

Research Article

**The emergence of “New Woman”: Two Novels, Two Writers, Two Continents - A Comparative Study**

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**Abstract**

Merely generalizing postcolonial literature as one that contests colonial power, knowledge and representation and marks the cultural independence of subjugated populations will obscure specific gender issues. Along this side, Weedon and McEwan point out that approaching ‘feminism’ in a universal sense is likely to conceal the differences between feminism and postcolonial feminism/third world feminism. Postcolonial writers, despite having obvious differences in their approaches, nevertheless display some similarities in their attitude towards issues related to marital life and traditional structures that bind women. In order to highlight these similarities, this paper attempts a comparative study of the Indian woman writer Rajam Krishnan’s *Lamps in the Whirlpool* and the Australian woman writer Ada Cambridge’s *Sisters*. It examines how despite the differences in geography, culture and lived experiences, the two writers from two different continents, through the medium of characters in their novels, deal similarly with (a) issues related to the institutions of marriage, (b) conflicts between inherited values and new values, and (c) the idea of “New Woman”.

**Keywords:** feminism, new woman, patriarchy, tradition, modern

**1. Introduction**

Rajam Krishnan, an Indian writer in a regional language (Tamil) and Ada Cambridge, an Australian Caucasian writer, being themselves both writers and women, use their novels as vehicles to drive forward discussions on the various kinds of constraints laid on women by the patriarchal system. The women characters in their novels suffer ‘alienation’ brought on by the insistent male institutional voice that urges them to conform. Women have always been seen as synonymous with ‘homemakers’ in the prevailing patriarchal social set-up. They are perceived as ‘humans’ only in the limited sense of supporting the men folk and raising the children. Further, patriarchy leads women to believe that pain and self-denial are required of them for the sake of a better tomorrow. Their thinking and their self-image are molded and shaped to suit the patriarchal environment, which constantly urges and even warns them to remain unquestioning and unenlightened. *Lamps in the Whirlpool* and *Sisters* subvert the portrayal of ‘women’ as historical subjects – powerless, exploited, sexually harassed, and so on. The focus of these novels is to present ‘woman’ as a self-aware potential ‘other’ who will contest patriarchal dominance. The novels resoundingly respond to Gayathri Spivak’s question “*Can the Subaltern Speak?*”, a question she must have posed on perceiving the plight of the colonial ‘women’ who allow themselves to be oppressed in the name of upholding customs and traditions. The writers of both these novels have proved Benita Parry’s argument that postcolonial ‘woman’ can and must voice her protest against oppression.

Rajam Krishnan projects the prominent postcolonial stance of the contemporary Indian woman. Her novel *Lamps in the Whirlpool* is a subversion of reality wherein the institution of marriage is preserved due to the patience of wives (such as Girija, the protagonist of the novel) for the sake of their children. Ada Cambridge, the Caucasian Australian writer, though born during the colonial period thought ahead of her times. In *Sisters* she

has portrayed Francie, a young girl of 19, who creates her own space in a world where men play the secondary role. As the journalist Nancy Cato observes, Ada Cambridge, despite being a clergyman’s wife, has written about “extra-marital affairs and the physical bondage of wives” (Cato Intro).

## 2. Patriarchy and the ‘New Woman’

The New Woman, in the novels of Rajam Krishnan and Ada Cambridge, reclaim control over their own lives and push back against the limits that society (patriarchy) seeks to impose on them. Like colonialism which is an expression of structural dominance over the weak and the powerless ‘other’, patriarchy too is a form of structural dominance wherein women are suppressed as the ‘other’. According to Adrienne Rich:

Patriarchy is the power of the fathers: a familial - social, ideological, political system in which men – by force, direct pressure or through ritual, tradition, law, and language, customs, etiquette, education, and the division of labor, determine what part women shall or shall not play, and in which the female is everywhere subsumed under the male (Rich 57).

