

## Hiding in the Light: R. K. Narayan as a Feminist Novelist

**Rajendra Kumar Dash,**

Asst. Professor, Department of English,  
C. V. Raman College of Engineering,  
Bhubaneswar, Odisha, India.

&

**Namita Panda,**

Asst. Professor, Department of English,  
C. V. Raman College of Engineering,  
Bhubaneswar, Odisha, India.

The fictions of R.K. Narayan (1907-2001), especially his novels, can be regarded as more or less a socio-historical chronicle of India of his time---i.e. pre- and post-Independent India. Set in the fictional town of Malgudi, these narratives record the realistic portrayal of life and characters. The social realistic canvass of Malgudi offer the novelist a matrix rich enough to portray all types of characters with a realistic touch---he finds equal pleasure in sketching worldly wise people and ascetics. R. K. Narayan portrays with equal ease both the genders: If varieties of men delight him with their peculiarities, his women characters are never inferior to any. However, most critics do not take his artistic engagement with women seriously, let alone consider him as a feminist. He also never claimed to be one. Nonetheless, Narayan's women characters can make an interesting study, for some of them present all that is best in Indian thought and character while some others represent the Westernised (not colonized) mindset, and still some exhibit peculiar trends such as moving out of tradition and a homecoming and vice versa. The most interesting point in this concern is the fact that the notion of 'woman' in the novels of R. K. Narayan underlies an evolutionary growth pattern ending in the emancipation of women. In a sentence, the concept of womanhood in the novels of Narayan can be read as a movement involving tradition versus individual talent. In this context, this paper claims that R.K. Narayan is a feminist though he has done justice to all his characters, which is attested by their true-to-life images. It dares to take a road not taken so far and asserts that R K. Narayan's status as a feministic novelist is just like a thing hiding in the light---it is very much visible but somehow we have missed it.

The periscope that Malgudi supplies the novelist with allows him to visualize women of all sorts: pious and God-fearing women; women of easy virtues; modernistic, happy-go-lucky young women; and 'domesticated' and wily women. The various social roles played by women make his novels interesting as R. K. Narayan does often narrate situations in a disinterested manner (or tongue-in-cheek manner) that would sometimes make Chaucer envious of him. However, it would be unwise to say that Narayan was not interested in women's issues or that he was more interested in a particular individual woman character exclusively. In this context, this paper claims that while his early novels like *Dark Room* (1938) and *The English Teacher* (1945), which were written before the Independence of India (1947), portray women as mere orthodox and god believing entities engaged in household chores, deeply rooted in traditional beliefs, his middle novels create a women who dare to pursue their own happiness escaping the noose of tradition or social mores. In his later novels we see the portrayal of stronger and firmer female

protagonist, influenced by the Western philosophy and culture, and they express their resistance to male dominance, cruelty against the fair sex, denial of identity and freedom of expression (or simply the right to live). In the following paragraphs, I intend to discuss the evolution of the Indian woman through spatial and temporal realities as R. K. Narayan envisions her.

That R. K. Narayan was not insensitive to the woes of women is discernible from his reminiscences on the plight of women in his memoir *My Days*. He came up with a philosophy envisioning the emancipation of women which he termed as 'Women's Lib movement.' As his memoir reveals, this philosophy was in operation while writing the *Dark Room*:

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 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 (119).

Thus, it can be said that Narayan's sympathy for women is a novelist's apolitical observations on the plight of women in general and the traditional Hindu women, chained to tradition and societal norms, in particular. Though R. K. Narayan came from an orthodox Brahmin family himself, he did not hesitate to depict the problems plaguing women in and out of the family circle. In a very matter of fact and in a 'as is, where is' style, the novelist examines the condition of women prevailing at that particular period of history: the pre-Independent period and the the post-Independent period. Retrospectively, a literary analysis of the major novels of R. K. Narayan through a feministic approach would provide a kaleidoscopic view of the position as well as the evolution of the concept of the Indian woman.

