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The Journey of Savitri for her Self-Respect in R. K. Narayan's novel *The Dark Room*

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Abstract:

R.K. Narayan's *The Dark Room* is a female centric novel. Here the main character is Savitri, the middle class, simple, docile, loyal wife of Ramani. In this novel we find the struggle of Savitri to discover herself. At the beginning of the novel we find Savitri lives happily with her husband Ramani and two little daughters Sumati and Kamala and a son. Ramani is the ruling deity here and other three members are enforced worshippers. Ramani commands Savitri very rudely whether it be his food or his office wear Ramani's wrath never seems to be appeased. R. K. Narayan in this novel does not use any hyperbolic statements rather his writing technique is very lucid and simple. We feel emotional attachment when we read this novel. This novel has an universal appeal. The name of the central character Savitri reminds us about the Puranic character of Savitri, the loyal wife of Satyaban. Likewise this Savitri escapes from the tyrannical authority of Ramani. It shows Savitri's withdrawal into the room as a defining moment in her attempt to free herself from the traditional gender codes and tries to discover her own self. The fictional world of R. K. Narayan seems to be a picture of the actual world which we live in. In almost all his novels he chooses matters of ordinary everyday life.

Keywords: journey, self-respect, traditional gender codes, tyrannical authority.

The Dark Room is a tragedy of domestic life. It depicts the plight and sufferings of a neglected Indian housewife. Whenever Ramani is intolerable with Savitri, she goes and takes shelter in the dark room. This dark room symbolizes her dark side

of life, sufferings and plight. The novel attempts a new technique which is cleverly skilful and excellent. In this novel we find miscellaneous accessories of trivial and familiar struggles, a common feature of the Indian soil. But here Savitri is not patient sufferers like the numerous Puranic women. The humiliation and distress that Savitri used to is similar to the helpless condition of many of Indian housewives of the lower middle class family. Ponny and Mari, women to the lower class struggle in life by doing manual work. But the Brahmin girl of the middle classes is completely desperate save as a housewife. The *Dark Room* depicts a story where patriarchy is supreme and the women are so economically deprived that they have compelled to endure what they hate and detest without any protest. R.K. Narayan is conscious about the changing nature of Indian middle class society. According to him it is appropriate to portray the women folk within the matrimonial framework and outside it. In *The Dark Room*, Narayan creates two major female characters - Savitri and Shanta Bai. Both of them unwillingly exist within a codified social structure. Savitri is legally married wife of Ramani and Shanta Bai is the other woman in Ramani's life. But neither of them is free to express themselves independently in the society. Each of them carries a male identity tag. Savitri is Mrs. Ramani and Shanta Bai is the Mistress of Ramani. Narayan projects them in such a way because he knows that despite multiple changes society never permits a woman to step out on her own. Earlier Savitri is the unquestioning, submissive female presence in Ramani's household. Savitri's life remains peaceful and uneventful for long in the codified world of Malgudi. She only worries about her children and always tries to pacify the wrath of her husband. At her free time she talks with the ladies of the Extension. Besides Savitri, R. K. Narayan presents in this novel other women characters who belong to different classes, castes, and ages. They are passengers of the same boat. They also live in their different life struggles and conflicting with their outer and inner self. Narayan presents Savitri as rebellious woman. She is contrasted with Gangu and Janamma who follow the traditions of extreme housewives. At first Savitri is not able to assess the illicit relationship of her husband and Shanta Bai. She remains busy in her household works. She is very loving and caring mother of her children. She is so loyal wife and believes her husband a lot. She ignores her husband's late coming and thinks it is his workload in office which is

responsible for his late coming. She knows the secret from Gangu. After knowing the fact Savitri tries to mend her husband. She dresses like a new wife but Ramani does not return home on that night and stays with Shanta Bai. But the next day when Ramani sits for dinner Savitri gathers courage and speaks with courageous zeal.

“ You won’t give up this harlot? You are not having me and her at the same time, understand? I go out of this house this minute.” (Narayan 86).

