

International Journal of Arts & Education Research

WOMEN'S REVOLUTION IN R. K. NARAYAN'S NOVELS

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This paper investigates the position of women in the pre and post-independence India and shows how Narayan delineates female characters written during this period in his novels. Narayan was born and brought up in a zoologist Hindu family. He saw closely the pathetic plight of women confined in the house. They were deprived of everything and treated as the puppets. In his novels, Narayan wanted to develop a different set of laws through which the deprived women of the society would be emancipated from the male servitude. This paper shows how his women break the traditionally accepted customs about women's status in India and rebuild a new status to establish them as human beings in their own light.

INTRODUCTION

The greatest problems of women in the patriarchal society are that they got adjusted to the male tastes and totally forgot that they were a different gender with different nature. Their mind got twisted so such that they started accepting their inferiority. As a result, what the male dominated society imposed on them, the matter was not strange to them. They never thought that this treatment was a torture on them and they were made inferior by patriarchies. Thus, the women unconsciously accepted the most talkative term in the current world "Gender Discrimination" as their lot. Narayan wanted to uphold the present deplorable plight of women. He has apparently expressed his desire in his autobiography, My Days:

"I was somehow obsessed with a philosophy of Woman as opposed to Man, her constant oppressor. This must have been an early testament of the "Women's Liberty Movement". Man assigned her a secondary place and kept her there with such subtlety and cunning that she herself began to lose all notions of her independence, her individuality, stature and strength. A wife in an orthodox milieu of Indian society was an ideal victim of such circumstances."

Narayan's aim was to make conscious women of their own entities. That's why it is found in all of his novels that his women are modern in thought and belief though the old women observe the traditional customs of India with devotion. Actually Narayan wanted to create new women out of the old fashioned, who are home makers but educated. After reading aptly, all the novels of Narayan, it is seen that he has commenced a movement for the liberation of women that has gradually developed in the novels written in succession from The Bachelor of Arts to The Painter of Signs. In all of these novels there is one or more than one female character that is out either half way or full way of this orthodox, conservative society to assert the right to live with dignity and freedom.

He finds two generations of women in his novels: the first generation comprising of mothers and grandmothers that are obedient and loyal to the old social customs and the second generation comprise of young women, who unlike the old women are educated and assertive. They are outspoken and assert power whenever possible and necessary. It is mentionable here that Narayan's Women's Liberty movement is slow and gradual, not drastic and that he uplifts the status of women within India's own norms, not by imitating the western feminist trend.

However, an attempt has been made to investigate how Narayan has delineated female characters with references to his four pre- independence novels and three post-independence novels. The novels are: The

Bachelor of Arts, The English Teacher, The Dark Room, and Mr. Sampath, Waiting for the Mahatma, The Guide and The Painter of Signs.

EMERGENCE OF NEW WOMEN

While the old women are in dilemma, carrying out the age old customs and sometimes believing in some rights of women and appreciating girls' education, the young girls seem to have an advanced position in the society and they look forward. They enjoy a considerable freedom without fearing Taboos and other social inhibitions are not so heavily clamped on them. They are aware of their female personality.

They are free, have participations at micro levels in family matters. And the emergence of these new women launches Narayan's Women's Lib movement. The first woman who among all Narayan's women seems to enjoy a better position in the superstitious society of Malgudi is Malati in The Bachelor of Arts. Malati is young, educated and assertive. She is outspoken in the patriarchal society. She is a marriageable girl of sixteen years but enjoys the freedom of having evening walks on the river bank. She stays on the river bank until darkness descends and returns home alone without any escort. Thus, she is free and is not forced to be confined always within the house like a show piece. She enjoys the status of an independent human being.

The second woman is Susila who enjoys a better position than Malati's, in The English Teachers educated. She is also an outspoken and believes equal rights of women. She has an equal participation in all decisions of the family matters. This position of Susila in her husband's family has been possible because of her enriched education. Her reading Ivanhoe from Sir Walter Scott and Lamb's Tales from Shakespeare indicate her rich education.

Besides, Susila reads the other variety of books. In fact, Narayan wanted to establish women as modern women who would be richer in knowledge and education, but who at the same time would foster and enrich Indian traditional reality. Her library contained a book of hymns by a Tamil saint, a few select stanzas of Kamba Ramayana, Palgrave's Golden Treasury and leather-bound Bhagavad Gita in Sanskrit. Susila is more advanced than the old women of her times in her thought. While in other novels of Narayan, people visit temples to seek gods' and goddesses' blessings to have only male children and believe: the more children a house has, the more blessed by God the house is, Susila is completely satisfied as the mother of a female child. She is determined and even has secured a promise from her husband that Leela would be their only child. Actually, Susila is very much determined in her decision.

TWO SIDES OF REVOLTS AGAINST SUBORDINATION

In The Dark Room, a pre-independence novel published in 1938, Narayan firsts how women as victimized though they were docile and subservient to men. Yet there was another group of women who were growing conscious of being exploited and victimized. The Dark Room, which Narayan calls his "early testament of "Women's Lib" movement, portrays four women characters:

Savitri, Shanta Bai, Gangu and Poni, and all of them want to break the culturally accepted beliefs about women's status in the superstitious Hindu society in India.

