



CHARACTERIZATION OF WOMEN IN R.K. NARAYAN'S *THE DARK ROOM*

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ABSTRACT

Narayan's women characters are clearly a by-product of the writer's personal recollection of the middle class Indian women of the previous century. Therefore, it is hardly surprising to find him designing them carefully in each of his novels, not as mere abstract theorization, but as wholesome human beings. Since Narayan was clearly aware and affected by the changing social scenario of the Indian middle class, he found it particularly relevant to portray the women folks, both within the matrimonial framework and outside it. In each of his novels, therefore, there are women who are either totally within the system or completely out of it.

INTRODUCTION

In *The Dark Room*, for instance, Narayan presents two major female characters, Savitri (within the matrimonial framework) and Shanta Bai (rebelliously outside it), begrudgingly co-existing inside a codified social structure. Savitri is legally married to the protagonist of the novel while Shanta Bai is the other woman in his life. But neither of them is allowed to venture out independently in the society, without a male identity tag in front of their names. Savitri is Mrs. Ramani, while Shanta Bai is the Mistress of Ramani. And this happens because Narayan is well aware that the society, despite multiple changes, will never permit a woman to step out on her own.

From a rationalistic point, both Savitri and Shanta Bai are stereo-typical characters performing two diametrically opposite functions. Savitri is the traditional housewife, while Shanta Bai is the modern woman in search of emancipation. But both are equally vulnerable when it concerns their positions in the patriarchy. Shanta Bai is ostracized not by the entire

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community but only by Savitri, whose interests are at stake. The rest of the community accepts her benevolently as the other woman in Ramani's life. And despite her cravings for liberation, she seems quite happy with the recognition. Savitri, on the other hand, feels threatened initially and revolts, but ultimately conforms for the well being of her children. She has no personal resources to bring them up single handedly. But neither of these two women characters can ultimately manifest an individual identity because the patriarchy will not allow them to do so; both are victims of circumstances with different connotations. Hence, neither displays a power to supersede the patriarchal strictures. According to Lakshmi Holmstrom:

In Narayan's own formulation, a middle class woman from an orthodox society is a victim of her circumstances: either, she must live within society by accepting its norms, or she must leave it altogether, in which case, she can be supported only by her own resources. Shanta Bai and Savitri in fact are seen to balance each other, each losing out in one way or another; both are victims.¹

The most interesting feature of the novel is Narayan's conscientious effort to present the entire narrative from the perspective of Savitri. Hence, the world of *The Dark Room* is the world as Savitri perceives it, and not Ramani. The novel begins on a mundane note with a detailed account of an Indian middle class family. Ramani is the ruling deity here, while his spouse and three children are enforced worshippers. And this happens because of Ramani's unpredictable whims. Whether it be his food or his office wear, Ramani's wrath never seems to be appeased. The children are afraid to talk loudly when their father is at home, heaving a sigh of relief the moment he steps out of the house. So is the case with his wife Savitri. On a superficial level, the storyline of the novel *The Dark Room* appears to be rather bleak. At the beginning, Ramani is a happily married man whose fidelity is beyond question. But with the arrival of Shanta Bai, Ramani is a changed man. Likewise, Savitri, the unquestioning, submissive female presence of Ramani's household, transgresses her boundaries of a model wife and dares questioning the validity of conjugal fidelity of her husband. Pompous and proud of his acquired position in the company Engladia Insurance, Ramani is of little use both to his wife and children. His presence is the cause of awe to the household and only with his departure to office every day, do the other inmates find time to relax and breathe freely. To worsen matters, Ramani is infatuated by Shanta Bai who joins his company as the first female probationer. Savitri feigns ignorance initially, but finally when Ramani fails to turn up one night, she decides to strike back.

