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Juxtaposition of Yielding and Leading Women Characters in the Novel *The Darkroom* by R. K. Narayan

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Abstract:

R.K.Narayan has portrayed typical South Indian life in his novels. The typicality is multi-dimensioned in way of mores and norms of the traditional society, familial relationship including husband and wife relationship, suffering of an individual with low economic background, caste and communal disparity, suffering of women in the male dominated society, people's belief system, survival or revival of a man or a woman not to escape from the life but by adjusting with or opposing the struggles in the family or in the society. Survival of women in the male-dominated society is a challenging one for many and not so difficulty for some. This paper focuses on how many of the women characters of the novel *The Dark Room* lead or yield to the oppressions on them for survival.

Keywords: Male-dominated society, Women characters, Individuality, Dependence, Lead or Yield.

Introduction

R.K. Narayan presents the two contrasting women Savitri and Shanta Bai react in different ways to the same kind of situation in the novel *The Darkroom*. The protagonist Savitri is simple, modest, gentle, loving and obedient. She is traditional and religious whereas another main character Shanta Bai is flirting, more modem and unconventional in her views and behaviour. She doesn't care for traditional norms. This paper focuses on with how they deal with the situations and lead their life.

Yielding or Leading

R.K. Narayan's *The Dark Room* is an attempt to portray the position of women in the patriarchal society. It depicts the plight of a traditional Hindu house wife, Savitri and simultaneously focuses on woman who wishes to fight for individuality and liberty.

Narayan feels that Indian woman has been relegated to a second place in Indian society.

He expresses:

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 Lib' movement. Man assigned her a second place and kept her there with such subtlety and cunning that she herself began to lose all notion of her independence, her individuality, stature, and strength. A wife in an orthodox milieu of Indian society was an ideal victim of such circumstances. (119)

R.K. Narayan includes the social values, norms and traditional mores of the typical Indian society. He never deviates from the norms and values of Hindu tradition. Any such deviation will lead to the state of disrupted society. Society is in turn built by the good family set up. The familial relationship particularly husband and wife relationship is based on mutual trust and marital fidelity. In *The Dark Room* Savitri, in a fit of anger quits her husband's house as her husband Ramani is infatuated by Shanta Bai, a colleague of his and neglects Savitri. Savitri is unable to live in isolation and finding no other way she is prepared to return to her disloyal husband. Savitri is a responsible mother and she realizes how impotent a woman is in an orthodox family: Hari Mohan Prasad observes:

The *Dark Room* is a short, simple novel, written at an early period of the novelist's career, yet it reveals the writer's mind and presents a candid picture of social life of India when the country has just begun to see the influx of modernity. The success of the novelist lies in showing through the cubit of domestic disharmony a deft understanding of human relationship and an awareness of Indian culture and tradition. (88)

Though Savitri lives with her husband Ramani and three children - Babu, Sumati and Kamala, she has no rights to take simple decisions. When their son Babu is ill, Savitri wants to put him in bed but Ramani forces Babu to go to school.

She had not the slightest power to do anything at home, and that after fifteen years of married life. Babu did look very ill and she was powerless to keep him in bed. (6)

Ramani is a self-made man and never tolerates any advice or interference in his decisions even from his wife. Ramani asks Savitri to mind her own business and leave the training of grown-up boy to him.

Mind your own business, do you hear... 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. (6)

Savitri has little education and is rendered totally helpless at the hands of a dictatorial husband. Narayan has presented the relationship between oppressed wife Savitri and a callous husband Ramani. She is aware of her own powerlessness and meekly accepts the traditional norms and mores. K.K. Singh points out:

The novel is an account of marriage from the wife's point of view in which the image that has been projected is that of an Indian woman as a victim.(100)

The second woman character in *The Dark Room* Shanta Bai is an outsider to Malgudi. She is quite bold and frank. She manages everything without anybody's support. Narayan has portrayed Shanta Bai as a modern and romantic woman. After her graduation, she works as a teacher for some time. She has been appointed as office assistant in Englandia Insurance Company. She leaves her husband who is a gambler and drunker. She could not tolerate his behaviour. She leaves him and lives an independent and dignified life.