Narayan chooses Savitri as the protagonist for this novel, which, like Ibsen's Nora, rebels against the forced loyalty and dedication of women. Savitri, a middle class house wife having three school-going children is meek and obedient to her philandering and bullying husband Ramani. She serves him until she is middle-aged, digesting all his injustice and betrayal. But she starts resenting when she sees her husband's intimation with Shanta Bai, a glamorous woman tempered with western craze. Being shocked by her husband, she realizes that she has been treated as a puppet, firstly, by her father before marriage and secondly at her husband's house, she grows into a rebel against the male dominated society in India.

Savitri leaves her husband empty-handed for establishing her as a human being without depending on others. But, ironically, soon she discovers her self-dependent on men. She says: "If I take the train and go to my parents, I shall feed on my father's pension; if I go back home, I shall be living on my husband's earnings, and then on Babu". Savitri's revolt resembles the revolt of Ibsen's Nora as they both protest against the patriarchal society. But Ibsen's Nora comes into conflict with Savitri in that Nora slams the door behind her husband and children never to return, while Savitri returns in humiliation to Ramani. As A. N. Kaul, in his article entitled "R.K. Narayan and the East-West Theme," comments: "... unlike Ibsen's heroine, Narayan does not bang the door but has it banged and that in the end, her dream of feminine independence and dignity over, she returns submissively to the house never again to stray in thought or deed".

Actually, Narayan does not advocate female sub-servitude. He draws the circumstances under which Savitri feels forced to walk out of the house and then to return. The novelist satirizes the hypocrisy of the male dominated society that uses even religion to exploit a woman. After leaving her house, Savitri finds a job and a place to stay in a priest's temple. Fakrul Alam, in his essay "Reading R. K. Narayan Post colonially", terms the priest as "the most disagreeable character" saying that "clearly Narayan has no sympathy at all for the official upholder of tradition and religion and caste." Savitri's achievement from her revolt is that, she is not a tradition-bound woman accepting her fate as destined. She discovers the reason that makes women subservant to men. As she says to her husband, "We are responsible for our position; we accept food, shelter and comfort that you give, and are what we are".

Again, Narayan does not show only westernization to enhance the plight of women. Savitri's rival, the single career woman Shanta Bai who quotes Omar Khayyam, hates Indian mythological films and has a great interest for Garbo and Dietrich, is narrated as a destroyer of homes.

Shanta Bai comes out full way, rejecting the traditional customs of women in the patriarchal society of India. She rejects her drunkard husband with her family and thus demolishes the four walls of the doll's house. But she perverts her feminine independence by devastating the peace of Savitri's family and by making Ramani a womanizer. Thus, Narayan problematizes the long established position of women in the tradition bound orthodox society of India through Savitri's revolt, and shows his abhorrence towards westernized attitude by portraying Shanta Bai negatively as a drifter and wrecker of homes. However, while Savitri is vanquished and Shanta Bai is a destroyer of homes, it is Savitri's close friend Gangu who succeeds in keeping a balance between tradition and her independence. Gangu is educated and is, as we find, training to be a film star, a professional musician, the Malgudi delegate to the All India Women's Conference, and a politician. She gets full support of her school master husband who believes in women's emancipation. Narayan delineates another woman named Poni in *The Dark Room*. She is a wife of the blacksmith-burglar who saves Savitri's life from drowning. She is a childless middle aged woman who should be especially vulnerable in that society, but still she gets complete freedom and dominance over her husband. Mari, Poni's husband, enjoys a sweet relationship with his dominating wife who is the only most outspoken and the bravest character in the novel. Besides, Poni teaches the vanquished Savitri how to manage and treat a man:

"Keep the men under the rod, and they will be all right. Show them that you care for them and they will tie you up and treat you like a dog.

Shanti in *Mr. Sampath: The Painter of Malgudi* revolts against the traditional life of a widow. She refuses to wear white clothes as was customary for them. She becomes them stress of Mr. Sampath and joins the celluloid world leaving her son to the care of strangers. But seeing the outside world unfriendly and not helpful for women, she finally returns to the life traditionally described for a widow in Malgudi.

Though Savitri and Shanti fail in their revolts against the patriarchal society of Malgudi, it comes as a source of inspiration for future women. Both of them realize their cause of retreat. The on comers take lessons from

them and equip themselves with the necessary weapons for want of which Savitri and Shanti have failed, and they smash all customs, taboos and other inhibitions that have treated them as dolls and kept subservient to men.

OVERCOMING BARRIERS AND ACHIEVING FREEDOM

Narayan's women are now much advanced in thought and mentality. They strongly flout all traditional inhibitions and are also conscious of their dignity and rights. Now, they are defying all traditional customs. Such a young woman is Bharati in *Waiting for the Mahatma*. Defying the traditional duties of a woman, Bharati dedicates her to the service of Gandhi. In fact, Bharati is a patriot who joins the movement Gandhi has launched to bring about the independence of India, and all other characters, which are all male, join this movement out of self-interest.