Savitri is representative of all women in a traditional family in the Indian context. O.P.Saxena remarks, "Savitri is the typical Indian housewife. She lives according to the traditional precept of feminine and wifely submission and sacrifice" (117). In Indian society, it is an



established rule and practice sanctified for ages that a woman in a conservative family is born only to stand and serve the man, bear, beget and bring up his children. She is enjoined to be subordinate and submissive to the other sex. She is believed to be intellectually inferior to man and expected to carry out his commands without any kind of protest and argument. She cannot express any opinion of hers. If this 'unequal equation' is disturbed even slightly by the woman, she will have to face disastrous consequences, even eviction and expulsion from home sometimes. Savitri, the wife of the hero Ramani, exemplifies this predicament experienced, not expressed, by most women destined to live in a conservative social milieu. "Through her Narayan pictures the predicament of a woman belonging to traditional Hindu society who is always pushed to inferior position than that of her counterpart who enjoys superior status in every respect" (Veena V.Mohod 10). Susan Ram and N.Ram are much impressed by The Dark Room's "relentless expose of the position of women in traditional Indian Society" (208).

Savitri plays different roles simultaneously. She is the kind-hearted, hyphathetic, considerate and obliging mother. As the mistress of the house she has greater control over her servants, regulates and supervises the house-hold matters ably. But her role as a wife is nerve-wracking and precarious though she is quite obedient, dutiful, tolerant, accommodative and submissive. Being astonishingly familiar with her husband's moods and temperament of varying degrees and intensity-she instinctively knows from the hooting of the horn whether he is angry or happy or normal-she adjusts her responses accordingly. She is the representative of the typically traditional Indian woman-docile, submissive and sacrificing like her epic prototypes, Sita, Savitri and Shakuntala. To quote Margaret Berry:

Certain general patterns of lila are clearly discernible in the novels as, for example, the cycle of creation-dissolution-rebirth..... Savitri of The Dark Room lives in a world of order if not happiness; in jealous rage, she runs from it, becomes temple sweeper, is converted psychologically reborn, and with new understanding goes back to her role-playing as wife of Ramani.²

Her husband Ramani, on the other hand, is overbearing, aggressive, unsympathetic, continuously abusive and relentless in denouncing or condemning Savitri even for an inconsequential lapse. Mrs.VeenaV.Mohod comments, "Her husband is the perfect embodiment of male dominated chauvinism [...]" (11). He thoroughly disapproves of his wife's manner of dealing with the children with a bit of indulgence. He is unusually or usually and uncompromisingly rigid and strict in his treatment of his children as well as his servants. In other words, he is a virtual dictator, a Hitler at home, terrorizing every living soul with a free distribution of severe reprimands, reproaches, rude words and punches when needed. In spite of her best efforts, Savitri finds it extremely difficult to please her husband



except, of course, when he is in his romantic mood. She feels exasperated when her husband, unmindful of her pleadings, forces their son Babu to go to school though he is really ill. Ramani's imperious, impervious, masterful, highly un-accommodative conduct hurts her ego. His tendency to overrule any objections or views, she now realizes, is a deliberate insult which she cannot endure any longer. She resents his arrogance. She feels sorry for having permitted him to exercise his power as a husband in an arbitrary manner. She reflects,

She had the slightest power to do anything at home and that after fifteen years of married life [...]. She ought to have asserted herself a little more at the beginning of her married life and then all would have been well. (DR 5).

Her idea of asserting herself is no doubt a belated one but it is certainly a suggestive hint of a significant change in her relationship with her husband. When Ramani thrashes Babu mercilessly, rudely and contemptuously brushing aside her intervention, he is quite unaware then that he is triggering a change in her and rousing unknowingly a sense of revolt in Savitri. Cut up by his unkind act, she finds no other way except to take refuge in the dark room of her house. One may find that Narayan uses ingeniously the motif of darkness which recurs throughout the novel. In fact, most of the scenes are structured to take place in the dark or at night. "Despite Savitri's ultimate defeat to assert her individual identity in an orthodox milieu of Indian society", avers Shyam M. Asnani, "her ambition is symptomatic of an early testament of the 'women's lib' movement".³ From times immemorial, man has assigned women a secondary place and kept her there with such subtlety and cunning that she herself began to lose all notion of her independence, her individuality, her status and strength. To quote Narayan:

*A wife in an orthodox milieu of Indian society was an ideal victim of such circumstances. My novel deals with her with this philosophy broadly in the background.*⁴

The dark room of the house reveals and defines the character of the heroine in a new light. Darkness is generally held to be symbolic of intellectual ignorance and enlightenment. But Narayan uses it creatively, investing it with meanings totally different from its commonly held symbolic implications. As a symbol, it works back and forth throughout his fiction, through description of places, incidents and characters, providing it structural unity, besides setting an appropriate background and atmosphere for the story to unfold itself. The symbolic variations of the dark rooms are quite striking. They stand for clarity and ambiguity, assertion and acquiescence, progression and regression, resurrection and death related to Savitri in one way or the other.



