



THE POSITION OF A HINDU WIFE IN NARAYAN'S NOVELS: (THE DARK ROOM AND THE GUIDE)

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the position of a Hindu wife in Narayan's novels with special reference to *The Dark Room* and *The Guide*. Narayan shows the helpless predicament of the Indian woman. He shows us as to how the husband is like God in the Indian household and women have to accept whatever fate has done to them. The paper accesses on how Narayan probes into the everyday incidents in Hindu household of Indian society and explores the predicament of common house wives who are generally confined to home and hearth.

Key Words: Hindu Wife, Hindu household, Indian Society, Predicament, home and hearth

INTRODUCTION

R.K. Narayan is not a feminist even then he has shown his sympathy for the exploited and oppressed class of women in Indian society. The helplessness and miserable condition of a Hindu housewife is brought to the forefront in Narayan's *The Dark Room*. In an interview Narayan explained, "In *The Dark Room* I was concerned with showing the utter dependence of women on man in society. I suppose I have moved along with the times."¹

By survival, Narayan does not mean continuity of mere physical existence, but a striving for dignity in the battle with society and circumstances. His protagonist Savitri is a victim of either man, or of authority, or of a particular social set-up. Today, a women's goals are expressively defined, first her indignation against the oppression and depression by men in patriarchal society, and second, the consequent quest of her identity. Both the factors go against the socially approved image of the passive woman. This study sicks to explain the true voice of endurance in the present novel.

R.K. Narayan's *The Dark Room* shows us a more somber atmosphere. The novelist draws here the poignant picture of a South Indian middle class family, in which the wife's life becomes much of a hell, because of the frequent fits of resentment and annoyance of her capricious and refractory husband, Ramani. In *The Dark Room*, the happiness or unhappiness, and quiet and disquiet of the household depend mainly on the mood and temper of the husband, Ramani. In the house, the servants, Children and even the wife are certainly in a state of extreme fear due to the domineering and cynical nature of Mr. Ramani. The appointment of Shanta Bai in Ramani's office produces more misfortune to the wife, Savitri. Unable to endure any more, Savitri, in a fit of disappointment and rage leaves the house of her husband one midnight to drown herself into the river, Saryu.

But a blacksmith burglar, who was prowling there at that time, saved her life. For a day or so Savitri attempts to get some independent employment for herself. But soon being fed up with the present state of her life, she comes back to her contemptuous home to sulk in the dark room sans much effect on her erring husband, Ramani. It is always an indication and not the description of emotion. Only gesture is significant as



when Savitri returns to her family and takes her place in it by offering to serve her husband his meal after forgetting all humiliations, "The car sounded its horn outside, Kamala and Sumati ran to the gate to announce: 'Mother has come': Has she? Ramani asked, and went into the house. He hesitated for a fraction of a second on the doormat and then passed into his room. Savitri sat in the passage of the dining room, trembling. What would he do now? Would he come and turn her out of her house? An hour later Ramani came towards her. She started up. He threw a brief glance at her, noted her ragged appearance and went into the dining room. He said to the cook, Hurry up, I have to be at the office ..."²

In this novel, Narayan utilizes Savitri's familiar pattern of domestic disharmony to describe the status of women in Indian society. Women are helpless prey to exploitation and hence when Savitri leaves her house, she is shown to be exploited also by the temple priest where she takes shelter. Sharing the agony and anguish of all helpless Hindu wives, Savitri expressed her feelings by making a flashing speech, "I'm a human being", She said ... "You men will never grant that. For you we are play things when you feel like hugging and slaves at other times. Don't think that you can fondle us when you like and kick us when you choose" (p. 73). Savitri further highlight the anguish of women by saying, "What is the difference between a prostitute and a married woman? The prostitute changes her men but a married woman does not. That's all; but both earn their food and shelter in the same manner" (p. 76).

