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Sympathetic Portrayal of Women in the Novels of R. K. Narayan

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Abstract:

This paper purpose is to highlight R.K. Narayan's sympathetic portrayal of women in many facets of their life. This short monograph presents a critical analysis of women characters in R. K. Narayan's Novel. R.K. Narayan portrays with sympathy the sufferings of women and shows the readers how important are their roles both in family and in social life. A systematic analysis has been made in this paper to put R K Narayan's female protagonists in the right perspective highlighting his feminist concern. Starting from Savitri in *The Dark Room* (1938) to Bala in *Grandmother's Tale* (1992), Narayan's women characters grow stronger and show that the emergence of the 'New Woman' is not a myth or a utopia. In each of his novel, there is at least one female character who occupies an important place in the story and Rosie is such a female character in *The Guide*. She represents a modern woman who is educated and ambitions and strives to attain independent economic entity according to her own taste and talent although she has to pay a heavy price for it. R.K. Narayan portrays with sympathy the sufferings of women and shows the readers how important are their roles both in family and in social life. Through his simple yet elegant way of telling stories, R.K. Narayan creates in us awareness for the need to change and work for the uplift of women.

Keywords: Art, Culture, Hegemony, Identity, Revolution, Womanhood.

R.K Narayan basically holds traditional views about women, especially in the earlier novels. He also projects the approaches as depicted in Indian myths regarding the Indian ideal of

womanhood. Yet his adherence to these views is not an unquestioning one. His perception of women's life and feeling are sensitive and move out of conventional grooves. Here I propose to examine three of his novels, *The Dark Room*, *The Guide* and *The Painter of Signs* for a study of the women characters.

Narayan's concept of tradition is of Vedic and epic ages. With the passage of time and degradation of culture customs also underwent change and the status of women suffered in the process. New ideas emerged within the tradition which gave prominence and superiority to men and made women a servile partner, slave and an appendix of men. Narayan does not accept this view.

In the Vedic age women were equal partners of men, the marriageable age was not too low and no ritual was complete without the participation and cooperation of a wife. Women moved about freely without any purdah or social taboos to constrict their movement. Girls received their education at home with the help of teachers engaged by their parents, and also at ashrams (educational institution) like male students. They engaged learned men in intellectual debates and discussion. Mastery, Gargi and Lopmudra are classic examples of this. The position of women in India gradually deteriorated, as the golden Vedic ideals of independence and equality began to fade off through the passage of time. During the period of smites—the period of codification of social laws—women were bracketed with the sutras and were denied the right to study the Veda. The old privilege of choosing an independent life of celibacy and asceticism were denied and domestic life and marriage were the only course open to them. Manu enjoined that a woman was to be protected by her father during childhood, by her husband during young youth, and by her sons during old age. She was never fit for freedom. (Saeid, vol.1, no.11, 2011)

To keep the women deferential and restricted mythical ideals are quoted and propagated. In the Hindu society the ideal woman is personified as Sita, the heroine of the epic the Ramayana. She stands for wifely devotion in the minds of most Hindus regardless of region, caste, social class or education. This shows the popularity of the traditional ideal of womanhood. The story of the Ramayana is a continuing ideal. Integrated into Indian life through recitation, reading, listening and attending to annual dramatic performance of Ramlila all over India. Many metaphors associated with her name - "She is as pure as Sita" or "Sita is a second Sita" denote her chastity and uncomplaining self-sacrifice and present her as an ideal to be pursued by every woman. She

is an embodiment of all virtues, as March, 2012. “The ideal of womanhood incorporated by Sita is one of chastity, purity, gentle tenderness and a singular faithfulness which cannot be destroyed or even distributed by her husband’s rejection, slights or thoughtlessness” (kakar ,1988,p.66)

Sita ideal advocating perennial devotion of woman also implies that even a god- like, perfect and virtuous man like Rama can be mistrustful, jealous and weak. Similarly the other ideals of woman hood of Savitri, Damayanti and serve others advocate that women should be perfect whereas men may have their shortcomings the number of ideals for women is far greater than for men.

R.K. Narayan draws form a storehouse of myths and legends from Indian literature as his background and he experiments with them in terms of subtle creative configuration .The demands of creativity during a change in the historical perspective and the modern outlook makes it difficult to re-create the old characters. Narayan alludes to many myths occasionally mirroring certain ideals enshrined in the symbolism of myth. At this times he is not only natural to the myths, he portrays their futility in contemporary life situations, as we shall see in the case of Savitri in *The Dark Room*.