Her self-confinement to the dark room is a non-violent protest of a silent, suffering woman against the aggressive and, arbitrary behaviour of her husband. It is a psychological reaction to and assertion of a suppressed and helpless woman against male oppressiveness and callousness. Her non-violent form of protest appears to have no impact on Ramani. He blatantly dismisses it as mere “sulking” (DR 42). Nevertheless, he is a nervous which may be seen in his pretended indifference and in his usually kind overtures and affability to please his children. Finally, Savitri has to yield to the pressure of Janamma who successfully persuades her to come out of the dark room. Savitri’s revolt, as it were, ends as suddenly as it starts. She is reconciled to the existing condition as swiftly as she is estranged from it. But the spirit of revolt or assertion dies not. It appears with greater vigour very soon. In the story of Savitri’s passive endurance, Narayan seems to be enacting the ancient Tamil bardic story of Kovalan and Kaunaki.⁵ One can discern mythical parallels in the character of Savitri in *The Dark Room* which strike comparisons with the character of Kaunki. The story of Kaunaki and Kovalan has its beginning in Puhar, the capital of one of the Southern Indian Kingdoms, mentioned by Ptolemy in that century.⁶

She, a devoted wife, walks out of her home in uncontrollable rage when Ramani, entrenched as he is in his firm belief in male superiority, refuses to sever his illicit connections with Shanta Bai. To quote Pashupati Tha, “The archetypal devoted wife deserts her husband when he does not give assurance of mending his ways” (61). Savitri can tolerate his insulting treatment but can never put up with infidelity. As Shiv K.Gilra points out, marital fidelity is “the most precious and durable of the Indian values” and any attempt to violate it “is nothing short of sacrilege” (43). Infidelity of a husband or a wife is, one may remark, the chief cause of domestic disquiet, discord and separation in the Indian social context. Savitri reacts to this sinful act of her husband with hysterical fury: “Don’t touch me! ... You are dirty, you are impure. Even if I bum my skin, I can’t cleanse myself of the impurity of your touch” (DR 87). Her earlier violent response is also to be relevantly recalled: “I’m a human being ... You men will never grant that. For you, we are playthings when you feel like hugging and kick us when you choose” (DR 85). This ironical remark is not only her vehement attempt to reassert her lost dignity and status but also the author’s open indictment of the male attitude to women, severely flawed by its own inherent injustice and false and self-conceited assumptions. Han Mohan Prasad comments:

Savitri is here speaking like a Shavian woman though she is neither conscious of the significance of a woman’s role in the creative evolution nor domineering enough to master the situation like Candida. She leaves her husband’s house all alone and without any thing [...] (87).



Joanna Kirkpatrick interprets Savitri's walk-out as an expression of her innermost longing for freedom, and it is her response "to promptings of *autonomy and self-identity under the Indian family system [...]*" (127).

Room is, in essence, Narayan's fictionalization of the inherent tension between the oppressive man and the oppressed woman. The unquestionable power of man is a social reality that derives its validity and support from ancient Indian texts and mythologies. The true cause of the rift between Ramani and Savitri can be better understood in the context of this age-old confrontation in man-woman relationship. Ramani feels that his wife should be loyal and duty-bound to be grateful to him for all his kindness and consideration he has shown her. He is indignant that she should become ungrateful. In his opinion Savitri's threat of leaving the house is a shameful act of ingratitude. Narayan shows, here, that he, as a male, sings his own praise and loses himself in his own thoughts of self-importance and self-glorification without caring to recognize and acknowledge the sweat and labour, the toils and sacrifice of a woman in her role as a home-maker. To a man what he has done to her appears to be more important than what she has done to him. Ramani's obsessive recitation and reiteration of a wife's place and duties are a striking reflection of male authority. He underscores the subordination of women as the essential feature of womanhood and it is the very cause of India's spiritual greatness in his view. He lays particular stress on the primary duty and "divine privilege" of a woman, which is "*being a wife and a mother*" (109). And the woman has no right to be called a wife if she disobeys her husband.

