

RESEARCH ARTICLE

R. K. NARAYAN'S *THE DARK ROOM* IS A NOVEL OF DOMESTIC DISHARMONY

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ABSTRACT

The present paper on R.K. Narayan's *The Dark Room* reflects his views on feminism and his characterization of Indian people especially women. He presents his character of Savitri and modernism through Shanti Bai. It dares to take a road not taken so far and asserts that R.K.Narayan's status as a feminist novelist is just like a thing hiding in the light-it is very much visible but somehow we have missed it.

Keywords: Apolitical, entities, familiar, feminist, introspection, Modernism, patriarchal, symbolic, self-reliant and traditionalism.

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INTRODUCTION

A Woman is given the peripheral region and the centre is occupied by a man in the patriarchal society from the olden days of socio-historical chronicle of India. Woman's total dependence on man curbs herself-respect and individuality. The tradition, superstition, male-dominated environment of society leaves woman in a boundary of four walls. It has a passive impact on woman's liberty to dream and achieve a position in the society which she can be proud of. She struggles for identity. This struggle leads to her self-discovery. The emancipation of women started with the remarkable changes that were brought about in the patriarchal and traditional society with the effect of modernism. Women's liberation is not mere

shouting of slogans for one's rights. Women's liberation means of a fuller development of her personality. She does not have to ask for freedom. She herself develops a capacity to achieve it. Freedom is not a thing to be given or taken but to be attained by the way of living and self-effort.

The novels of R.K.Narayan (1907-2001) can be regarded as more or less a socio-historical chronicle of India of his time-Pre and Post-Independence India. His early novels were written before Independence of India (1947) portray women as mere orthodox and god-believing entities engaged in household chores, deeply rooted in traditional beliefs. His middle novels create women who dare to pursue their own happiness escaping the noose of tradition or social mores. In his later

novels, R.K.Narayan portrays his heroines are capable of expressing their resistance to male dominance, cruelty against the fair sex, denial of identity and freedom of expression.

R.K.Narayan's attitude to Women: Narayan's novels depict the provincial lives of the denizens of Malgudi-atown somewhere in South India, a town that has in it the very essence of Indian sensibility. Life follows snail's pace in Malgudi as it does in most of the small towns in India. Cultural and social norms have failed to keep pace with the changing world. One such issue is that of the position of women in the life of Malgudi. Narayan's sympathy for women is a novelist's apolitical observations on the plight of women in general and the traditional Hindu women in particular. Though he came from an orthodox Brahmin family, he did not hesitate to depict the problems plaguing women in an out of the family circle. Despite his emphasis on moral values and traditions prevailing in the society, his concern for women reflects his attitude which is liberal and considerate towards women. His main aim appears to be preserving the harmony of marriage and also restoring the woman's individuality. He gives a message that woman can assert herself being "Self" in spite of continuing to fulfil her commitments and her responsibilities within the family and society for a better life by adding more meaning to it.

R.K.Narayan's 'The Dark Room'- Its symbolic significance: R. K. Narayan's *The Dark Room* offers a feminist view of the contemporary South-Indian society. The dark room is used as a symbol that entails the frustration of a tormented, helpless Indian wife. In THE DARK ROOM, R.K.Narayan introduces Savitri, the reincarnation of mythical goddess who would do all she can, even make a dwarf of herself to ascertain the well-being of her husband and family. Her husband Ramani was an employee of an Insurance company. He was a very insensitive man. Savitri was very much dominated and neglected by her husband. As a true Hindu Wife, she swallowed all humiliations but never demanded anything in return to keep her marriage afloat. But when she tried to stand against her husband's debauchery, she was labelled as a thankless creature. So she warned her husband of his miscreants. The blatant disregard shown by her

callous husband caused such depression that she finally decided to retreat into a dark room. The dark room is a room used to store the junks of the house. When Savitri's self-worth is deeply wounded, she takes shelter in the dark room. She identifies herself with useless domestic junks which have outlived its utility. This dark room is not only a room, but also a metaphor which highlights the miserable condition of a woman and the oppression imposed upon them by men. So, the title of the novel rightly matches with the symbolism of the novel.

'Dark Room' as a novel of domestic disharmony:

One of R.K.Narayan's most successful novels is 'The Dark Room' (1938). It presents a picture of domestic disharmony. In the quiet town of Malgudi, in the 1930s, there lived Savitri and her husband, Ramani. They lived with three children, Babu, Kamala and Sumati. Ramani is the office secretary of the Engladia Insurance Company. He is very domineering and cynical in his ways. He governs his house according to his own sweet will. As he is always irritable, the atmosphere in his house is generally gloomy and his wife, Savitri, his children and servants have always remained in a state of terror. Savitri is a true symbol of traditional Indian womanhood. Savitri is a timid, silent suffering and deeply devoted to her husband. Ramani, however, does not respond to her sentiments even with ordinary warmth. Though they have been married for fifteen years, his wife has received nothing from her husband but rebukes and abuses. Even his children get more rebukes from him than expressions of his father love. Savitri has endured a lot of humiliation from her temperamental husband and she always puts up with his many tantrums. To find solace and escapism, she takes refuge in 'the dark room', a musty, unlit, storeroom in the house.

