Women, Motherhood and Patriarchal Oppression: An Intersectional Feminist Reading of Rajasree Variyar's *The Daughters of Madurai*

Dr T Palanisamy
Assistant Professor
Department of English
PSG College of Arts & Science, Coimbatore, Tamil Nadu, India

Abstract : Literature has always been a vehicle for challenging social inequalities and for putting the experiences of the marginalised into the public sphere. The experience of women in particular, in the context of patriarchy, gender discrimination, motherhood and the various social relationships that women have with one another, has become a major area of concern in literary studies today. Rajasree Variyar's debut novel *The Daughters of Madurai* (2023) is a case in point in which these issues are explored through the lives of two generations of women, Janani and Nila. The novel moves between Madurai in 1992 and Sydney in 2019 and in doing so interrogates the continuing existence of gender discrimination and the impact this has on women's identities, their reproductive autonomy and their relationships with their families. Janani's experience is used by Variyar to demonstrate the social and psychological toll of son preference. Within the family, daughters are not seen as individuals with equal rights and equal human value. Their very existence is judged in terms of their utility to the family.

INTRODUCTION

Throughout history, literature has been an important tool for exposing social inequalities, for challenging the status quo and for representing the lives of the marginalised. Feminist literary criticism has been particularly concerned with the way in which literature represents women's identities, their position in society and their experiences of oppression within a patriarchal framework. The issues of gender discrimination, reproductive autonomy, motherhood, sexuality and the nature of the family are still very much in the forefront of current feminist literary debate. Rather than seeing women as a single monolithic group, an intersectional approach to feminism recognises that gender operates in conjunction with other social locations (class, sexuality, cultural location etc) to produce different forms of oppression and different forms of agency (Cho, Crenshaw and McCall, 2013; Carastathis, 2014).

Rajasree Variyar's debut novel *The Daughters of Madurai* (2023) is a very good examination of these issues via the lives of two generations of women, Janani and Nila. It moves between Madurai in 1992 and Sydney in 2019 and looks at the ways in which patriarchal attitudes affect women's lives in different places, different cultures and different generations. Janani's experience of female infanticide, reproductive control and familial oppression is used by Variyar to lay bare the social attitudes that devalue female life and prefer male children. The novel also delves into the emotional dimensions of motherhood, particularly the tension between a mother's desire to protect her children and the patriarchal structures which seek to control her reproductive choices.

Motherhood is another major theme of the novel. Rather than simply presenting motherhood as an ideal of love and sacrifice, Variyar looks at how it can become a site of suffering when it is governed by the expectations of the patriarchal institution. Adrienne Rich's distinction between motherhood as an institution and motherhood as an experience (made in Of Woman Born, 1976) is a very useful one for understanding Janani's situation. Motherhood as an institution is the social construct that imposes its expectations upon women. Motherhood as an experience is the actual experience of mothering, which is one of love, care and responsibility. Janani's fierce determination to protect her daughters is the very embodiment of the conflict between these two aspects and is a clear example of how maternal love can be a form of resistance.

The novel goes further than simply presenting women as passive victims and looks at the possibilities of agency that women can have within the constraints of a patriarchal society. Janani's actions in the face of her circumstances to protect her children, her readiness to go to people for support and her outright rejection of the family's discriminatory expectations all point to the potential for resistance even in the absence of economic or social power. The support she receives from Shubha, Sanjay and Priya is also a powerful illustration of the importance of solidarity and of collective action in the face of

patriarchal authority. In this respect, feminist understandings of agency that recognise the potential for resistance in the everyday and the importance of social relationships are particularly pertinent (Charrad, 2010; Borovoy and Ghodsee, 2012).

Through Nila the novel brings in a modern dimension to the discussion of gender, identity and individual freedom. Janani's experience is one of reproductive discrimination and economic vulnerability in Madurai, whereas Nila's is one of difficulties relating to her lesbian identity and the fear of family rejection in Sydney. Nila's reluctance to come out is a clear indication of how the conventional expectations around gender and relationships can impact on one's sense of self even in a different cultural context. The Janani/Nila relationship therefore provides a useful lens through which to look at the different ways in which women can be oppressed across generations, while still being bound together by the issues of autonomy, acceptance and the family.