R.K. Narayan in his novel *The Dark Room* portrays a patriarchal family set in pre independence India, two decades before Jawaharlal Nehru passed the Hindu Code Bill in an effort to rid women of their inferior status and regenerate the family value of Indian family life. The Hindu Marriage Act of 1955 which amended in 1976 and 1981 made provision for judicial separation, divorce, nullity and annulment of marriage for the Indian Hindu woman. In the novel *The Dark Room*, R. K. Narayan portrays the helplessness of Savitri. Ramani’s control over his wife and household and rebuking her in every single error seems very familiar in Indian family system. Ramani acquired a high position in Englandia Insurance Company. He is very proud of that. Ramani’s presence creates an awe situation among his family members. With the passing of time Ramani falls in a relationship with Shanta Bai. Savitri remains ignorance at first but after knowing this relationship Savitri decides to strike back. Earlier she takes shelter in her household dark room and the children suffer unnecessarily due to their parents confrontation. Savitri takes shelter in her dark room to bring back her staggered husband in a straight way of life. Here we find the emergence of a different Savitri. Savitri finds herself at odds with her husband in what ever attempts she tries to please him. She lacks her own voice and through this the novelist R. K. Narayan portrays her pathetic and helpless condition. After knowing the fact of the illicit relation between Shanta Bai and her husband Ramani she falls in a stage of pathos and mental agony. Ramani does not care for this but the children become worst sufferers. They realize that something is happened between their parents but they are too innocence to understand the real fact. Savitri wondered herself about the change within herself. She express her grievances in a straight forward way without any hesitations.

“I'm human being. Don't touch me. You men will never grant that. For you we are playthings 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”. (Narayan 85).

It is remarkable to note that Narayan's main characters always try to live their lives according to their wishes both implicitly and explicitly in his short stories and fiction. It fulfils Narayan's editorial ambition too. Narayan's works reveal the quest for identity by principal characters. It projects a journey through certain types of experiences characterized by conflicts and tension between the tradition and the collision of modernity. In this patriarchal Indian society women are marginalized. *The Dark Room* is Narayan's serious exploration of the class, caste and gender question. Narayan aptly sketches Savitri's location in the Brahminical context. She is totally a devoted wife of Ramani and a good mother of her children. But Savitri has a limit to remain in patience. Finally Savitri decides to leave the house for good. She rebels and here Narayan depicts her as one who has flouted Dharma. Savitri herself is surprised about her own transformation.

“Am I the same old Savitri or am I someone else. You want me sit up and wait for you, do you?” (Narayan 85).

We can realize that Savitri is different from Gangu and Janamma. Savitri tried to find her own self and identity. She struggles to free herself from her monotonous existence. But Gangu and Janamma remains within their circumference. Gangu and Janamma stand for women representatives of orthodox Hindu society and they lack the intellectual power which Savitri possesses. Before leaving the house Savitri tries to take away her children with her but her husband Ramani resists. She speaks in a mode of challenge,

“Do you think I am going to stay here? We are responsible for our positions. I don't possess anything in this world. What possession can a woman call her own expect her body? Everything else that she has is her father's, her husband's, her son's. She removes her diamond earrings, the diamond studs on her nose.” (Narayan 88).