The *Guide*, the most famous novel of Narayan in which he draws the character of a woman named Rosie who defies almost all traditional customs to establish herself as a human being like Savitri in *The Dark Room*. While Savitri fails to establish her as a human being, Rosie in *The Guide* is successful in her mission. She gets her emancipation and moves all over India without escort to work. Thus Savitri's failed revolutionary mission gets success in Rosie twenty years later when India had already become independent. The independence of the country had brought about a great revolutionary change like political, social, economic, and even religious milieus of Indian. A great change also came in the intelligent of women. Rosie, an M.A. in economics, challenges the orthodox Hindu concept of what a woman should be. She leaves her husband who is callous towards her feelings and comes out of the walls of his family on a path that was not smooth for women in the patriarchal society. Narayan satirizes the patriarchal society and delineates the character of Rosie with great sympathy. Rosie gives more importance to her personal interest than to the observation of social norms for women. She ignores all superstitions that her independence and moves on in her own way with her back to the society's reaction and criticism. When her husband comes to her with passion, love and time for her, she enjoys the company of Raju, walking with him all over Malgudi and its surrounding sites, sitting with him beside the river Sarayu in the evenings and even indulging him in her closed room. Rosie's first revolt is seen when she rejects the established custom of matching horoscopes and caste for marriage-a practice then held to be sacred in Hinduism.

Narayan's portrayal of the character of Rosie again exposes the cruelty and inhumanity of the patriarchal society of India. Though Rosie is educated, her education fails to raise her status. As she says: "We are viewed as public women. We are not considered respectable; we are not considered as civilized". Even Marco wants to raise her as a puppet as if she were an illiterate woman unable to understand anything. Thus the society was blind between an educated Rosie and an illiterate woman. Rosie eventually comes out of this 'doll's house' and tries to stand on her own feet firmly.

By rejecting the sacred relationship with Marco, Rosie fills up the unrequited dream of Savitri of *The Dark Room*. Savitri returns to her husband like a dead horse while Rosie either goes back neither to her husband to be his worse half, nor to Raju taking shelter. Rather, being frustrated, she becomes strong and experienced enough to guide herself properly without a Marco or a Raju beside her.

Finally, we get the echoing voices of all women of Narayan's previous novels in *The Painter of Sign*. They struggled to come out mashing the walls of the "dolls house."

Like *The Dark Room*, this novel also has a protagonist named Daisy who defies the traditional customs of India. While Rosie in *The Guide* still has a traditional woman in herself, as is seen in her dependence first on her husband Marco, and then on her lover Raju, Daisy is apparently modern in her spirit of independence. She protests against the established marital system of the society only at the age of thirteen when her

prospective bridegroom visits her. Her individuality becomes apparent when she says, “And then they seated me like a doll, and I had to wait for the arrival of the eminent personage with his parents”.

At that very moment, she takes decision to smash the walls of the doll’s house. She off ends the groom on the face and thus off ends the whole orthodox tradition. She flees her family and never again in her life she gets herself reconciled to the idea of a family. Thus, she shatters all the trends about women in the prevailing society of Malgudi and turns into a bizarre figure wandering the countryside with the mission of family planning. “She has no taboos of her own” and “the only topics she could appreciate are birth control” with a “sort of unmitigated antagonism to conception” that flagrantly violates the traditional Indian notion that “God gives us children. How can we reject His gift?, and that “Our shastras say that the more children in a house, the more blessed it becomes”. To remark on Daisy’s devotion to her mission, Jayant K. Biswal observes:

With rare exception to her emotionalism at times, Daisy can be said to be nearer to the female version of Marco both of them are heart and soul dedicated to their projects- one to the archaeological survey in the Memphi hills, the other to the cause of family planning. In Daisy, the cold professionalism of Marco and the revolutionary zeal of Bharati exist together. If Savitri and Rosie revolt against their doll’s houses, Daisy seems to carry their revolt further, even to a hysterical height. If The Dark room is an ‘early testament of the Women’s Lib movement’, The Painter of Signs is its more pronounced representation. Thus, Daisy comes out of the doll’s house and fulfills to the desire of those women in Narayan’s novels, who launched the women’s liberty movement.

CONCLUSION

To uphold the status of women, Narayan follows a ‘slow and steady method’ to carry his ‘Women’s Liberty Movement’ which actually launches in The Dark Room and comes to end in The Painter of Signs, enclosing a long journey from Savitri to Daisy via Shanti, Bharati and Rosie. There mark able feature of Narayan’s Women’s Lib’ movement is that he neither encourages the western thought, nor endorses them or society of Malgudi in the process.

He satirizes the established customs that reduce a woman to a plaything of a man and thus creates a new, better position for women. But as an upholder of traditional values, he develops the movement within the traditions of Malgudi society, and so Shanta Bai is portrayed as a wrecker of home; Rosie takes the traditional name, Nalini and Daisy leaves Malgudi.

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