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Disorder And Dominance in Malathi Rao's *Disorderly Women*

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Abstract

The present paper deals with the Malathi Rao's sahitya Akademi Award -Winning novel *Disorderly Women*, a narrative of four Brahmin women- Venku Bai, Rukmini, Kamla, and Ila represented in pre-independence South India. Revolving around the ancestral house Himalya, the novel talks about how women bear the burden of family ties while denying the agency of male chauvinism in all spheres of life. By means of detailed account of South Indian Brahmin domestic life, Rao depicts how child marriage, rigid gendered training, and sacralised images of the husband as "God" reinforce female conformity. However, she simultaneously finds quieter, interior forms of disorder. Kamla's refusal of an abusive marriage, her pursuit of education and paid work, he illegal love for Vasudeva, and Ila's insistence on narrating these lives. Reading Disorderly Women alongside Rumi, the paper argues that Rao reinterprets rebellion as subtle, often invisible protest in the male chauvinistic society.

Keywords: Sahitya Akademi Award, Narrative , Pre-Independence, Family , Male Chauvinism , Child Marriage, Gendered training , Illegal love.

The present paper seeks to argue the element of "Disorder and Dominance in Malathi Rao's *Disorderly Women*," explores the aspect of dominance as portrayed in Malathi Rao's English novel *Disorderly Women*. The novel's opening is startlingly reminiscent of Daphne du Maurier's *Rebecca*—"Last night I dreamt I went to Manderley again…." (Rebecca Web) and serves as a foretaste of what lies in store for the reader. *Disorderly Women* won the Central Sahitya Akademi Award in 2007.

Reading the novel fifteen years after its first publication, one senses that it has lost some commercial sheen. Amazon registers virtually no rating, whereas Goodreads offers a respectable 3.5 average with thoughtful reviews. Yet, quick surveys of lists of Indian women writing in English show Malathi Rao as barely visible. This neglect belies the richness of her text.

The title *Disorderly Women* immediately piques interest. It operates both as a tone of admonishment and as a thematic introduction. Women in the novel carry the burden of maintaining family continuity and tradition; they are implicitly assumed to be meticulous guardians of order. Untidiness, slovenliness, and "disorder" are seen as unbecoming to their feminine role. Rao illustrates this through Nagamma's training of Rukmini in exacting household work:

> "If a single remnant of food was found anywhere in the hall after the daughter-in-law had cleaned it, she would be condemned as unworthy and lazy, arrogant and slovenly" (14).

The second part of the title—"women"—dovetails with Rao's opening dedication: "For, I believe, that's what stories are for. To be endlessly repeated, so that there is no forgetting, who you are and where you came from" (1). Spanning 277 pages without a formal table of contents, the novel becomes itself a story about stories—about how women remember, transmit, and sometimes resist oppressive norms.

Rao's own life frames this fictional exploration. Born in April 1930 into a quintessential South Indian Brahmin family as one of five daughters, she chose not to follow the "orderly" custom of early, arranged marriage. Rejecting pre-Independence conservatism, she enrolled in English Literature at Bangalore and Mysore Universities. She thus embodies the "disorder" that breaks traditional shackles. Later mentored by Prof. V. T. Srinivasan at Vijaya College and spending much of her career at Miranda House, Delhi University, she only turned seriously to creative writing after retirement in the mid-1990s: "It was in the post retirement period that she put pen to paper to carve her well deserved niche as an author, crowned with the Sahitya Akademi award in 2007" (Web).

An important feature of *Disorderly Women* is its verbal simulation of the mid-20th-century South Indian ecosystem. The detailed evocation of houses, kolams, temples, and rituals resembles the intricacy of auspicious rice-flour designs on doorsteps. These descriptions, drawn from lived experience, immerse the reader in a pan-regional South Indian atmosphere beyond any single locale. Like *Rebecca* and Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss*, *Disorderly Women* is anchored in a house—*Himalaya*—that functions almost as a protagonist.

Rao enmeshes the central women—Venku Bai, Rukmini, Kamala, and Ila—in tropes of destiny, family, and marriage. Venku Bai, the older generation, is mother of Kamala and mother-in-law of Rukmini; Ila, Rukmini's daughter, becomes the narrator and sutradhar. These women do not appear as flamboyant rebels in the vein of Namita Gokhale's heroines; instead, the novel traces their largely private traumas and daily battles against the barriers of domesticity. This quieter, interior form of struggle is arguably more devastating and more representative of countless unrecorded lives.