Ramani accommodates Shanti Bai in his office room and regularly visits her. He shifts the furniture of Savitri to Shanta Bai's room. She receives excessive attention from Ramani. Shanta Bai is a romantic woman as she says that she always carries a copy of Khayyam's *The Rubaiyat* under her pillow. She is a well-educated woman. Shanta Bai too didn't have an easy past as she says:

"I was married when I was twelve to a cousin of mine, who was a gambler and a drunkard. When I was 18, I found he wouldn't change, and so I left him. My parents would not tolerate it and I had to leave home" (51).

Shanta Bai, here appears to be completely opposite to Savitri. Like Savitri, Shanta Bai has questioned the ideals of society, judged her husband and found him drunkard and left him. But unlike Savitri, Shanta Bai does not return to her house. She was unable to limit himself to her house where her husband and children live as Shanta Bai says,

I love unconventional Things. Otherwise I should not be here, but nursing Children and cooking for a husband (59).

For Shanta Bai, her existence and her economic independence matters more than her marital relationship. During her first meeting with Ramani, she tells him about her past. She reminds Omar Khayyam's philosophy of life. She says:

His philosophy appeals to me. Dead yesterday and unborn tomorrow.... In this world Khayyam is the only person who would have understood the secret of my soul. No one tries to understand me; that is the tragedy of my life. (151)

Savitri's friend Gangu tells Savitri that she has seen her husband in the company of a woman at the theatre at night. Savitri, humble in nature, rebels with her husband first time in her life and asks him to leave Shanta Bai. He diverts her attention by catching hold of her in an effort to fondle her. She frees herself of his hold and cries:

“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”... Do you think that I will stay in your house, breathe the air of your property, drink the water here, and eat food you buy with your money? No,
“I will starve and die in the open, under the sky, a roof for which we need be obliged to no man.” (112-113)

Savitri's rebellion against her dishonest husband leads her to threaten him that she would leave the house at once. But Ramani shows no regrets, instead, asks her to take her things while leaving the house. She seems to believe that in the domination of man's world, a woman cannot possess anything.

Things? I don't possess anything in this world. 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. (113)

Savitri removes all her ornaments and throws them at the feet of Ramani. She does not want to take anything that belongs to him. She leaves home at midnight. Savitri quits her husband's house. She walks towards North end to river Sarayu. She becomes upset and raises a question over the difference between a married woman and a prostitute. She says:

What is the difference between a prostitute and a married woman?-The prostitute changes her men, but a married woman doesn't; that's all, but both earn their food and shelter in the same manner. (120)

Savitri leaves her house but is unable to live in this world without any economic support. She is not an educated woman as Shanta Bai. She reveals her sadness, helpless plight of a woman in the Indian middle-class society:

What can I do myself? Unfit to earn a handful of rice except by begging. If I had gone to a college and studied, I might have become a teacher or something. It was very foolish of me not to have gone on with my education. (119-120)

When she tried to commit suicide by drowning herself in the river Sarayu, Mari, the village blacksmith saves her. He leaves her lying on the river bank to bring his wife, Ponni, from the village Sukkur to save Savitri. Mari and Ponni take Savitri to their house in the village. She refuses fruits offered by Ponni and says that she will live in the open without food and shelter at anybody's mercy. She pleads them to find her any job in the village.

The couple helps her in securing a job in a temple of Murugan. The temple priest allots work for her. Her work is to clean and sweep the shrine. She will be paid a quarter of an anna and half a measure of rice each day. A dirty, semi-dark room in the temple is allotted to her to stay. The allotment of a dark room to Savitri by the priest of the temple has symbolic significance. Lakshmi Holmstrom shows,

The two dark rooms in the novel are crucial in symbolizing this conflict. The dark room in the house next to the store is where Savitri withdraws in protest against Ramani's treatment of her son. She withdraws from all responsibilities, and merely lives there with her face to the wall, withdrawn into herself.... The second dark room in the novel, clarifies and questions Savitri's apparent and brief achievement of that 'right to live', when she finally gains employment at the shanty at the corner of the temple corridor.(105)

Savitri becomes homesick, nostalgic about her children, home and her accustomed comforts. She feels discomfort, insecurity and loneliness. At night, she is upset by nightmarish fears. She is unprepared for this situation. She could not live in that place and longs for her previous condition. She hates herself for her fate. She feels,

“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 wall to support it....” (189)

Savitri struggles for independence but doesn't have the necessary strength to live in isolation. So, she decides to give up her fight against dependence. She feels defeated and cries,