This novel shows the helpless predicament of the Indian woman, Savitri. She is aware of her mean state in domestic life. Savitri rightly reacts in *The Dark Room* and says, "Women don't possess anything in the world possession can a woman call her own except her body? Everything else that she has is her fathers, husbands or her son's" (p. 75). Ramani, an officer in Englandia Insurance Company, is the complete embodiment of male chauvinistic society that is why he reprimands and makes light of his wife, "...go and do any work you like in the kitchen, but leave the training of a grown up boy to me. It is none of a woman's business" (p. 5). As K.R.S. Iyengar remarks, "The dark room used to be as indispensable a part of an Indian house as a kitchen, and was a place for 'safe deposits', both a sanctuary – and a retreat; but modern houses are apt to dispense with the dark room.' Even in the old houses, the installation of electric lights has effectively destroyed the traditional character of the 'dark room'. Narayan has thus done well to preserve-like the mummified curiosities of ancient Egypt- the 'dark room' in the pages of his novel."³

R.K. Narayan shows us as to how the husband is like God in the Indian household and women have to accept whatever fate has done to them. This is the cause that the priest, in charge of the temple, gives the advice, "If she won't let rest, thrash her that is the way to keep women safe. In these days you fellows are mugs, and let your women ride you about" (p.100). Thus, Savitri feels nothing is her own and even her children are her husband's absolutely, "You paid the midwife and the nurse. You pay for their clothes and teachers. You are right. Don't I say that a woman owns nothing" (p. 77)? Savitri, in an effort to assert to her individuality, revolts and leaves home only to retreat and compromise with the situation. Here the novelist has tried to infuse confidence and seed of rebellion in Savitri. Savitri represents thousands of other Indian housewives who are depressed and helpless creatures in the hands of their husbands. When Savitri prohibits her son to school due to illness, she is humiliated by her husband, "Mind your own business, do you hear..." (p. 5). Savitri miserable thinks over the problem of her existence: "How important at home and that after fifteen years of married life" (p. 8). This is not only the case of Savitri but also the case of other housewives who lead their life under the complete hegemony of their husbands. The social status of an Indian housewife is evaluated at the end of the novel. The condition of women is reflected from Savitri's voice, "What despicable creations of God are we that we can't exist without a support? I am like a bamboo pole which cannot stand without a well to support it" (p. 113). R.S. Singh rightly says:

Here is the sort of thing that happens in thousands of households in our country; a few Savitries hang burn or drowns them. The great majority dare not to do it.⁴



R.K. Narayan is too much of an artist to think of dealing with problems, much less offer solution to any problem. The few problems that we can find in his novels are human problems that refer to some strange situation in which the character happens to be placed. He betrays some significant observations clear enough to convey his likes and dislikes and then goes on. Narayan actually dislikes the absurd custom of comparing the horoscopes of bride and the groom. Similarly he does not like the present system of soul-killing educational system, but prefers a new type of 'let-alone' schools for children. William Walsh remarks:

"The family is the immediate context in which his sensibility operates and novels are remarkable for subtly and conviction with which family relationships are treated."⁵

Among women characters, Narayan generally portrays two kinds of women – typical Indian house wife and fashionable and butterfly type of women. His female character 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. Narayan remarks in *My Days*, "I was somehow obsessed with a philosophy of a woman as opposed to man, her constant oppressor. This must have been an early testament of the women's liberation movement. Man assigned her a secondary place and kept her there with such subtlety and cunning that she herself began to lose all nothing if her independence, her individuality, stature and strength. A wife as an orthodox milieu of Indian society was an ideal victim of such circumstances."⁶

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 moralize or philosophize. But Narayan does not lack sympathy for his characters. Each one of his characters wicked or virtuous is drawn with extraordinary delicacy and tenderness. In his sympathetic hands they turn into interesting figures and make the earth very meaningful by their presence and actions. His philosophy of life seems to be that it is foolish to worry about evils that one cannot prevent. Life at best is only an imperfect affair and it has to be lived, what makes life delightful or sad, does not depend on the real texture of life itself but on the way one lives or on the attitude that one has towards it.