Soon there arrives at the scene a beautiful lady, Shanta Bai, who has deserted her husband and joined the Engladia Insurance Company; Ramani succumbs to her beauty and coquettish ways. Ramani spends nights in Shanta Bai's company. Savitri feels disturbed but she decides that it would be better to suffer in silence than to venture question. When Ganga, the talkative forward wife, a teacher tells her about Ramani's infidelity, she sucks only in self-pity. She pathetically prepares herself to win him back by reviving her charm. She longs that

he may come and love her as affectionately/hilariously as he loved her in the first week of their marriage. All her dreams are shattered. Her fury is implacable' "don't touch me! You are dirty, you are impure". Her anguish born of self-pity and impotent anger is heart-rending. Seeing no way of correcting husband, Savitri revolts against him and in utter frustration and disgust, she leaves her husband's house with an intention of committing suicide.

Savitri goes to the river and throws herself into it. The timely arrival of Mari, the blacksmith and burglar who, while crossing the river on his way to his village, sees her body floating on the river and at once rescues her, and saves her life. Mari's wife Ponni on knowing her plight persuades her to come to their village. There Savitri embarks upon an independent living of her own by work in the temple. As she cannot bear the querulous, priest of the temple and as her own homesickness and tormenting anxiety for her children nag her, she becomes restless. She realizes the futility of her attempt to escape from her bonds with the temporal world and returns to her husband's hateful home to suck in the dark without much effect on Ramani. Savitri has neither the courage nor the independence of spirit. Savitri's return resembles the rich Indian tradition and strong familial ties that project Indian cultures.

Introspection of Savitri: Fulfilling the responsibilities and performing the duties efficiently does not mean being submissive but it means being traditional and doing her duties too, a woman can ascertain her identity thereby acquiring her independence and ultimately resulting in equality. In the process, she also realizes the importance of education in becoming self-reliant.

"If I take the train and go to my parents, I shall be living on my husband's earnings, and later on, Babu. What can I do by myself? Unfit to earn a handful of rice except begging. If I had gone to college and studied, I might have become a teacher or something..... Yes, Kamala and Sumati must take their university course and become independent", says Savitri to herself. This introspection of Savitri is a turning point in the novel. It makes her to shift from Dark Room to illumination. Unlike the traditional woman, the modern woman's advantage

is her education that should help in grooming her personality, strengthening her moral and ethical values emerging as an individual with dignity and self-respect. In this male dominated society with hide-bound traditions, education is indispensable for women. It is equally important to bring up the children. This is the message of Savitri as well as R.K.Narayan's through this novel. Narayan comments that the progress of Savitri's character shows that she had the essence of feminism in her, but it had been suppressed for all these fears. The mental torture that she has been going through draws out her inner strength and that gives her the courage to talk back.

Critique: R.K.Narayan is to a great extent a traditionalist in matter of characterization. He does not present portraits of exceptional men and women among his characters. There are no Hamlets, no great intellectuals or statesmen among his characters. He does not draw even such young men and women as being the products of the transitional age, are caught in the conflict between the East and the West or the old and new values of life. Narayan is fully conscious of his restrictions and does not try to draw any character with which he is not fully familiar and which does not come within this scope. A close study of this novel reveals that there are two categories of women in this whole plot –typical Indian housewife and fashionable and butterfly types of woman. His heroine like Savitri finds her place in the first category. This woman is docile, modest, gentle, religious and loving. Her only anxiety is the welfare of her husband and children. The other category to which Shanti belongs represent modern women who lives her life in her own terms, having complete freedom who stands shoulder to shoulder with men, leaving no stones unturned to seek economic independence. What is significantly mentioned-worthy about Narayan's women's life movement is that his process of liberating women is slow and gradual, not drastic and that he uplifts the condition of women within India's own tradition, not by following the western feminist trend. R. K. Narayan tries to promote the status of women very consciously. His 'women's life' movement, which actually begins in "The Dark Room" (1938), comes to an apparent fulfilment in 'The Painter of Signs' (1949),

encompassing a long journey from Savitri (Dark Room) to Daisy (Painter of Signs) via Shanti (Mr. Sampath), Bharati (Waiting for Mahatma) and Rosie (The Guide). The novelist laments the pitiable condition of women and this has perhaps led him to formulate the "women's life" movement. Narayan does not advocate the westernized life style of women and he cannot accept the atrocities done on women in the moribund Malgudi patriarchal society. Thus, Narayan favours for his new women and wants to see them educated, active and independent. There is no ground to deny R.K.Narayan the status of a feminist writer.

It is a great achievement of Narayan's creative power that he has described the Indian people and the Indian way of life with an abundant measure of success without trying to moralise or philosophize. But his philosophy of life seems to be that it is foolish to worry about evils that cannot not be prevented. Life at best is only an imperfect affair and it has to be lived. What makes life glad or sad, does not depend on the real texture of life itself but on the way one lives with the attitude that one has towards it. Thus, R. K. Narayan is a minute observer of society.

CONCLUSION

The issue of domestic harmony dominates the narrative of 'Dark Room'. Its loss vitiates the whole atmosphere in which not only the male but even children suffer. The conduct of husband-wife is a shaping influence and children's attitude, temperament, preference and goals are directly affected by their parents' visible performance. An indication of it is available in the son Babu's hatred for marriage itself. "Dark Room" is not an outstanding work of Narayan though its basic concept is of familial ties of husband-wife relationship. William Walsh in his book on R.K.Narayan has lightly dismissed this novel. Professor C. D. Narasimhaiah also skips over it "for all its pathos develops melodramatically and has a didactic ending". The action of Savitri in returning to her husband after pathetically trying in vain to stand on her own legs is rather unconvincing. But is a great leap in the direction of woman's emancipation. So Prof. Sundaram in his perspective study of R. K. Narayan, finds the novel quite realistic. Narayan's realism is psychologically convincing. He narrates

the story as a detached observer and focuses the readers' attention to the feelings and emotions of both husband and wife. He leaves interpretations to readers.

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