Savitri leaves the house alone in the dark without her children. Once again her rebellious spirit is suggestively associated with darkness. It is the darkness of her life denoting her mental agony, misery and it sears her very soul that she is not permitted to take her children with her. Her remark that even her children are not hers but his is a pathetic, yet ironic cry of a woman-mother who is denied the basic call right to claim her children as hers: "They are yours absolutely. You paid the midwife and the nurse. You pay for their clothes and teachers" (DR 88). Nazar Singh Sidhu comments: "It is a renunciation of supreme order" (119). It implies that the statement is a sorrowful expression of the harsh reality a woman has to face in life. A woman owns nothing except her body. She remarks, "What possession can a woman call her own except her body? Everything else that she has is her father's, her husband's or her son's" (DR 88). There is an inexpressible, piercing sorrow in her remark. Savitri seems to be extremely disgusted with her own gender having no face and identity of its own, no power to free itself from male control and no strength to live with dignity and honour in a man's world. Savitri refuses to take even the ring, necklace and stud given by her father as "they are also a man's gift" (DR 88). There is an inescapable sarcasm in Savitri's blunt reply. It is Savitri's pungent comment on the pernicious and oppressive male pervasiveness in society and her brusque rejection of anything that savours of 'male touch' or



patronage. It is not the daughter in Savitri who looks at her father as 'father' but the hurt and humiliated woman in Savitri who views him as 'man'-a member of the male tribe antagonistic to all women. Narayan ironically pictures male hegemony and a woman's precarious state. Further, her life is one of fear from birth to death, even beyond death-fear of rupture in the hell. This haunting sense of fear is chiefly due to the manner of her ill-treatment which affects her whole physical being and, leaves a deep scar on her psyche. Savitri sadly reflects: "Afraid of one's teachers and everybody in early life, afraid of one's husband, children, and neighbours in later life-fear, fear till the funeral pyre was lit (DR 91). The fear-ridden and shaky life of a female who lives in fear and dies in greater fear is here forcefully brought out by Narayan. Savitri is exploited at home by her husband and by the priest in the temple but she displays a tremendous power of endurance characteristic of all Indian women.

Savitri, after she leaves her home, sustains her assertion of independence and pride. Narayan draws the attention of the readers to this aspect of her character when she firmly spurns Ponni's offer of food and shelter which she has not earned: "I am resolved never to accept food or shelter which I have not earned" (DR 122). Her resoluteness is quite amazing. She maintains her spirit of freedom and self-dependence in the temple as she is prepared to eat even the plain rice without salt and butter milk which Ponni wants to offer her. This unusually strong fervour of independence and sense of self-dependence are the direct result of her bitter experience at home and the denial of freedom of expression and action by her husband. What she hates most is charity. She feels a great thrill, and her joy knows no bounds when she cooks a little rice for herself in the temple. She remarks with pride: "This is my rice, my very own; and I am not obliged to anyone for this. This is nobody's charity to me" (DR 142). This triumphant sense of her self-reliance, as opposed to her compulsion to slavishly depend on her husband at home, fills her mind with a rare kind of Peace which she savours with great contentment and happiness. Though out the novel, the novelist "presents a detached approach to life by perceiving the wrong and the right actions of the characters with certain equanimity."⁷

She is now free in the temple and elated. Very soon, the reader finds a shocking change in Savitri. The fire of independence burning bright, as it were in her heart is doused quickly by circumstances. An overpowering and intense longing for her dear children and the comforts of home subdues her stubbornness and ignites an unbearable feeling of homesickness. Further, the situation is aggravated by her fear of loneliness. Narayan peeps into her mind and perceives and recognizes the true cause of her anguish 'and her futile attempt to control her emotional turmoil and check her homeward thoughts-frenzied and uncontrollable-which simply flatten her "fiery vows"'.