The woman's point of view has been totally consigned to oblivion by Marco in *'The Guide'*. A woman is not gadget by any chance is evidently revealed in the character of Rosie who is replete with desires and spirits. And hence, there are bickering in the married life of Rosie and Marco. Som Dev rightly remarks, "If Rosie is driven to the arms of a stranger, it is partly not her fault... Had he considered the basic needs of the woman whom he takes for a wife, perhaps their union would not have sundered in this manner. He has offered insult to the womanhood, and in turn the woman hood in Rosie raises its hood to leave 'fran marks' on him."⁷

Marco really wants a wife like the servant Joseph who is in his opinion, a wonderful man. Secondly, for all his outward appearance, he looks down upon dancing, and misunderstands the art as something below his rank and position:

Old prejudices die-hard, and Marco for all his erudition looked upon dancing as just street acrobatics, and he killed Rosie's instincts for life and love of art by denying her both of them.⁸

Rosie belongs to a family dedicated to the temple as dancers, and yet she obtains an M.A. in Economics. Not only that, she discards the convention and enters in Matrimonial agreement with Marco. But to her utter shock, she discovers that he is more interested in the sculptured figures on walls and stones in the caves, than in his wife who is living embodiment of these things. Dead and decaying things have attracted him, but not things that live and move and swing their heads. Her position in his company is no better than that of an animal. For Rosie "followed him, day after day, like a dog-waiting on his grace" (p.151). In the company of Raju too, she fares no better. She feels like one of those parrots in a cage taken around village fairs: the position of a Hindu housewife realistically presented by Narayan. In utter helplessness she gives vent to her feelings, "It is far better to end one's life on his (Marco's) doorstep (p.220).



The submissive attitude in Narayan's major characters is but the outcome of a tremendous impact of the Hindu culture and its traditions on their mind; their will power lies crippled under the weight. They do not control events but let the events control them. They appear as helpless creatures, torn by desires and tossed this way and that by the caprice of fortune. Rosie is portrayed as the representative of a new class of women who have the opportunity to be released from the conventional confinement to join colleges and universities. Rosie acquires a Master's degree in Economics: no mean achievement in relation to her place in a scheme of castes in Hindu society. On the one hand, her education has enhanced in her, the awareness of her own individuality. On the other, it pits her against the society which still has certain well-defined-attitudes towards women. Moreover, the class to which she belongs is looked down upon as a low community which does not deserve equal status with the higher caste. Despite the hurdles, she has established her own individuality. Her inner being, it appears, is not prepared to go on playing the traditional role as a suppressed Indian wife for the rest of her life.

Rosie has had a bitter experience in the house of Raju whose mothers, an old orthodox woman, refuses to accept her on the ground that she belongs to a different caste. His uncle's insulting questions make her lowers her head in shame and disgust, "Are you to our caste? No our class? No. Do we know you? No. Do you belong to this house? No. In that case, why are you here? After all, you are a dancing girl; we do not admit them in our families" (p.169). Rosie survives the shocks and shows to the world that she too has an individual status and aspirations in life, which she tries to accomplish all her life. However, her guilty conscience makes her restless and in the end we see her painful longing to die at the threshold of her husband's house.

CONCLUSION

Thus, to conclude that R.K. Narayan is a minute observer of society. Narayan's fictional world is circumscribed by a traditional Hindu society where men rather than women hold a superior position. He probes into the everyday incidents in Hindu household of Indian society and exposes the predicament of common house wives who are generally confined to home and hearth. The novelist's world of women is far removed from the modern liberation movement. The female characters are all suffering housewife of our society who is exploited by all means in her life. His novels depict the irony of modern Indian life where women on the one hand are regarded as deity and on the other are bereft of their basic rights. That is why women in the novels of R.K. Narayan present the true voice of endurance.

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