An intersectional feminist reading of *The Daughters of Madurai* is therefore very important as it allows for a much more nuanced understanding of the various forms of discrimination which are at play in the novel. Janani's experience is one of gender, poverty, reproductive expectations and the lack of authority within the family. Nila's experience is one of sexuality, of identity and of the lack of acceptance within the family. The two experiences are very different in both nature and degree and the novel makes it very clear that they are not the same. It shows how the constraints of gender operate in different ways depending on the individual's circumstances and their position in society.

In this context the present article looks at how Rajasree Variyar represents female infanticide, patriarchal motherhood, women's agency, intersectional oppression and the quest for sexual identity in *The Daughters of Madurai*. Using a feminist lens, in particular Adrienne Rich's understanding of motherhood and Kimberlé Crenshaw's concept of intersectionality, the article looks at the experiences of Janani and Nila in order to explore the relationship between gender, family, power and individual autonomy. It contends that the novel in fact questions the patriarchal assumptions about the value of female children, the maternal role and the extent to which women are expected to conform. Through the juxtaposition of the experiences of two generations of women the novel offers a complex and deeply felt portrayal of female suffering, maternal resistance and the continuing struggle for identity, self-worth and acceptance.

Female Infanticide and the Denial of a Girl Child's Right to Life

Female infanticide is the major social issue in *The Daughters of Madurai*. The novel is very much about the killing of female infants and the terrible consequences of a society in which the birth of a girl is regarded as a bad thing.
Janani's own experience gives a very human dimension to this. She's allowed to keep her first daughter, but all her subsequent daughters are taken away and killed very shortly after birth. It's a very traumatic set of experiences for her and the deaths of the children are the most painful as she's simply not allowed to protect or look after them. The novelist doesn't see female infanticide as just some isolated act of violence. It's a product of the social preference for boys, economic vulnerability and the prevailing patriarchal notion that girls are a burden (Pennington et al., 2023), (Kumar & Sinha, 2019), (Westley & Choe, 2007), (Vella, 2004), (Jayachandran, 2015). The killing of female infants is the ultimate expression of a system in which female life is not of equal value.
A key aspect of Variyar's representation is the link between gender discrimination and reproductive control. Janani's pregnancies are not seen as her own personal experiences in terms of her own body and her own wellbeing. They are simply matters in which other members of the family have control. Her ability to make any decisions about her children is severely constrained by the expectations that are placed upon her (Ganle et al., 2015), (Grace & Anderson, 2018), (Grace & Fleming, 2016), (Pearson et al., 2023), (Colombini et al., 2025).

Research into reproductive coercion provides a useful lens through which to view these situations. Grace and Anderson (2018) define reproductive coercion as the use of practices to restrict an individual's ability to make reproductive decisions. Pearson et al. (2023) point to the influence of family expectations in the context of reproductive control. The studies are from quite different social contexts but together they serve to illustrate the relational nature of reproductive autonomy.

Janani's experience shows that reproductive control doesn't necessarily operate solely through the husband-wife relationship. The mother-in-law and the wider family can be very much involved in the decision as to what happens to the woman and her child. The household thus becomes a space in which reproductive power is unequally distributed. The deaths of Janani's daughters also highlight the psychological impact of female infanticide. They are still very much part of her emotional life. The children are never really 'out' of her life despite the fact that they never got the chance to grow up. Her grief is a clear demonstration of the emotional bond that exists in motherhood and that this bond cannot be severed simply by the child's physical absence. The novel therefore gives narrative significance to the lives of the children who have been

denied recognition. The daughters who are killed become symbolic of the violence which is inflicted upon women and girls in patriarchal societies. The novel is also significant in terms of its examination of the social conditions which perpetuate female infanticide. It looks at son preference, poverty and the position of the family as interlocking factors. The implication is that the eradication of such a practice will not be achieved simply by legislation. It will require a change in social attitudes, greater access to education and a redefinition of the role of women in the family.

Motherhood: Between Patriarchal Institution and Personal Experience

Motherhood is one of the key themes of *The Daughters of Madurai*. For Rajasree Variyar it's an experience of love, of responsibility, of grief and of resistance. It's not presented as a wholly fulfilling or ideal experience. The experience of motherhood is shown to be one that can be subverted by patriarchal expectations and become a source of both emotional and physical suffering.