The major novels of R. K. Narayan can be discussed to see how the novelist treats women. Among them mention may be made, from a feministic point of view, of major novels like *The Dark Room* (1938) and *The English Teacher* (1945) as works of pre-Independence period. Novels like *Mr. Sampath* (1948), *The Financial Expert* (1952), *Waiting for the Mahatma* (1955), *The Guide* (1958), *The Man-Eater of Malgudi* (1961), *The Vendor of Sweets* (1967), *The Painter of Signs* (1977), *A Tiger for Malgudi* (1983), and *The World of Nagaraj* (1990) fall under the category of post-Independence novels. A select study of some novels will also suffice to trace the evolution of feminism in the works of R. K. Narayan.

The first of these novels, the *Dark Room* offers a feminist view of the contemporary south Indian society. The dark room is used as a symbol that entails the frustration of a tormented, helpless Indian wife. The female protagonist Savitri is shown as a victim of the then existing patriarchal society. This novel reflects in a very subtle way the injustice caused by the male world and the society in general. The central female character of the novel Savitri is a typical Indian middle class submissive housewife married to a tin god, a very insensitive man Ramani, who was working as an insurance employee in an insurance company. Savitri was very much dominated and neglected by her husband. But as a true Hindu wife, she swallows all humiliations but never demands anything in return to keep her marriage afloat. But soon her marriage becomes a living hell when she came to know that her husband has a torrid affair with another woman, a new employee in her husband's office. So Savitri warns him of his miscreants but it seems as if Ramani has taken her entirely for granted.

The blatant disregard shown by her callous husband causes such depression that she finally decides to retreat into a dark room. The dark room is a room used to store the junks of the house. When Savitri's self worth is deeply wounded she takes shelter in the dark room. She identifies herself with useless domestic junks which has outlived its utility. This dark room is not only a room but also a metaphor which highlights the miserable condition of a woman and the oppression imposed upon them by men, ideally the title therefore matches with the symbolism of the novel. But despite being sympathetic, Ramani started spending nights with Shanta Bai. Unable to endure anymore, Savitri reacts in a very unusual manner. Savitri leaves the house of her husband in a fit of disappointment and anger. In the following lines she aptly expresses women's position in this society:

“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 to die in the open under the sky a roof for which we need not be obliged to no man”.

In the last sentence it is worth noticing that she has used 'we' instead of 'I' which signifies that this is not her lone voice, it is the voice of all those suppressed a voice, who are the victims of the male dominated world. Though she could not succeed in making her own identity, but she had made an effort to assert to her individuality. The spark of rebellion is worth praising.. Though she loses her battle on the home front, it begins within her heart by seeking her self realisation. The submissive wife who used to come at his husband's beck and call did not care for her so called god after her return to his husband's house. Her journey from insignificant cannot be ignored her return should not be counted as her submission rather as a spiritual triumphant.

She tries to commit suicide. However she is saved by Poni, wife of Maru, a blacksmith. She decides to take shelter in a temple and earn a little money to become financially independent. But here also she is exploited by the temple priest. Is there no safe place for a woman in this male chauvinistic society? In her early days she has to be in the custody of her father; then in her youth she is in the 'care' of her husband; and in the old age she is in the custody of her son. Isn't it an irony of life that when on one hand women are being propagated as the symbol of the goddess, embodied with tremendous power, on the other hand they are bereft of their basic rights in the society. Savitri's agony is well expressed in the following fiery speeches:

“I'm a human being “she said, ....”You men will never grant that. For you we are playthings when you feel like hugging and slaves other times. Don't think that you can fondle us when you like and kick us when you choose.”(p-73)

But finally she comes back to her husband's house.

Apart from Savitri's character there are other two women characters who grab our attention like Poni, wife of Blacksmith, and Shanta Bai. They belong to the low class stratum of Indian hierarchical society. But they are shown as independent women's character that represents another brighter facet of women. Narayan says about the theme of the *Dark Room*:

This must have been the early testament of the women's lib movement. Man assigned her

(i.e. woman) 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. My novel is dealt with this philosophy in the background (*My Days*:119).

Coming to *Mr. Sampath*, there are varieties of female characters like “Srinivas wife, Sampath’s wife and Ravi’s mother but among them Shanti’s character stands in a different place representing the face of a modern women , who dares to pursue a career in order to achieve an independent identity in this patriarchal society. She has been a wife of a forest officer with whom she snaps off her nuptial ties due some differences. So she comes to Malgudi to seek a career in a film, leaving her only son in the custody of an unknown person in madras. This background reveals modernity of her outlook. Eventually She succeeds to get a role of heroine in a movie.