Walking down the streets Savitri feels very lonely and frustrated and she decides to commit suicide. But almighty God saves her in disguise of a blacksmith cum burglar. Savitri decides to take shelter in a village temple. Walking down the street Savitri realizes her helplessness. Then she sits on the bank of river Sarayu and memorizes her past and she feels too much worried about her children. The burglar cum blacksmith Mari and his wife Ponni welcomes Savitri greatly. They give Savitri respect as she belongs to a high class. Ponni is also very simple woman. She does not show any interest about Savitri's past life. According to Ponni Savitri is a burning example of patriarchal oppression. Savitri hesitates to take food and shelter from them. Savitri feels herself burden to Mari and Ponni. So they started to find an abode for Savitri where she earn and live respectably. Savitri decides to take shelter in the village temple because only God is almighty and saves us from danger. From then Savitri leads a new life and feels mental peace by servicing the God and poor, needy people of the village. Savitri tries hard to earn her food and shelter in the temple. But thought of her children always gives her pain. As a loving and caring mother she feels worried about her little children. The children also think about their mother. They do not know the real fact between their parents but they miss their mother greatly. Ramani tries to control over the children and his household but he is not as an apt homemaker as Savitri. Savitri becomes happy that now she leads an independent life without dependable on anybody. The priest is very cruel. He offers only rice to Savitri. Ponni feels sorry and wants to give her some buttermilk and salt but Savitri refuses to accept this. Savitri prays for her children and believes that God protects her children. She tries to dedicate her rest of life in the foot of God and tries to forget about her family, husband and children. In this novel we find Savitri's attempt to realize her independence but lying on the chamber of the dark room of the temple Savitri realizes that both the dark rooms are parts of social institutions. In the household when she feels frustrated and angry she takes shelter in a dark room and withdraws from herself and the dark room in the temple also is a place which is not adequately protected. It is merely a shelter from the outside world. Savitri has her own dignity when the priest offers her the coconut she refuses. Savitri is not a modern type of woman because in the then time very little number of Indian women

were educated and they grow up in such a atmosphere that they become mentally prepare as a submissive, loyal wife of husband and as a protector of her children and husband. Savitri thinks very deeply and feels that there is a little difference between wife and prostitute because marriage is a form of legalized oppression. Savitri feels pain when she thinks about her children. She becomes homesick and nostalgic. Savitri's decision to leave her home is very bold and brave decision but now she feared and anxious for her children. She is not like Shanta Bai. The dream of the respectful husband wife relationship drives Savitri. She is unable to live without her family. Before returning home she meets the priest of the temple and reveals her decision to him and she also meets Ponni and Mari because they are saviors of her and help and respect Savitri a lot. At last we find the victory of tradition but Savitri is also now transformed into a different human being. She decides to fulfill her responsibilities and duties as a wife and mother without being mentally involved. The separation for some days gives her a great lesson in life. Savitri becomes mentally strong and her experiences in life makes her rebel against the oppressive society system. Savitri thinks very deeply, Savitri is different from Janamma and Gangu. She questions about the validity of her bore existence and unlike Gangu her family goes on routine and unlike Janamma she protest against the infidelity of her husband in her own way and takes shelter in a dark room. Even she leaves her family for some days. She has enough courage than Gangu and Janamma. The fantastic, imaginary locality of Malgudi is disturbed by the arrival of Shanta Bai. People assume her as the other woman in Ramani's life. There is difference between Savitri and Shanta Bai. Savitri is traditional housewife and Shanta Bai is modern type of woman who lives according to her individual wish. But neither of them is free. Both are victims of tyrannical society system. Savitri provides a direct contrast to Shanta Bai. Very pathetically Savitri asks herself,

“ What is the difference between a prostitute and a married woman? The prostitute changes her men, but a married woman does not. Both earn their food and shelter in the same manner. Yes, Kamala and Sumati must take their University course and become independent.” (Narayan 93).

Narayan makes clear contrast between Savitri as high class woman and Ponni, the lower class woman. Ponni is far more free than Savitri and Shanta Bai. Even Ponni's husband is afraid from her. She can never be suppressed. She genuinely helps Savitri to find the life of independence and makes for her a shelter as well a job in the temple. She respects Savitri very much and also tries to guard her privacy. She speaks to the priest very logically and a friendship grows between her and Savitri crossing the barrier of caste and class. At last Savitri returns to her home in Malgudi and we find a profound loneliness in Savitri's life but now she finds her own self esteem. R. K. Narayan's Savitri is different from Ibsen's Nora in Doll's House. After returning home one day past. The next day when Ramani sits for dinner, he tries to make the home atmosphere friendly as if nothing has happened. But Savitri remains strong and stout in her behavior and she has done all her duties and responsibilities without mentally involved. While talking with her husband Savitri replies,

“ A part of me is dead. I can't even stand. I must sleep.” (Narayan 160-161).

She does not remain the same old Savitri. Savitri realizes her own place and position and struggles with herself and only performs her duties and responsibilities as a loyal wife and loving and caring mother.

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