Adrienne Rich's *Of Woman Born* (1976) is a very useful text in which to interrogate this issue. Rich makes a clear distinction between mothering as a lived experience and mothering as a patriarchal institution. The first is the actual experience of mothering, the mother-child relationship; the second is the institutionalised form of motherhood that is imposed upon women by the patriarchal society.

This is very much the case with Janani. Her motherhood is absolutely a matter of feeling and experience with her daughters. Her husband's family on the other hand treat reproduction as a duty and the expectation is that it will produce a son. To them motherhood is simply a matter of reproduction and they don't in any way recognise it as a mother/child relationship. For Janani, motherhood is all about the struggle to protect your children. Her love for her daughters is in direct conflict with the way the family want her to behave. She wants to look after her children, but the family expect her to accept the way they treat the girls.

The tension between Janani's maternal instincts and the family's patriarchal attitudes is very clear. Her total inability to stop the deaths of her daughters is a stark illustration of the extent to which women can be denied the very basics of motherhood. Motherhood scholarship also goes some way to challenging the notion that mothering is a monolithic experience and that it is necessarily a positive one. Jiao (2019) looks at the relationship between mothering, ideology and agency. Henriksson, Williams and Fahlgren (2023) look at the ambivalence of motherhood narratives. That said, Janani's experience can be understood in the context of these more nuanced perspectives on motherhood rather than simply as an example of motherhood as sacrifice and unconditional acceptance.

Janani is not presented as a passive victim throughout the novel. Her resolve to protect her next child is a significant step in her development. She comes to realise that if she simply went along with the family's wishes she would be actively contributing to the destruction of her own child. Her decision to resist the practice is a clear example of the assertion of maternal agency. Motherhood thus becomes an act of resistance. Janani's struggle is not simply about saving one child; it's an act of resistance against the social beliefs which hold that a woman's life is of less value than a man's life.

The help she gets from Shubha, Sanjay and Priya really underlines the value of solidarity in the face of oppressive systems. It enables Janani to see that resistance doesn't have to be a solitary enterprise. The support of others can in fact provide the opportunity for women to challenge the power that is exercised over them. O'Reilly (2004) is very useful in thinking about the possibility of mothering in opposition to patriarchal motherhood. Janani's refusal to accept the expectations placed upon her is perfectly in line with that. Her determination to look after her daughter is a direct challenge to the institutional requirements of patriarchal motherhood and is a clear assertion of the emotional and ethical dimensions of mothering.

The novel also deals with motherhood through the relationship between Janani and Nila. It's a relationship that links two generations and shows how the experience of motherhood in one generation can impact the emotional development of the next. Nila's understanding of her mother is very much altered as she comes to learn about the difficult circumstances of Janani's earlier life. Motherhood in the novel is therefore neither a simple biological function nor simply an expression of sacrifice. It is an experience through which the novelist is able to explore the emotional lives of women, the constraints they face and the possibilities of resistance.

Women's Agency and Resistance within Patriarchal Structures

Although *The Daughters of Madurai* is very much about the suffering of women under the domination of the patriarchal system it by no means reduces its female characters to passive victims. Rajasree Variyar also looks at the various ways in which women do assert themselves and resist the circumstances which limit their freedom. Feminist scholarship is

increasingly aware that agency cannot be understood in terms of simply rebellion or complete independence from the structures of oppression (Charrad, 2010; Kanal & Rottmann, 2021; Borovoy & Ghodsee, 2012) stresses the need to understand women's agency in the context of the particular culture in which it is being exercised (Charrad, 2010). Kanal and Rottmann (2021) likewise look at agency in the everyday sense as something which is a product of the particular social circumstances in which it is enacted (Kanal & Rottmann, 2021). This is particularly pertinent to Janani's case. At the outset of her story she seems to have very little control over her own life with her husband and mother-in-law clearly in the driver's seat. Her economic dependence makes it very difficult to resist. The deaths of her daughters are a stark illustration of her position within the family. She becomes increasingly determined to protect her next child and her response to oppression is very much altered as a result. Rather than simply go along with what the family expect she starts to seek support and actively works to prevent the recurrence of the violence she has suffered. It's a case of agency emerging in the face of extreme constraint.