A question that arises at the outset is why the title refers to "disorderly women" rather than "disorderly daughters." The emphasis is on daughters who have grown into womanhood, cut their moorings with their natal homes, and entered marital houses where their identities are reshaped. The story revolves around the enforced abnegation of all roles for women except those tied to domesticity.

II

The first five chapters of the novel establish the background against which the lives of these "disorderly women" unfold. If imagined as a play, the curtain rises on Ila, the youngest of the four key women, and her childhood home, *Himalaya*:

> "Last night I dreamt of 'Himalaya' again. Transformed by a greenish light, the beloved place tricked my eyes. Except that I would know it, awake or asleep, anywhere in the world. An inseparable part of my childhood, an indelible spot—like no other place on earth" (1).

These lines assert the centrality of the house, both to the narrative and to the characters' lives. Ila's brother Pradyumna is determined to convert this "white elephant" into profit. Kamala, in contrast, calls *Himalaya* a "carapace." The brother's ambitious name—Pradyumna, son of Rukmini and Krishna—contrasts with his mercenary vision. Ila has inherited her aunt Kamala's diaries and letters, hinting at deeper layers that only she can bring to light. The first chapter closes by announcing that Ila will carry the narrative, recounting stories told by her mother Rukmini half a century earlier.

The bulk of the narrative unfolds in flashback, beginning with Rukmini's birth in Chandragiri. Unusually, her arrival as a girl child is welcomed with joy. Yet the circumvention of normal domestic training in her early years is treated as an aberration. Her mother Nagamma prevents her from going near the kitchen or learning drudgery "even at the age of eight" (8). Her father Guru Murthy, though fond of his youngest child, frets that she remains "illiterate" in household skills:

> "What kind of daughter-in-law will she make when she gets married tomorrow or the day after, Nagu? Everyone will laugh at us and make fun of our ignorant girl" (8).

Simultaneously, Rukmini is subject to continuous indoctrination:

> "Nagamma, whenever she had the chance, spoke to Rukmini of the household she would eventually enter and how she should serve her husband, her father-in-law and her mother-in-law" (9).

By the middle of the second chapter, domesticity emerges as the only option open to girls. Rukmini is taught to regard her husband as an avatar of God. From the cradle, parents think of the day the girl will be sent to her husband's house. Every act—songs, worship, grooming, household chores—is oriented toward this one destiny. The slightest deviation is branded "disorderly" and marks a stain on the girl's character.

At the same time, Rao's description of South Indian Brahmin households is akin to petit-point embroidery. The celebration of Rukmini's birth, family portraits, abundant household stores, flowers, and rivers create a rich tapestry of ethnic identity, time, and place. Even bathing is folded into motifs of marriage, fertility, and fortune, as Nagamma blesses her child during Friday ritually:

> "May you live for a hundred years. May you be a good wife to your husband. May you bear 12 children. May your wisdom and good fortune increase day by day like the growing moon" (6–7).

Thus, at ten, Rukmini is already treated as "a little woman," echoing Louisa M. Alcott's *Little Women*—unsurprising given Rao's English-literary leanings, also evident in allusions to *Alice in Wonderland*.

Neighbouring families spur Rukmini's parents into action. Subbarao has married off his nine-year-old daughter Lalitha; Venkata Rao has married off two daughters aged eight and nine on consecutive days. Rao captures the grotesque normality of child marriage:

> "Marriage was a favorite game, which the elders of every family played. They took hold of a boy and girl in much the same way as they would take hold of puppets, and tied them into marriage" (12).

To imagine any other path is to invite "disorder." Against this background, one understands why Rao herself never married and can be seen as a living model for the "disorderly women" she portrays.

Rao also emphasizes how a girl's every act is weighed for or against her marriageability. Rukmini's dark complexion lowers her ranking among eligible brides. The astrologer Harisamy Achar asserts that even if she married a beggar, her lucky stars would raise her to "great position and power" and a "full, happy life" (22). The contrast between such astrological assurances and the brutal actualities of women's lives becomes a recurring irony.

III

By Chapter Six, the narrative pace quickens. Ila now walks the reader down Chamarajpet's Mosque Street from her vantage point in *Himalaya*. Rao paints a vivid picture of a "melting pot" of communities carefully kept apart:

> "The portly and conservative Brahmin community on Mosque Street, lived amidst the stench and drum beating, forever anxious to keep the fringes of their existence untouched by the life that sizzled around them" (31).