Shanti in *Mr Sampath* seems to carry Savitri’s movement a step ahead. Shanti raises her voice against the traditional life of a widow. So in the course of time she agrees to be the mistress of Sampath who promises her to give name and frame through his film. Like a modern woman she is very much aware of the fact how to use her seductive physical charm as a potent weapon so as to successful economically. Thus she succeeds in gaining Sampath’s proximity. She is successful in arousing jealousy in Ravi’s mind against Sampath. When she was taken to the hill resort at the top of Mempi hill to recover her mental equilibrium, though she promised to marry Sampath putting an end to the illegitimate relationship, she gives a shock to the reader by taking i startling decision that she will go back to Madras to take care of her only son. She abandons Sampath as a jilted, bewildered man. Her return to the real world of her domestic life reveals the fact that she had mistakenly imagined the unreal world, alluring world of film industry as a real one. The following line reiterates this fact: “I had a different idea of a film life.”

Unlike Savitri, her return cannot be considered as a failure from feministic point of view rather it gives her a crown of success. She decides to go back to madras to her son, not because she failed to achieve success in film line rather herself realization of the celluloid world compels her to resume her domestic duty. This very incident is very significant because by doing like this she projects herself as a modern woman who lives life o her own terms.

There is a striking similarity between the character of Shanta Bai of *Dark Room* and Shanti of *Mr Sampath*. Both of them are modern, ambitious unorthodox and daring women who leave their home and hearth in order to acquire economic independence. Both of them develop amorous relationship with their male colleagues. Despite this striking similarity their dissimilarity is very significant. Like Savitri ,Shanti goes back to her domestic life once again putting an end to the unlawful relationship with Sampath. But Shanta Bai ,on the contrary is very cunning, artful and selfish. She shows no realisation or repentance at any stage.

A close study of this novel revels that there are two categories of women in this whole plot. The first category which comprises of Srinivas wife, Sampath’s wife and Ravi’s mother belong to the class of orthodox, like to be confined in the four walls of their house who derive pleasure in family members' happiness , ignorant of their self identity. The other category to which Shanti belongs represent modern women who lives her life in her own terms, having complete freedom who stands shoulder to shoulder with men, leaving no stones unturned to seek economic independence.

Narayan's next novel *The Guide* (1956), was written after India's independence, when the wind of modernization had already started blowing. It drew attention for the heroine's strong resistance against the deeply-rooted patriarchic culture of India. Rosie demonstrates the courage to get out of unhappy marriage and marry a person (Raju) who she loves. However, she is disillusioned soon. Raju, the tourist guide, starts exploiting her, just as a money-making machine. She starts bewailing her lost freedom and deserts Raju in a fury, brokenhearted. But unlike Savitri of the Dark Room, Rosie does not return to Marco, her first husband. Instead she breaks the image of the Indian woman seen as a cowardly, dependent, and never-complaining wife, who is very eager to die for the 'cause' of the family. Narayan has, much like George Bernard Shaw, made her heroine a revolting female: she does not stoop to conquer but she takes the burden of life on her own shoulders. However, the novelist has left the question open to the readers whether Rosie is right or wrong. For an answer, let us have a close reading.

Rosie, the central protagonist goes a little further. Starting from her name to her marriage, everything is unconventional keeping in mind the long established orthodox tradition of Malgudi. Rosie portrays herself as a very modern educated woman who belongs to a "devdasi" family has undying love for dance. Her marriage with Marco is a curse in disguise. They are poles apart in their temperaments and in their likings and disliking. while Marco is a research scholar who prefers to spend time with nonliving historical monuments, on the other hand Rosie is very much eager to live life to the fullest. Marco never tries to understand the requirements of his young and beautiful wife. The matrimonial relation between Rosie and Marco gradually becomes bitter. On discovering the affair between Rosie and Raju, he abandoned Rosie.

