



Real and Imagined Women: Gender, Representation, and Postcolonial Agency in Rajeswari Sunder Rajan

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Abstract: This article explores the significance of Rajeswari Sunder Rajan's book "Real and Imagined Women: Gender, Culture and Postcolonialism" (1993) as a foundational text in the development of postcolonial feminist thought. In the book, Rajan examines the interrelation of representation, subjectivity, and agency in the postcolonial world. She demonstrates how the figure of the woman is both constructed as a symbolic figure and exists as a subject in the world of culture and politics. In the text, Rajan examines the interrelation of the "imagined woman" as an ideological figure and the "real woman" as a figure who exists in the world of constraints. This article draws on the theories of postcolonialism and feminist epistemology to explore how Rajan's text re-theorises the concept of subaltern agency through the interrelation of the figure of the woman and the state. This article proposes a model of Representation-State-Subjectivity to explore the significance of Rajan's text in the development of postcolonial feminist thought.

Keywords: Postcolonial feminism, Representation, Subaltern agency, Gender and nationalism, Cultural politics, Feminist theory, State and subjectivity, Literary criticism.

Introduction

The development of the postcolonial feminist theory is a product of an understanding that nationalist and colonial discourses used women symbolically but ignored their experiences. In the book by Sunder Rajan, "**Real and Imagined Women: Gender, Culture and Postcolonialism**," the author offers an in-depth analysis of women's identity from cultural, literary, and political perspectives.

Rajan's most important contribution has been her distinction between "the real" and "the imagined." "The imagined woman" refers to the symbolic women in nationalist discourse, religious mythology, and literature, and "the real woman" refers to the women who live in the real world of law, caste, class, and gender. According to Rajan, the space for the postcolonial feminist discourse has to be located between the two.

This article places the work of Rajan in the broader context of the discussions on subaltern agency and representation. It argues that Rajan's work offers a sophisticated approach to the ways in which agency is not denied or autonomous, but rather negotiated within structures of institutions and discourse.

Methodological Approach



This study utilises an interpretive textual analysis approach in which the arguments presented by Rajan are contextualised in postcolonial feminist theories. The analysis revolves around three major themes in the text:

1. Representation and ideological construction
2. Nationalism and the symbolic female body
3. Law, state power, and female subjectivity

Rather than summarising Rajan's chapters, this article reconstructs her theoretical architecture and assesses its implications for feminist theory.

Representation and the Imagined Woman

Rajan's other area of interest is the ideological construct of women in post-colonial discourse. She shows how there is often an idealised notion of womanhood, mother, goddess, sacrificial wife, in the narratives of culture formation in both literature and nationalism.

These numbers are symbolic rather than material. The woman as "Mother India" or goddess has symbolic rather than material power as the embodiment of purity and moral authority. Symbolic elevation of the woman has no corresponding political empowerment of women.

The representational logic is also criticised by Rajan, who argues that symbolic exaltation is often accompanied by structural subordination. The imagined woman is culturally central but also, in political terms, marginal.

Her intervention is also significant for the postcolonial debate on whether the subaltern speaks. Rajan refigures the question of the speaking subaltern by looking at how women are spoken for.

Nationalism and Gendered Symbolism

Rajan discusses the production of the symbolism of women in the context of Indian nationalism. Anti-colonial movements often positioned women as the protectors of cultural authenticity. Such symbolic positioning ensured the distinction between the "spiritual" inner space of the nation, personified by women, and the "material" outer space of the nation, personified by colonial modernity.

Although this strategy helped nationalist resistance, it also limited the roles of women to idealized positions. The symbolic position of women as keepers of tradition limited their roles in the political and economic spheres.

The analysis presented by Rajan shows that nationalism is not, in itself, an emancipatory force for women. Even in nationalist movements, women are subject to patriarchal control.

This imagined woman thus becomes a site in which modernity, tradition, and colonial resistance intersect. Rajan shows how a feminist critique requires the disentanglement of women's participation from their symbolic appropriation.

Law, State Power, and Real Women

Besides cultural representation, Rajan explores the place of the law in the formation of the female subject. The debates on marriage, dowry, rape, and inheritance laws demonstrate the involvement of the state in the management of women's bodies and rights.

The "real woman" is most apparent in these legal systems. In contrast to symbolic women, the "real woman" faces the institutional systems, which determine her possibilities.