Here stands *Himalaya*, the first Brahmin house on the street, owned by Seshagiri Rao, Ila's great-grandfather and the dominating pater familias. Rao writes,

> "'Himalaya,' however, seemed to be an appropriate name for Seshagiri Rao's house, for no ice-bound mountain could be barer than the earth here."

Set against neighboring verdure, *Himalaya* prefigures the emotional barrenness and harsh discipline inside. It soon emerges as a bastion of male chauvinism intensified by the unquestioned dominance of Seshagiri Rao. His inflated self-importance is illustrated when he violently kicks a new recruit in the stomach for placing a letter incorrectly. At home, wife Venku Bai, sons Krishna, Venkatesha and Govinda, daughter Kamala, and servants tremble before him.

In sharp contrast to this regime is twelve-year-old Kamala's guileless request to see the circus with her friend Vasudeva. Vasudeva can make her laugh until she cries, comfort her, and make her laugh again. Yet in the domestic upheaval that follows, no space remains for such laughter or minor disorder. Women have no right to be disorderly; they are mere cannon-fodder for male whims. One recalls Tennyson's lines: "Theirs not to make reply, / Theirs not to reason why, / Theirs but to do and die" (Alfred Web).

The whole episode culminates in Chapter Ten when, with theatrical flair, Rao stages Kamala's marriage preparations without a word of explanation to the bride herself. Marriage and husband—God in human form—are deployed as dual panaceas to cure any potential scandal. Gudanna, the selected groom, is no match for Vasudeva, who had held Kamala under the blue-flowered tree, the sole foliage besides jasmine in *Himalaya*'s backyard. Marriage confers new status:

> "In ordinary conversation, 'it was in Kamalu's marriage' … and 'Kamalu's husband' appeared again and again like refrains in a song" (65).

Yet Kamala continues to live with her parents until puberty. From then on:

> "From morning to night and even in her dreams, her thoughts were centered on her husband, who had tied the thali around her neck" (65).

Her small "disorderliness" with Vasudeva is thus absorbed into a fortified fortress of ordered marital life.

IV

Vasudeva, who unintentionally precipitates Kamala's arranged marriage by incurring Seshagiri's wrath, now comes to the fore. Having eaten as a poor Brahmin student at *Himalaya* for seven years, he feels part of the family and sees nothing wrong in loving Kamala. Rao's description of their bond—always with the blue-flower tree as silent witness—conveys a relationship that transcends mere adolescent infatuation:

> "Sometimes when he put his arms around her and held her close to him, she felt she had come home and did not want to leave his arms ever" (29).

No one except her eldest brother Krishna suspects this budding disorder, though whispers circulate at Kamala's wedding. Vasudeva's unrequited love turns into a fierce determination to outclass Seshagiri and prove his worth.

Having "married off" his daughter, Seshagiri turns to Krishna, who recoils from marriage. The narrative toggles between Chandragiri, where Rukmini lives, and *Himalaya*, where Krishna struggles against his father's will. Women's lives again appear overdetermined: poor but beautiful Suguna is condemned for being unmarried at seventeen. To escape his father's tyranny, Krishna agrees to marry Rukmini.

On the eve of the wedding, Venku Bai explains Kamala's sudden removal to Mysore—her husband's home—following her first menstruation. Sisterly affection cannot supersede marital commitments; a girl who has crossed the "red signal" of puberty must go. When Kamala returns for Krishna's wedding, her misery is evident:

> "Kamalu, why did you cry in the hall a few minutes ago? I saw your tears. Tell me are you happy in your new home? Is your husband good to you?" (84).

Kamala cannot answer; her heart is with Vasudeva, whom she sometimes imagines as her real husband.

The wedding journey from *Himalaya* to Chandragiri is huge, comical, yet successful. Immediately after the ceremony, Krishna flings off his garland, crying:

> "A householder at twenty four and all because I have a domineering father… I do not even have a job, for heaven's sake. It's madness, madness" (88).

Rukmini, unlike her husband, embraces marriage. Yet wandering around, she accidentally witnesses Gundanna forcing himself on Kamala. The shock contaminates her nascent love for Krishna; the accoutrements of marriage—the toe-rings and thali—are all that make her feel married.