Her resistance is so significant in that it directly contradicts the notion that women have to be silent in order to maintain the family. Janani's decision to protect her child is one which puts the value of human life above the expectations of the family as a patriarchal unit. The support of Shubha, Sanjay and Priya also demonstrates that women's empowerment doesn't have to be a purely individual process. Where women have no financial or social power, supportive relationships and collective action are vital (Charrad, 2010), (Rizvi, 2026). provide a useful corrective to the individualistic notion of feminist agency by foregrounding the importance of the family and of social relationships(Borovoy & Ghodsee, 2012). This is exactly the lens through which we need to understand Janani's resistance, i.e. as resistance which is enabled and sustained through her relationships with people who are supportive of her. Nila is another example of female agency. Her struggle is about identity, sexuality and the freedom to live as she sees fit. Her reluctance to come out as a lesbian is a clear indication of the emotional pressure that comes with conforming to the traditional expectations of relationships and sexuality.

Although Janani and Nila are in very different situations in terms of the restrictions they face, both are seeking the freedom to make decisions about their own lives. Janani is fighting for the right to protect her daughters and Nila is seeking the freedom to be herself without the fear of being rejected. The two women thus exemplify different aspects of female agency. Their experiences show that resistance can be in the form of protecting one's children, challenging the accepted norms of family life, seeking out support or simply asserting the right to have an identity.

Intersectionality: Gender, Class, Sexuality and Family Relationships

Intersectionality is a really useful lens through which to understand the difference between Janani's and Nila's experiences. A feminist analysis that looks at gender discrimination in isolation is unlikely to take account of the impact of economic circumstances, sexuality, family authority and cultural location on women's lives. Crenshaw's approach is intersectional and that challenges the tendency to treat gender, class and all the other forms of social identity as separate categories. Cho, Crenshaw and McCall (2013) make the same point about the need to look at the interplay of different systems of power.

Janani's experience is a case study in the intersection of gender and class. Her poverty makes her reliant on her husband's family and limits her ability to challenge the authority which they exercise over her. Her status as a daughter-in-law is also a factor in the way she relates to the household. She is expected to be the one to provide for the children in terms of reproduction without having any equivalent authority over the decisions which will impact on her children. Her experience of discrimination is therefore not simply a matter of gender. Economic vulnerability, reproductive expectations and the nature of the family relationship all play a part in restricting her freedom.

Nila's experience is a different intersection of identity and social expectation. She grew up in Sydney in a very different cultural and economic environment to her mother. Her lesbian identity is the source of the same kind of emotional difficulty around disclosure and family acceptance. Her experience is that social mobility and moving to a different part of the world doesn't in any way remove the expectations that are placed upon you. You can move to a different culture and the family still have an effect on the way you see yourself and the way you express yourself.

It's important to recognise that Janani's experience is not the same as Nila's. Janani is experiencing extreme reproductive violence and the loss of her daughters. Nila is dealing with the emotional fallout of having to hide her sexuality. The two experiences are very different. Their link is in the wider issue of individual freedom. Both women are constrained by the expectations of family and society. Their stories are a clear illustration of how women's lives are shaped by the particular historical, economic and cultural circumstances in which they find themselves. Intersectionality therefore allows

for a much more sophisticated analysis of the novel. It stops us from treating all women as one monolithic group and acknowledges that gender oppression works in different ways depending on an individual's social position and identity.

Nila's Identity, Sexuality and the Question of Acceptance

Nila's story adds a very modern dimension to the novel's exploration of gender, identity and individuality. Janani is the one who is actually subject to the direct impact of the patriarchal traditions of Madurai. Nila is a completely different proposition in that she is growing up in Sydney in a very different social and cultural milieu. What her story shows is that you don't necessarily escape the emotional impact of family expectations just because you're in a different place and you're of a different generation.