With the help of Raju, Rosie begins the journey of her uninhibited self assertion, realizing the hidden facets of her personality and becomes a professional classical dancer. She earns huge amount of money which is again taken care by Raju. while Rosie was simple trustful and loving, Raju on the other hand turns out to be a deceptive. Unlike Savitri of Dark Room, Rosie definitely stands champion because after she came to know about Raju's deception, she did not go back either to Raju or Marco. Rather she decided to lead her life alone. By doing so, Rosie strongly comes out of the well defined confinement of women in Malgudi. She decided not to be a puppet in the hands of men, be it Marco or Raju. Raju's following statement uttered by Raju really stands true for Rosie:

".....Neither Marco nor I had had any place in her life, which had its own sustaining vitality and which she herself had underestimated."(p-223)

Through the character of Rosie Narayan makes us think that has position of women really changed in our society? Though Rosie was an M.A in Economics but does it uplift her status in the society?

In his portrayal of the self, narayan goes the farthest in "The Painter Of Signs". Unlike Rosie, who has a westernized name but she is still a tradition abiding woman deep inside of her heart, Dasie of "The Painter Of Signs", is a modern unwomanly woman who even dares to choose a very unconventional profession of family planning worker. She revolts against the long established girl review system which is very much prevalent in Hindu marital system of the society, when her prospective bridegroom visits her. Her strong sense of individuality peeps out in her following speech:

“And then they seated me like a doll and I had to wait for the arrival of the eminent personage with his parents.”(p-131)

So, She offends the bridegroom on his face and thus offends the entire orthodox system of the then prevailing system in the society. Since that day She evident when gives up the idea of having a family. Dasie's independent nature becomes more evident, when she was given proposal of marriage by Raman, she agreed to marry him under certain conditions, including the one that they would produce no child. But when it comes to the bare essentials of marriage and she is asked to move to Raman's house, she realizes that she has travelled on the forbidden path. Though she faces two horns of dilemma, she cleverly avoids the situation by leaving for a very long tour, giving a message to Raman that their temporary elation is over now.

Unlike Rosie who discovers herself gradually, Dasie on the other hand does so with finality after a short deviation from her mission. Dasie is entirely a different from other prominent female characters of Narayan's earlier novels. While other female characters are tradition bound milieu of the Indian middle class society in which they are engaged in a struggle to get over the taboos and restrictions imposed by social institutions such as parenthood and marriage which symbolise family bondage. But Dasie does not confront such dilemma. The author has presented Dasie in a newly emerging, regenerated and conscious woman of India who lives and thinks of a life beyond her home and hearth.

Though Narayan's women have not brought earth shaking changes neither in their household nor in the society, but we cannot ignore the fact that they have definitely brought positive changes in their surrounding and in the society in general. A critic has rightly pointed out:” Narayan's objective was to make his women conscious of their separate entities: they would think and believe like women, not like men. That's why we find in all of his novels women modern in thought and belief although the old women—mothers and grandmothers—observe the century-old customs of India with devotion. Hence, what importantly Narayan does is create new women out of the old fashioned, who are home makers but educated, intelligent, assertive and able to be self dependent and many of them are both home makers and professionals working in different fields from temple dancer to family planning worker. A critical reading of all novels of Narayan shows that he has started a movement toward the liberation of women that he 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 who is out either half way or full way of this orthodox, conservative society to assert the right to live with dignity and freedom.” We can conclude by saying that R. K. Narayan is not prejudiced against women.

We find two generations of women in his novels: the first generation consisting of mothers and grandmothers who are loyal to the old social system with all its tradition, customs, taboos and superstitions, and the second generation consisting of young women, who, unlike the old women, are educated and assertive. They speak out their voices and assert power whenever possible and necessary. What is significantly mention-worthy about Narayan's Women's Lib movement is that his process of liberating women is slow and gradual, not drastic and that he uplifts the condition of women within India's own tradition, not by following the western feminist trend.

As we see, R. K. Narayan tries to promote the status of women very consciously. His 'Women's Lib' movement, which actually begins in *The Dark Room*, comes to an apparent fulfillment in *The Painter of Signs*, encompassing a long journey from Savitri to Daisy via Shanti, Bharati and Rosie. The novelist laments the pitiable condition of women and this has perhaps led him to formulate the 'Women's Lib' movement. Narayan does not advocate the westernized life style of women and he cannot accept the atrocities done on women in the moribund Malgudi patriarchal society. Thus, Narayan favours freedom for his new women and wants to see them educated, active and independent. There is no ground to deny R.K. Narayan the status of a feminist writer.

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