Henrik Ibsen’s *A Doll’s House* laid strong emphasis on the concept of New Woman, and may have inspired other writers, particularly women writers to rise above the patriarchy-imposed norms. The emergence of the New Woman has ensured power to their pens. With this new liberated stream of thinking running through the intellectual landscape, postcolonial women writers have started expressing strong pro-women and anti-patriarchal concerns. These writers take issue with the ingrained concept of the superiority, and hence the natural dominance, of men. They discard the template of an unequal power relationship between husband and wife. These writers portray liberated women who refuse to confine themselves to the traditional roles of women as obedient daughters, dependant wives and dutiful mothers. They are self – assertive and determined to overturn the roles assigned to them by the patriarchal society.

## 3. Rajam Krishnan’s *Lamp’s in the Whirlpool*

Rajam Krishnan portrays three generations of women of different age groups: the widowed mother– in-law, who is in her sixties, the daughter-in-law in her thirties and the grand daughter in her early twenties. Girija’s mother-in-law is always seen to strictly adhere to the rules of austerity and piety. Elders in her family tutor Girija to follow the rituals of the Brahmin community. She is forced to accept them despite her modern education.

She has spent the seventeen years of her married life catering to the needs of her husband and children to the total neglect of her own self and her priorities. She is never appreciated for the selfless love that she shows towards her family. Instead, the venomous tongue of her husband lashes her. Her husband feels that he has every right to rage and rant against her and does not appreciate her selfless sacrifice. She decides to go to the bank of the Ganga to find solace for her battered spirit. In a fit of defiance, she walks out of the family hoping to get relief from the oppressive atmosphere of the home. This act of defiance is viewed as immorality on the part of Girija. She is barred from returning and is forbidden to meet even her own children. Rajam Krishnan’s protagonist does not fight but stands helpless. Ultimately, it is through Ratna, her husband’s niece, that she gains self-awareness.

Ratna serves as her eye opener. The novelist projects Ratna as a contemporary, rational, and postcolonial woman. Though Ratna has not experienced the psychological trauma undergone by Girija, she is able to clearly analyze the plight of Girija and warns her: “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” (13). Ratna makes Girija understand that unquestioning, mute suffering does not contribute to the harmony of the family. The character Girija has been constructed by the novelist as a sensitive person who has been upholding the traditional, cultural values of the Brahmin community throughout her life, and who later

realizes that she has been enduring the ill-treatment at the hands of her husband and the cruelty that her mother-in-law has been inflicting on her; and that even her education and profession as a teacher have not helped her to

counter her mother-in-law's and her husband's oppression. She feels that she has not been empowered by her education. The novel moves from the initial rigid space to a broader space as Girija's mind opens up and she realizes that her constrained mindset has prevented her from understanding that she has actually lost her identity. Her interactions with Ratna give her self-confidence to re-position 'herself' as an individual in a society that had displaced her. She emerges as a New Woman who no longer needs to kill herself to live the life of the 'other'.

#### 4. Ada Cambridge's *Sisters*

Ada Cambridge's *Sisters* highlights the transition period when women started realizing that male domination within the institution of marriage denied women a 'space of their own'. Although Ada Cambridge was a nineteenth century writer, she was ahead of her times in her attitudes. This paper therefore examines her work as one from a more contemporary novelist. Francie, a protagonist of Cambridge's novel, feels no qualms of conscience when she decides to move away from the role constructed by men. Ada Cambridge presents four different prototypes of women within the institution of marriage, all four of whom happen to be sisters. She presents Deborah as a frustrated woman who understands the treachery of men and yearns for a companion who would put her first. She is a single woman in the prime of her life and has no intention of mothering a child, though she wants to adopt her sister's son only because this would help her sister financially. She knows very well that even this child respects her only because of her money. When she was still young, she was surrounded by young people whenever and wherever she traveled. When she grows older, she realizes the need for a companion: "...I have not married him to take care of him, but so that he may take care of me. I'm lonely. I want somebody" (223). She justifies her act:

I've come to the time of life when I am of no account to the young folks...Nothing but money gives me importance in their eyes. And what's money? It won't keep you warm in the winter of your days- nothing will, except a companion that is in the same boat. That is what I want – it may be silly, but I do – somebody to go down into the valley of the shadow with me; and he feels the same (223).