This is defeat. I accept it. I am no good for this fight. I am a bomboo pole.
(190)

Though she struggles for her individuality, she has to accept her defeat. She realizes her helplessness. She feels a woman should take either her husband's side or her children's side. V. Panduranga Rao asserts,

Savitri comes back to motherhood and, as an inescapable adjunct, to wifhood, but her acceptance of duty and response to instinct are qualified by her bitter recognition of the helplessness of her sex in general and her own unavoidable dependence on her husband.(3)

The other two women characters Janamma and Gangu play a limited role. Both are friends and neighbours. They are at the two extremes of traditional female society in Lawley South extension. Like Savitri, Janamma is also a victim of the religious taboos. She is middle-aged woman. Her husband is a public prosecutor. She never moves freely among people. Savitri has a great regard for her and consults her for her problems. Janamma taught Savitri about her primary duty, as a wife, towards her husband. She also confesses that she never uttered a single word against her husband. She says:

As for me, I have never opposed my husband or argued with him at any time in my life. I might have occasionally suggested an alternative, but nothing more. (59)

Gangu is of different sort. She is religious, and visits the temple regularly. She is a wife of a school teacher and mother of four children. Her ambition is to become a film star and a professional musician, but she has no qualities like a striking figure, acting ability and good voice. She hopes that she would be sent some day to the All-India Women's Conference as a delegate of Malgudi so as to be elected to various municipal and legislative bodies. Her husband supports her in her activities. She is an eccentric.

She left home when she pleased and went where she liked, moved about without an escort, stared back at people, and talked loudly. Her husband never interfered with her but let her go her own way, and believed himself to be a champion of Women's freedom. (19)

Ponni is a low caste woman. Her husband Mari commits burglary only to fulfill her wishes. She knows how to manage her husband. Ponni, is an example of dominating woman. It is expressed in her words to Savitri.

“Sister, Remember this. 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. (136)

Savitri represents every middle class woman who is a victim in the male-dominated society.

At the end of the novel she ultimately pockets her pride and returns home broken and defeated to her still unrepentant husband exhibiting her yielding character. She never wishes to violate the traditional norms of Hindu society and culture of the Indian society. Savitri has realised much after her return to home. She hesitates to welcome Mari who is walking on the street to her house at the end of the novel. She wanted to meet him, give him food and water because Mari was the person who helped her from drowning in the river. But she feels, “Why should I call him here? What have I?” (162) which shows that somewhere she undergoes a feeling that she has no authority to call a guest of her own as it is her husband who is the real owner and decision maker. She feels, she cannot do anything to change the temperament of male dominated society. She decides herself women are just dutiful wives, mothers and daughters to males. Savitri says to her husband, “We are reasonable for our position; we accept food, shelter and comfort that you give, and are what we are” (87).

Shanta Bai’s philosophy of life shows her of the view of Simone de Beauvoir. Shanta Bai feels that society cannot be built without Women. They are important for the continuation of the species as well as balanced social order. Why they are treated as outsiders. Women in forms of wives are often being allocated a marginal status focusing their physical or cultural characteristics. It has been inculcated that happiness for women lies in fulfilling the role as a good wife and mother. She is devoid of her own self, independency and leading role in a family or in a patriarchal society. As Simone de Beauvoir writes about patriarchal culture,

...humanity is male and man defines woman not in herself but as relative to him: she is not regarded as an autonomous being.

Shanta Bai wishes to define her life differently and to establish her desire for a more independent life or carrier not involving male dominated views. Thus, she proves her leading character by standing on her feet with the help of education and economy avoiding social or cultural norms which have always kept women as marginalized community. Savitri’s anger showcases her willingness to raise voice

against patriarchal society though she is yielding in nature. Shanta Bai's way of life forecasts women as part of society and asserts the voice raised by Savitri against male-dominated society.

Conclusion

The role of individuality in women is seen in both Savitri and Shanta Bai, but Savitri is unable to live in isolation and is prepared to return to her disloyal husband whereas Shanta Bai keeps herself away from her disloyal husband for he is a drunker and is capable of managing without anybody's support. Though Savitri's hopes and frustrations are truthful portrayal of a typical Indian Woman, her utterances and Shanta Bai's leading independent way of life echo the progressive voice of the rising womanhood.

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