And she grew homesick. Nostalgia for children, home, and accustomed comforts seized her. Lying here on the rough floor, beside the hot flickering lamp, her soul racked with fears, she couldn't help contrasting the comfort, security, and un-loneliness of her home. And then the children. What a void they created 'I must see them; I must see Babu, I must see Sumati, and I must see Kamala. (DR 146).

Every object frightens her. It is a new, terrifying kind of darkness that envelops and subjugates her brave heart. If the first dark room symbolizes the awakening of her slumbering spirit of independence and resurrection, the second dark shanty in the temple indicates her quiet determination to accept the slavish and choking life at home. It is death, death of the soul. It is an ignominious retreat into the former battered self. Savitri's mute acquiescence and uncomplaining attitude reminds us of Draupadi who felt that happiness is not derived from happiness but a good woman experiences happiness through suffering.⁸ By she despises her own weakness and lack of mental strength and courage. "What despicable creations of God are we that we can't exist without a support." she reflects (DR 146). Narayan comments: "The futility, the frustration and her own inescapable weakness made her cry and sob." (DR 146). She admits, "This is defeat. I accept it. I am no good for this fight (DR 146).

Her later reflection "A part of me is dead" (DR 160) significantly implies the inevitable defeat of a single, lonely, helpless, supportless woman in her fight against male dictatorship. Narayan, by the use of contrasted meanings of the dark rooms, brings out, as Lakshmi Holmstrom rightly points out in "Women Characters in R.K.Narayan's Novels", "[...] the predicament of women attempting to live a life of independence. Either one lives within society by accepting its norms, or one leaves it altogether, in which case one can be supported only by one's resources [...]" (66). Savitri fails because she lacks her own inner strength or resources to sustain her freedom.

Han Mohan Prasad argues against the commonly held view about Savitri's return to her husband and children. It is generally taken to be a disgraceful surrender and an anti-climax. Meena Shirwadkar observes, "The Savitri who returns is a spiritual collapse" (54) but Han Mohan Prasad stoutly defends Savitri's conduct as well as Narayan's conclusion. He remarks:

[...] Savitri does not submit to Ramani; she submits to her obligations. It may be a failure on the material plane, but spiritually she comes triumphant [...]. The conclusion is consequential. The incident and actions of the character anticipate it. Ramani had been bullying and belligerent, Savitri submissive and accommodative. She sulked and gruded but never resisted firmly. The end is a



magnified sulking and a magnified submission. It is in keeping with both her character and her cultural heritage [...] (88).

However, one may still maintain that Savitri, crushed by her inadequacy, returns home rather crest-fallen, and her self-acknowledgement of her defeat and the death of a part of her being testifies to her sad realization of the futility of sustaining the struggle against male suzerainty and the complete disintegration of the spirit of independence and conscious and meek acceptance of what is or has been. It is submission, pure and simple, whatever be the real cause, perhaps “a magnified submission”. Veena V. Mohod observes that “her revolt and her quick retreat are the inevitable facets of predicament that the Indian woman faces in a society where the orthodox traditions still have considerable influence” (11). Jayant K. Biswal also feels that “The walls of the orthodox society close in on woman,” given the situation in the Malgudi of the nineteen thirties, and “Savitri’s return is of course inevitable” (16). Michel Pousse lends support to this ‘inevitability-thesis’ in different words stressing the intolerance of the masculine world: “Indian society does not tolerate individualism. Feminine individualism is not acceptable. Savitri fails because she moves within a masculine world” (“Women in the Early Novels” 40). It is Harsharan Singh Ahiuwalia who defends the novel’s controversial denouement: “In the given situation, Narayan does not feel the need of offering any solution to the problem of a loveless marriage except patient endurance. It would indeed be unauthentic in 1938 to suggest separation or divorce as the solution” (“Rosie and Daisy” 128).