Another sister is Mary. She marries Mr. Goldsworthy the parson, just to avoid having to stay with her family. Unable to deal with depression, she half-heartedly decides to go and commit suicide by drowning in a river. There she happens to meet her family friend, and later they marry. At the time of her wedding, she is not aware that her marriage 'contract' would cause her heartache. The man turns out to be an opportunist as his ambition has been to marry one of the Pennycuicks. Cambridge gives us a searing description of Mary's anxiety:

She was in a high fever and delirious on her wedding night, and a week later at death's door. When she came out of her illness, reconciled to her family, meekly obedient to her husband, she was a wreck of herself- a prisoner for life, bound hand, and foot, more pitiable than she would have been as a dead body fished out of the dam (93).

Mary silently suffers through out her life. She gains freedom only with the death of her husband. Cambridge's projection of Mary's reaction is shocking in that it flies in the face of expected norms: "I'm clean now – I never thought to be again – to know anything so exquisitely sweet, either in earth or heaven - I'm clean body and soul, day and night, inside and outside, at last" (227). And she is annoyed when Deborah tells her about her marriage and she expresses her discomfort: "Oh, Debbie you have been a free woman – why, why didn't you keep so? – but with all your freedom, and all your money, you don't know the meaning of such luxury I live in now" (227).

The third sister, Rose, sees marriage as a happy event and marries out of her free will. She happily plays the role of an 'angel in the house', which in fact is a welcome attitude in the patriarchal set up. Cambridge portrays Francie as the 'polar opposite' of Deborah. Whereas Deborah refuses three proposals of marriage in a single

day, Francie readily agrees to marry a man who is three times her age. When Deborah points out the incongruity of her decision to marry an old man, Francie remains firm in her decision. Cambridge presents Francie as a New Woman who contests the colonial view of marriage in Australia. For a post-colonial woman marriage becomes a necessity to fulfill social needs and becomes a matter of convenience. After the death of her husband, she wants to marry her boy friend, Guthrie Carey, but he disappoints her by declining her proposal although he is understanding and sympathetic. Francie’s pride as a woman makes her reject his sympathy, conveying her inner strength. She leaves Australia and goes to Europe where she marries an Italian Count, hoping to lead a normal life. In this novel Ada Cambridge has portrayed four different characters who happen to be sisters, three of whom try to find comfort in one another’s company, whereas the fourth sister, Francie stands aloof as she feels that her ideas are contrary to those of her sisters who appear to abide by the behavioural codes set by men. Francie therefore emerges as the symbol of the New Woman in Cambridge’s novel.

Ada Cambridge portrays the 19th century women who have come to Australia as settlers. They seem to carry the baggage of traditional values to which they have been exposed in England. The novel’s protagonists are from a Victorian middle-class family, strictly adhering to the set norms of patriarchy. Deborah, Mary, and Rose are infected with the middle-class syndrome, which makes them ‘crippled’ and incomplete persons. Francie, on the other hand, remains unaffected by the pull of societal and family pressures, and lives a life as a free thinker, in control of her own life and destiny, and a symbol of the contemporary Australian woman.

### Conclusion

Through the characters in their novels, Ada Cambridge and Rajam Krishnan assert the need for women to claim their own ‘space’. Though women are referred to as ‘impatient wives’ by the ‘intolerant husbands’, they are always glorified as mothers. Girija’s urge to explore her identity and her desire to secure a ‘space’ of her own transforms her from a ‘selfless mother’ to a selfish ‘other’, a transformation that militates against everything she has been convinced about all her life. Her abdication of moral responsibility as an individual and as a mother towards her children clashes against the norms of the traditional value system for Indian women. Ada Cambridge’s *Sisters* examines the pros and cons of marriage – what a woman has gained and what she has lost in marriage. Through the concept of the New Woman, these two writers emphasize the need for women to take control over their lives and identities.

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