V

Krishna's marriage becomes a watershed. Pressured by Seshagiri, he applies for a lecturer's post in Civil Engineering in Bangalore—an appointment virtually guaranteed by his father's clout, although Krishna dreams of a job in Bombay. His new salary allows him to avoid contributing to the household and to spend nights partying with friends, further distancing himself from his wife. Rao underscores male callousness through his behaviour: he tears up Rukmini's letters and refuses her parents' Deepavali invitation, scoffing:

> "And that girl—his wife—well, she was a rag doll. Rag dolls do not squeal or sigh and you can push any number of pins into them" (95).

This chilling image foreshadows the emotional violence faced by the women.

On Deepavali, Venku Bai collapses from long-ignored abdominal pains and dies after three days of agony. Her death is perversely praised as "lucky" because she dies before her husband and as a sumangali, with kumkum still on her forehead. Through Krishna's grief, Rao exposes the centrality of this "green oasis" in barren *Himalaya*:

> "How could she vanish into nothing, she, who had been so real, she, who had never complained… she, who had always been there, a green oasis in the barren 'Himalaya'?" (100).

Death, writes Rao, is "the only certainty, the only reality in the flux of life" (100).

Plans to sell *Himalaya* and profit from it are dogged by disorder across generations of servants and Marwari buyers. Pradyumna's arrogance provokes Bora to remark that gifting *Himalaya* to him is like giving a ruby necklace to a monkey. Ila feels:

> "'Himalaya' was not a mere brick and stone. It was, like love, a many splendored thing" (105).

The house's contrasting meanings—commodity for Pradyumna, emotional archive for Ila—constitute an important thread in the novel's exploration of dominance and disorder.

Venku Bai's death summons relatives, including Rukmini's parents; Gundanna and his family are conspicuously absent, except for Kamala. Kamala's long overstay, and Krishna's probing, reveal the brutality of her married life—abuse, blame for infertility, violent expulsion, and the symbolic snatching of her thali. Yet, because of iron marital bonds, Kamala is pushed back to Gundanna against every fibre of her being.

When Rukmini arrives at *Himalaya* as a new bride, she is constantly measured against the invisible standard of Venku Bai:

> "They were always telling her about the way the dead woman had done things" (110).

Like the second Mrs de Winter in *Rebecca*, she is haunted by an absent predecessor. But Rukmini gradually charts her own course: partly accommodating Krishna's modern cravings, partly greening *Himalaya* with flowers and herbs. Meanwhile, Seshagiri wanders like a lost soul, his arrogance intact, even when Kamala returns, a wraith begging for refuge after being cast out for barrenness.

Krishna's pleading secures Kamala's permanent residence at *Himalaya* as one who is "married, yet not married" (117). Visiting his friend Doraiswamy to make a will, Seshagiri is challenged by Sivakamasundari Ammal:

> "Why not send her to high school, and then to college?" (119).

Her suggestion opens the door to Kamala's possible rehabilitation.

VI

Chapter Twenty-One opens on a cautious note of hope, framed by the lush blue-flowered tree and Rukmini's garden:

> "When Rukmini's own person swelled with Krishna's child, Kamala too saw a faint silver lining in the dark cloud of her blighted youth" (120).

Yet Kamala's life is one of endless waiting and emptiness; the horrors of abuse and the destruction of her sacred thali haunt her. This state gnaws at Seshagiri and Krishna, who long for a solution. In contrast, Rukmini and Krishna's tender, mutually

respectful marriage shines as an exception. Rukmini becomes the heart of the household, but cannot thaw Kamala's desolation.

The first real crack in Seshagiri's supremacy appears after Venku Bai's death and Kamala's return. For the first time, he has no panacea. The astrologers, who once extolled Kamala's invincible horoscope, now speak in "forked tongues" of misfortune. Remembering Vasudeva, Seshagiri wonders whether he erred in rejecting his proposal.

Rao now draws energy from the wider pre-Independence milieu. The freedom movement, though largely in the background, percolates into minds and possibilities. Rukmini returns to Chandragiri for confinement, enabling the novel to contrast her secure, affectionate marriage with Kamala's violent one, and to revisit the saga of Raja and Suguna. Chandragiri remains redolent of life—the golden champak's scent, cows' lowing, bird song, and cool stone floors:

> "'Himalaya' had brought out the woman in her and beside the child, she seemed to bear within her another treasure—her love for Krishna" (126).

Against this fullness stands Kamala's barren existence.

