serves because it is not to his liking. The mother-in-law pretends as if nothing unusual has happened.

ANGEL VS DEMON:

Unable to bear any more oppression, Girija leaves to spend some time on the banks of the Ganga. She does not feel guilty or think she is being deceived. She has escaped from her cage for a short spell of peace. She does not consider this in any way unnatural. She meets an elderly couple, Gowri Ammal and her husband, and accompanies them to Haridwar. Girija also meets another spiritual widow in Rishikesh who shares her experiences. After learning about Girija's plight, she advises her to take life into her own hands and act clearly. Her brief escape from home has enlightened her mind. She is happy that she could at least renounce her house for four days. However, has the angel of the house transformed into a demon?

When she returns home, she finds that her children are untended and the house is messy. Her husband and mother-in-law charge her with infidelity, and she is called a 'loose woman.' She has become 'impure' just because she had chosen a few days of solitude. Solitude becomes a crime in Girija's life.

Giving solitude a high priority is difficult, not just because expressing a preference for being alone is often disparaged in our extroverted culture, but because it can also pose a threat to personal relationships, especially for women. 'When women, the traditional nurturers and maintainers of relationships, spend what friends or partners consider too much time alone, they often become targets of criticism and rejection .' (Anderson and Hopkins 201)

Girija remains embarrassed because no one asks where she has gone or why she has gone away for those four days. Her husband only asks her what she had done to the family. Her husband and mother-in-law ask her to leave the house immediately. Girija is stunned. She feels that women seem to enjoy destroying each other instead of standing by each other. Powerful women can indeed undermine other women. There is woman-to-woman sex discrimination.

She takes temporary refuge in Ratna's hostel when her mother-in-law comes and returns her belongings with a cheque of Rs.10 000 as compensation. Girija flings it back at her. Her husband had also come but preferred to stay in the car. Girija comes to know of this later. Her mother-in-law tells her, 'A husband who willingly gives you life has the right to lose his temper occasionally. A woman has to be submissive. That is what a family is all about. Patience enhances a woman's stature. At one stroke, you broke a relationship you enjoyed for eighteen years and cast a stain on our family's honor. (73)

Did Girija really 'enjoy' being the angel in the house? Was she the only cause for disrupting the family's harmony? These are the questions that need to be pondered.

Girija worked as a teacher before marriage after her post-graduation and B.Ed, when she managed to save money and buy a gold chain for herself. She pledged her gold chain in the bank and sought employment with a nun who was running a home for refugee children. Her only concern is about her daughters, Kavi and Charu, who would be trained to be angels and destroyed by the family regime when they grow up.

FEMINIST SIGNIFICANCE AND SPIRITUAL YATRA:

'The mother is the faceless, unfigurable figure of a figurante. She creates a place for all the figures by losing herself in the background'. – (Jacques Derrida, 'All Ears; Nietzsche's Autobiography'). The concept of motherhood is idealized. Girija is blamed because she chooses to walk away from the house. Even the last few lines of the text tell us that Girija has not walked away from motherhood, even though she had walked out of her husband's house.

The central image of the novella is a small leaf carrying an oil-soaked wick floating in the Ganga. The pilgrims float these lamps in the river. Each one turns in different directions, sometimes in the same direction. Some reach the other shore; some divert themselves elsewhere. The lamp with the burning wick symbolizes the courageous woman in our society trying to cope with its forces like the lamps, which cope with the currents of the river. The title is charged with feminist significance.

There is spiritual imagery in the form of the lamps in the Ganga, while we have the material imagery of 'madi' and 'aacharam. They are used as instruments of torture against the daughter-in-law of the family. Ironically, it alienates her from her children as she is even restricted from embracing or being intimate with them, as the nonobservance of 'madi' would pollute them.

Germaine Greer in *The Female Eunuch* says, 'The married woman must ... analyze her day-to-day evasions and dishonesties, her sufferings, and her real feelings towards her children' (1971, p. 353). Women must achieve the revolution Greer envisages in their homes' privacy. Therefore, her argument is addressed primarily to women, exhorting them to change their behavior. For a woman like Girija, the old concepts, ideals, and emotional meanings are no longer meaningful, so she chooses to cross them.

A neighborhood woman, Roja Mami, who claims to be a daughter in the house, exploits the doggedness of the woman for 'madi' to kindle suspicion. She wears a mask of madi and aacharam to conceal her husband's smuggling activity. However, ironically, the mother-in-law believes her and accuses her daughter-in-law. This highlights the fact that 'madi' is only a mask.

The story kindles a universal sisterhood. Many Indian women like Girija are caught up in their marriage and family. Their personalities do not exist after marriage. They become scapegoats in the name of 'angels'. The education these middle-class women had gone through has not given them any rationale in their lives. They do not have time for themselves. Their minds are conditioned so that they hardly question the people around them. The mores of society are always inimical to women. In a traditional society, any woman who leaves her home is considered immoral. The irony is that women do not support one another during times of crisis. The mother-in-law and Roja mami do not understand Girija. This throws yet another critical question, 'Does sisterhood exist?'

When Girija returns to her house, her husband tells her that the family's prestige has been ruined. Kinship systems produce many kinds of exchanges of statuses, rights, property, and people. The network of beliefs, categories, assumptions, and symbols that make up a culture constitutes any conception of prestige. While kinship and marriage are essential parts of this network, they 'are filtered through the perspective of the male ego situated within the prestige structure (or structures) of the society in question' (Ortner and Whitehead 20). In this view, cultures may define a woman's nature and status in various ways, but always from a male standpoint.

In the article, 'Is Female to Male as Nature is to Culture?' Ortner holds that women tend to experience things, feelings, and people as concrete rather than abstract, subjectively and interpersonally rather than objectively. Women tend to enter into relations with the world that culture might see as being more 'like nature permanent and embedded in things as given than 'like culture'- transcending and transforming things through the superimposition of abstract categories and transpersonal values. Although a woman's body and mothering role align her closely with nature, her obvious participation in culture places her in an intermediate position,

'performing some sort of synthesizing or converting function between nature and culture.' Because she mediates between the two realms somewhat ambiguously, she is liable to more stringent restrictions and circumscriptions than men are.

'A good marriage shuts out a great deal,' the elderly heroine, Laura, states at the beginning of May Sarton's *A Reckoning*. Towards the novel's end, she contemplates a friend's question, which seems to reinforce her conviction: 'Do you suppose growing up always means diluting [our] fierce purpose for the sake of others?' (Anderson & Hopkins 80). Like Laura's friend who enlightens her, Ratna is the person who kindles the spirit of enlightenment in Girija, thus making the 'personal as political.' Female bonding is thus seen between the two characters.

Conclusion:

This text deals with Indian culture, specifically the plight of a south Indian Brahmin daughter-in-law. However, the text can apply to any woman in any part of the world. The social norms, conditions, and circumstances may change from culture to culture, but it becomes universal when we notice that the way women are treated remains similar worldwide. It cannot be denied that the concept of an angel in the house remains the same in almost all cultures and has been present throughout history. Therefore, asserting women's values, dignity, and worth is essential, and recognizing women's distinctive contributions to their families and culture.

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