One of the big issues in Nila's life is that she's absolutely not going to tell her parents she's a lesbian. She knows that if she does that it will have an impact on her relationship with them and she's not at all sure what their reaction would be. The secret is a major source of stress for her and is a clear reflection of the problems faced by people whose sexuality doesn't conform to the traditional expectations. Nila's experience broadens the feminist dimensions of the novel. Janani's oppression is about the expectations of reproduction and the devaluation of female children. Nila's oppression is about the freedom to define and express her sexuality. Her experience also raises questions about the relationship between family love and acceptance. A family that truly loves you will accept you for who you are. The prospect of disappointing your parents is what makes it so hard to come forward. Nila's trip to India is a crucial stage in her personal development. She goes with her parents when her grandfather falls seriously ill and the journey is the vehicle through which she begins to learn about her family's history. Her very limited knowledge of her mother's past starts to change as she starts to find out about the circumstances of Janani's life.

The discovery of the family history also prompts Nila to re-think her relationship with her mother. She starts to see Janani not just as a mother but as a person who has experienced violence, grief and resistance. Via Nila, Rajasree Variyar suggests that identity is shaped by both our own experience and our family history. The younger generation will have grown up in a very different cultural milieu, but it is still very important to understand the experience of the generations that went before us in order to form an emotional connection and a sense of belonging.

Conclusion

Rajasree Variyar's *The Daughters of Madurai* is a major study of the experience of women in a patriarchal society. It's the story of Janani and Nila and looks at female infanticide, motherhood, the oppression of women, poverty, family life and the quest for self. Janani's experience is a stark illustration of the human cost of a society which values a son over a daughter. Her suffering is a case in point of how patriarchal attitudes can impact reproductive choice, can limit the autonomy of women and can in effect deny a girl child her right to life. The deaths of her daughters are the ultimate consequence of son preference and her sheer determination to protect her next child is a powerful act of resistance to the prevailing culture.

Nila's story adds another dimension to the discussion of women's freedom. Her battle with her own identity and with the expectations of her family is a clear illustration of the fact that the constraints of conventional life still have a bearing on individual lives in different parts of the world. The challenges faced by Janani and Nila are of course very different, but their stories do point to the continued relevance of freedom, of dignity and of acceptance.

The intersectional feminist approach taken in this piece is that women's lives cannot be understood through the lens of gender alone. Janani's vulnerability is compounded by poverty, reproductive expectations and the lack of authority within the family. Nila's difficulties stem from issues of sexuality, identity and family acceptance. The two women's experiences demonstrate the different ways in which social structures impact women's lives across the generations.

The relationship between the two women is the emotional core of the novel. It's through their relationship that Variyar shows how family histories, memories and the legacy of suffering can affect relationships across generations. Nila's uncovering of her mother's past is a significant step in her journey to understand Janani as a person, rather than simply as a mother. The novel's treatment of motherhood is just as important. Motherhood is not simply a biological function or a social role, it is an emotional experience involving love, protection, sacrifice, grief and resistance. Janani's fight is in itself a challenge to the patriarchal notion that a woman's value is determined by her capacity to bear a son. Her fierce desire to protect her daughter is in itself a demonstration of the power of maternal love as a force which can be used to resist and challenge oppressive social structures.

The novel's conception of female agency goes well beyond the traditional idea of resistance as simply opposition. Janani's desire to protect her children, her readiness to go to the authorities and her refusal to accept the notion that women are simply there to be subservient are all examples of agency in the face of constraint. The fact that she is able to receive support is also a significant point in terms of the value of solidarity and collective action in the face of patriarchal power.

The Daughters of Madurai is really a critique of the social practices which determine the worth of women and girls in terms of gender and of what is 'normal' in terms of expectations. It is a reminder that every child has the right to life, to dignity and to equal opportunity regardless of gender. By linking the experiences of two generations it makes a very powerful case for the recognition of the individuality of women and for the challenge of the discriminatory practices that are so often in place. It is ultimately a very powerful piece of literature in terms of motherhood, in terms of the woman's identity and in terms of the continuing fight for gender equality.

Literature has long been a site for interrogating social inequalities and for bringing the experiences of the marginalised into the public sphere (Bell, 2016), (Liao & Wang, 2020). Women's experiences in particular, those of women shaped by patriarchy, gendered discrimination, motherhood and unequal social relationships, have become a major concern in contemporary literary studies.

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