Raja, Rukmini's brother, returns as a haggard, haunted man. His clandestine relationship with Suguna—who bore his child—resulted in his disgrace and exile. Rukmini's puzzlement at why he did not marry Suguna contrasts with the ease with which unemployed men like Raja or Krishna are nonetheless considered "qualified" for marriage simply by their gender and family status. Once again, women, not men, bear the consequences of sexual transgression.

One whole chapter is devoted to the debate on giving Kamala a second chance through education. Subbi, Seshagiri's widowed sister, embodies entrenched patriarchal scripts:

> "For a married girl, the husband was the life-breath even if he were a monster, even if he were a tiger. The death of her husband was the end of her life… I have simply existed through the years…" (134).

For Subbi, anything other than silent widowhood invites catastrophe. Kamala's education is unthinkable, for women's "training" is assumed to be purely domestic.

Krishna counters this:

> "Of course, she has not been trained… But her training will start now. The problem of her rehabilitation has to be faced now and there is no other solution… Times are changing Subbi, and people are gradually overcoming taboos and superstitions that bound you and your parents… almost all the middle-class families want education for their girls. And things will improve further" (139).

Subbi would rather die than witness such change, yet the die is cast when neighbours also send their girls to school. The whole family gathers as Kamala and Marakatha leave for high school. Thus, the "opposition bench" of Seshagiri and Krishna wins the day, and Kamala's life takes a new trajectory.

Rukmini urges Nagamma to discover Suguna's fate; they learn she bore a stillborn child and returned to Honnali. This brings a partial closure to that thread. Yet *Himalaya*, now compared to a "prehistoric beast" waiting to pounce, remains ominous (139). Soon there is happier news: Rukmini gives birth to a daughter named Ila, "cardinal to the sky like the sun and the 'Aum' in the Vedas." Rao notably dwells on the birth of girls more than boys, subtly valuing the female line.

Raja's journey from Chandragiri to Bombay, through the Hanuman Jayanti celebrations at Ketawadi and onward to Benares, is sketched as his spiritual search:

> "Some fiend seems to have got into him… it was the fiend within him that he must conquer, to conquer desire and attachment" (158).

Back at *Himalaya*, while Rukmini is away with infant Ila, Bora tends the garden until it flourishes, diminishing the blue-flower tree's importance. One morning, Seshagiri reasserts his mastery by ordering this very tree cut down, despite everyone's protests. Kamala is most affected:

> "It was almost like a murder, the act of demolishing the tree, which had stood there like a sage at penance… and in summer months burst into flower as a reward for its penance" (161).

The felling symbolizes patriarchal attempts to erase forbidden love and disobedient memory.

Kamala's rehabilitation begins to show results: she tops the school matriculation exam; Krishna rejoices in her newfound courage and confidence (164). She is set for college as Rukmini returns to Chandragiri for a second confinement.

Then Vasudeva reappears, transformed into a suave Indian Civil Service officer, stepping out of a green Ford. In a calculated gesture, he thanks Seshagiri for the insult that spurred his success. Seshagiri, in recounting Kamala's ordeals before Vasudeva and his English wife Judy, shows chilling indifference to his daughter's shame. Vasudeva is deeply moved, both by Kamala's suffering and by her transformation.

He remarks to Judy:

> "Kamala is different. She's rebelled against the Hindu ideal in order to save herself from a living hell… I like her spirit… Kamala could be the first modern Indian woman, Judy, what? Or one of the first?" (179).

His admiration marks a positive endorsement of "disorderliness." Yet Judy intuits the threat this renewed connection poses to their marriage, feeling "a fine veil" descend

between them. Rao closes the chapter with the koel's call as metaphor for unresolved tension.

Vasudeva soon returns to *Himalaya*; Kamala, now a confident college student in yellow sari, evokes for him their youthful past—though the blue-flower tree is gone (183). The missing tree is meant to symbolize severance, but in reality the past remains stubbornly alive. A trip to Mysore's Brindavan Gardens with Vasudeva, Judy, Kamala, and Krishna becomes the setting where Vasudeva and Kamala finally acknowledge their deep love. All participants realize that consequences will unfold in time. Seshagiri's horror on learning that Vasudeva has married a foreigner is almost comic; his dream of marrying off Kamala's younger sister to this established officer collapses.