Viewing the story from another angle, it may be said that Savitri’s defeat is no defeat at all but a victory of the mother in her. She ennobles herself by reaffirming her profound love and affection for her children. To a mother nothing is sacred than her close bond and ties with her children. She is prepared to face any kind of humiliation or sacrifice any amount of liberty, precious identity and dignity and even her very life for their sake. What Savitri regards as defeat is really the spontaneous reassertion of the mother in all women. Savitri does exactly what any mother will do in her situation. Room is, in a different way, the story of the Return of the Native, the Return of the Mother in triumph. Rajalakshmi’s comment is relevant here: The rebel in her is overshadowed by the mother [...]. Motherly fulfillment illumines the darkest of the dark rooms like that of Savitri (42). Her willing acceptance of her defeat for the sake of her children is, as remarked by Pashupati Jha, “an act of courage and endurance, almost like the acceptance of Isabel Archer in The Portrait of a Lady by Henry James” (“The Protector and Preserver” 111). Further, Jha observes: “She now, emotionally ceases to be a wife without ceasing to be a mother” (111). She leaves the house in wrath as a wounded wife, which is her primary role, and returns home as a loving mother intensely longing to be with her children, is her secondary role, and both the roles, equally important, form part of Indian woman, signifying the plight of wife and the pride of mother.



Savitri after her short 'exile' or short-lived stint in the temple seems to be a changed woman. She looks the very picture of sorrow. She is shorn her erstwhile 'fieriness' and self-confidence. A sort of oppressive weariness crushes her soul. She, of course, speaks with her children with affection but not with her customary cheer, fervour and self-assurance. She is nervous, timid, meek and hesitant. She is not excited at the arrival of her husband, as she was in the past. She serves food to her husband mechanically, not with the interest and involvement of a wife. She is cold and indifferent to Ramani's husbandly overtures and his special efforts to make peace with or please her. She turns down even his plea to have "a little talk" (DR 161) with her.

Nothing is more humiliating and tormenting to Savitri than the excruciating consciousness of her unavoidable, 'destined' dependence on her husband. She symbolizes, here, the Indian woman whose plight and pitiable condition is in no way different from hers. Narayan brings out the distressful situation of Savitri with creative sensitivity when Savitri gives up her idea of calling Mari, the lock-repairer and husband of Ponni. She feels strongly that she must "give him food, water, and a magnificent gift, and inquire about her great friend Ponni" (DR 161) and repay her debt of to her. But she checks herself after she painfully realizes that she not have anything, which she can claim to be her own, to offer Mari about the consent of her husband. She reflects, "Why should I call him? What have I?" (DR 162). She silently stands by the window, haunted memory of Mari's shining hungry face and his cry 'locks repaired' after he is gone. Savitri remains a dejected and oppressed woman end of the novel brings to light Savitri's kindness and helplessness. Savitri, representing the suffering woman, is a lock that cannot be repaired. K.V. Suryanarayana Murti rightly identifies the rich suggestiveness of the end:

The closing is suggestive of Savitri's humanity and charity and inability. Her failure is that she is like an irreparable lock-a symbol of the feminine. The novel [...] closes with Savitri's helpless dependency after her returning home which points to the same condition of her dependency at the beginning of the novel. (133).

Savitri attempts to commit suicide by drowning herself in the river Sarayu after she quits her house. Her mental toughness in enduring the insults of her husband, her courage in leaving her home and children and her bold resolve to be independent do not match with her sudden and cowardly decision as only those who are mentally weak and fear to face the failures and disappointments in life will be tempted to commit suicide. Perhaps, Narayan wants to heighten the impact of his heroine's misery on the readers or imply that self-destruction is the only-or the best-option available to a helpless and unfortunate woman like Savitri to whom life, without her children, becomes meaningless and killing. This episode, no doubt, strikes a



jarring note in the characterization of Savitri but one has to admit that it develop the plot as it brings in time Ponni's husband Man to rescue with from death. In the character of Savitri in *The Dark Room*, R.K. Narayan highlights her genius for suffering which is in absolute consonance with the ancient Indian tradition. She closely resembles her mythical namesake, Savitri, for her fidelity and devotion to her husband. ⁹

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