Rajan suggests that feminists' involvement with the state must also be a critical one. This is because, while the law has the power to extend rights, it also has the power to reinforce paternalistic logic. The state is thus seen as a site of contestation and control.



Such duality makes it difficult to conceptualise empowerment in simplistic terms. Rajan's model of agency argues that it is negotiated within an institution rather than outside it.

Subaltern Agency and Feminist Critique

Rajan's contribution to the discussion of subaltern agency is the way in which she avoids binary oppositions. She does not accept the notion of the complete silence of women nor the idea of their complete autonomy.

Instead, agency is seen as "constrained negotiation." Women are seen to be negotiating within the limits of discourse and institutions. The subjectivity of women is influenced by factors such as caste, class, religion, and laws.

This complex picture also points us towards later debates in feminist theory on intersectionality and power. Rajan focuses on the complexity of agency in the postcolonial world, where there is both resistance and restriction.

Her work also shows the significance of cultural production. Literature becomes a space for the reproduction and challenge of the ideological constructs.

Representation–State–Subjectivity Framework

Synthesising Rajan's theoretical architecture, this article proposes a conceptual framework:

Representation–State–Subjectivity Model

- **Representation** – Cultural and literary construction of imagined femininity
- **State** – Legal and institutional regulation of women's lives
- **Subjectivity** – Negotiated agency within structural constraints

At the centre:

CONSTRAINED FEMINIST AGENCY

This model encapsulates the key insight of Rajan's work: that women's identities are constructed through representational and institutional practices, but that these practices do not completely efface agency.

Implications for Postcolonial Feminism

Rajan's work challenges Western feminist universalism in the positioning of gender in a specific historical and cultural context. She argues that postcolonial feminism must consider nationalism, colonialism, and cultural politics.

Rajan's work on universalism also questions the nostalgic formation of cultural identity. Tradition needs to be rethought in terms of its gender effects.

In her work on literature, law, and politics, Rajan displays an interdisciplinary approach to feminist studies.

Contemporary Relevance

Despite being published in 1993, **Real and Imagined Women** continues to be very relevant today. Modern discourses of nationalism, religious identity, and gender citizenship continue to invoke symbolic femininity.

The continued presence of gendered cultural icons in political discourse illustrates the continued relevance of the imagined woman. At the same time, legal changes and feminist politics illustrate the continued negotiation of the rights of real women.

The relevance of the **Real and imagined women** categories established by Rajan continues to be very useful in the study of modern identity politics.



Conclusion

Real and Imagined Women, by Rajeswari Sunder Rajan, is a landmark text in postcolonial feminist studies because it resists the easy binary oppositions between symbolic representation and material reality. Through the distinction between the “imagined woman” and the “real woman,” Rajan reveals the ideological framework by which femininity is deployed in nationalist and cultural discourse. The figure of the imagined woman, as mother, goddess, and bearer of tradition, becomes a metaphor for the nation as a stabilising presence. But this ideological visibility does not map onto political autonomy. Instead, it often conceals the structural marginalisation of real women in legal, economic, and social systems.

The most significant aspect of Rajan’s work is her theorisation of agency. Rather than positing women as either passive victims or fully empowered agents, Rajan theorises agency as a site of negotiation between the terrains of representation and regulation. Feminine subjectivity is constituted through engagement with state law, cultural ideology, and institutional power.

In this way, Rajan integrates literature, law, and cultural politics into a unified framework of analysis, thus linking feminist literary studies and political theory. The argument here demonstrates that representation is never merely aesthetic; rather, it is embedded within governance as it articulates the terms upon which women are recognized, protected, or disciplined. The state does not merely act after representation; instead, it formalises and institutionalises the symbolic assumptions implicit in cultural narratives.

In the contemporary moment, where nationalist claims are being made with renewed vigour and where gendered surveillance is being practised with increasing fervour, the distinction between **Real and imagined women** in Rajan’s work remains as timely as ever. The meaning of femininity is thus always constitutive of the formation of majoritarian politics, even as legal reforms and feminist politics have continued to signal the ongoing articulation of rights and recognition.

Ultimately, **Real and Imagined Women** suggests a feminist politics that is attuned to both discourse and structure. The book urges feminist scholars to think carefully about the relationship between symbolic uplift and structural constraint, and about how agency is produced not in contradiction to but in relation to regulatory frameworks. In this sense, Rajan shifts the postcolonial feminist theoretical tradition away from a simple notion of power and towards a more complex understanding of subjectivity that is produced at the intersection of representation, law, and politics.

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