VII

After Mysore, the narrative baton passes more firmly to Ila, through Kamala's letters and Ila's adoration of her aunt. Ila longs to "stand alone, be strong and courageous, be an individual, family or no family." Yet Kamala's marital status casts a permanent shadow over her achievements. In the 1950s, even with college degrees, she cannot find steady employment:

> "Women, ordinary women like me even after college degrees found it difficult to get jobs… No husbands, no jobs. We were at the transition period of history. I'm happy you've at least found a job, Ila. You're own person—not like me" (192).

Kamala's letters oscillate between exuberance and desolation, invoking Hamlet's dilemma:

> "To be, or not to be… Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer / The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune / Or to take arms against a sea of troubles…" (Shakespeare Web).

Eventually, when Marakatha and Sivraman are posted to Bombay, Kamala resolves:

> "At twenty-nine, I leave the cocoon of my family, and venture forth into the world, an independent individual, free to choose what I want and to be solely responsible for my choice… I alone must decide and make the choice between what is right and wrong" (193).

Her travel to Bombay is a personal tryst with destiny.

Bombay, with its vistas of the Arabian Sea, becomes the stage for waves of passion between Kamala and Vasudeva, barely held in check. A visit to Judy and Vasudeva's home, however, confronts Kamala with reality: she can never be more than a mistress. This insight propels her to break away. When she tells Vasudeva, "Greater than happiness is duty," he protests:

> "You have chosen the head and denied the heart" (218).

Yet Kamala feels morally suffocated by passion's tentacles; she finds clarity:

> "What could I ever have been to him except, perhaps, his mistress… She'd stopped short of being that and there was a curious sense of relief… She had sent him back to Judy. Ah, that business was over now she must think of what lay before her" (222).

Here Rao consciously invokes Rumi's "voice that does not use words" (Web): passion and renunciation are conveyed not through explicit description but through suggestive, measured prose.

Back at *Himalaya*, the place dearest to her, Kamala's initial self-absorption in grief transforms slowly into acceptance, aided by Krishna's unconditional empathy. She abandons plans for further study and lets everyday domesticity soothe her. She resolves never to leave *Himalaya*:

> "She would cling to it as a crab clings to sea-wet rock… Here she was in touch with peacefulness and compassion and the courage to live for the sake of others" (228).

Writing in a grey leather diary becomes catharsis:

> "She found an immense release… exorcising the ghosts that haunted her, and cleansing her of the sin of weakness" (229).

The later chapters tidy loose ends through karmic accounting: Govinda's decision to remain in Germany is both lamented and accepted; Raja's story reaches its unexpected conclusion as ascetic Rajendra; Suguna marries and has two children; Janki, the unmarried youngest sister, finally weds Subramaniam, a lecturer, despite sub-caste differences.

Through it all, *Himalaya* remains more than a house; it is a cold, looming, ever-present character, akin to the mountain itself. Kamala's attachment to it deepens with age. Her death at fifty-nine—surrounded by gossip, caretaker tales of poisoning, and ghostly sightings—still does not sever the bond between aunt and niece:

> "There was a deep bond between us which even death couldn't snap" (258).

In the penultimate chapters, Kamala engages Raja in searching conversations that expose her hunger for acceptance and normalcy and his irreversible commitment to renunciation. He gently reminds her that "frustrations, dissatisfactions… a sense of total failure" are inherent in human ties. She accepts her failure to secure him as a husband with dignity and resignation (266).

When Raja finally leaves *Himalaya* for Kerala to take vows, Rukmini weeps helplessly at the gate; Raja walks away without looking back, his heart "overflowing with compassion" (269). Once again, those who depart—Govinda to Germany, Raja

to asceticism—do so as men; Kamala, unable to renounce in socially sanctioned ways, remains in the domestic sphere.

In the final two chapters, Rao juxtaposes Rukmini and Kamala. Rukmini is the "orderly" protagonist, a woman who believes in marriage as "one of the surest paths to mortal happiness," and who holds *Himalaya* together after Venku Bai's death. Kamala is her antithesis, whose "tangled existence" Rukmini cannot fathom. Yet Rukmini also repeatedly acknowledges that without Kamala's rare brave smile and endurance, the household narrative would be incomplete.

Rao brings the reader back full circle to Ila, the storyteller and perhaps another "disorderly" woman who chooses her own path while preserving the memories of those who came before. Ila, as sutradhar and biographer of Kamala and of *Himalaya*, ensures that these voices—often unheard in official histories—are "endlessly repeated," so that there is "no forgetting who you are and where you came from."

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