Savitri in *The Dark Room* symbolizes the Indian wife whose capacity for endurance is proverbial. Ramani, her husband, is a tyrant but has occasional flashes of good humour when he pampers her. Savitri tolerates everything with silent resignation, till his affair with Shanta Bai shocks her beyond grief. When Ramani refuses to be dictated by her in his affairs and treats her anger with utter indifference and disgust, she realizes the futility of her existence and walks out of the house. Her attempt to commit suicide and later live like an ascetic is a complete failure and she returns to her children and her comfortable home. She returns to her husband because she has nowhere else to go. She feels the impact of the curse of dependence and decides that her daughters must complete their education so that do not face the same predicament of living like parasites, “I am like a bamboo pole which cannot stand without a wall to support it” (*The Darkroom* 1938, p.139). Ramani keeps on eulogizing the traditional ideals. He has one set of norms for himself and wants another set of values to be followed by Savitri:

“Didn’t all the ancient epics and scriptures enjoin upon woman the strictest identification with her husband? He remembered all the heroines of the epics whose one dominant quality was

a blind stubborn following of their husbands, like the shadow following the substance. (*The Dark Room*, P.141)

He very conveniently forgets that he himself is farthest from those ideals. Savitri appears like Sita in her suffering and endurance, but since Ramani is not Rama, the mythical parallel ends here. The limitations and handicap felt by Savitri were never felt by Sita who said that she would precede her husband to make his path smoother. Meenakshi Mukherjee has equated Savitri with Sita, calling her a submissive sufferer. But this is a very simplistic interpretation of Sita's character. Valmiki's Sita is a co-sufferer and not a submissive sufferer and there is a great deal of difference between of love never diminishes although they have to suffer in isolation and separation. Sita is never abandoned in love. In a conflict between duty and love, Rama being an ideal king gives preference to his duty, though with a heavy heart (Chitra Benarjee, Vol.no.3,"12)

Savitri returns to her home with the realization that "A part of me is dead." (The Dark Room, 208) her helplessness is overpowering. Her husband, to her great relief, accepts her without any questions, as it is difficult to manage the children without him'. All because of the social stigma of a runaway wife. The relationship between Ramani and Savitri appears like a master- mind relationship rather than that of companionship. They are never close to each other, and Savitri is in continuous dread of his temper and waits for his good mood. She has no right over her own children and cannot protect them from his harsh treatment or take them with her when she leaves her house. (Sujit Kumar, 2012)

Contrasted with Savitri are the other woman characters in the novel: Gangu, her friend, and Ponni, her savior. Both of them are companions of their husbands, being on an equal footing, and sometimes also having an upper hand. They think that no husband is unmanageable in this world if he is handled properly.

Different from all these women and a rare character in Narayan's novels is Shanta Bai, the other woman in Ramani's life, the root of all the trouble. Her impeccable manner and dress and haughty demeanour sweep Ramani completely off his feet, as he has till now met only timid and docile women. She is the very contradiction of the values and virtues of Indian womanhood and tries to imitate the western ideals presented by Greta Garbo and laughing stock among his employees. Ramani, like many Indian men, applies double standards. He believes that India owns

its spiritual eminence because of its women and they should not ape the western women who live in a chaos of promiscuity and divorce, but appreciates Shanta Bai's western ways.

Narayan contrasts the two opposites, the traditional and the modern. Without passing any judgment, he leaves it to the reader to decide in favour of the mythical or the modern. He also presents the middle path and shows that a happy companionship can be achieved without being too mythical or too modern.

But in a later novel like *The Guide* Narayan's portrayal of women goes beyond a statement of the contradiction of the traditional. The name of the heroine, Rosie, denotes an unconventional, modern non-Hindu girl and one wonders what she is doing in Narayan's novel which endorses traditional values. Raju too is struck by her unusual name.

She is the daughter of a Devadasi – woman married to God-- and therefore she cannot marry a man. Rosie's mother wants her daughter to have a better future and therefore she educates her. Rosie has a Master's degree, but is unable to suppress her desire for dancing for which she has a natural talent. But the art of dancing is looked down upon by the respectable conventional people.

Rosie's education does not make it any easier for her to rise out of her background and to enter the world of social respectability. Marriage, when it comes in the shape of a proposal from Marco, is welcome. Marco is a man isolated from society living with his own lonely pursuits. He is practically insulated from the society and family constrictions. It is possible for him therefore to propose to women without a recognized social status and parental bondage. But as the novel progresses, the reader can see the conflict between self-expression and respectability, as also between men's desire and ambition for his work, and a women's lack of freedom in this direction. Marriage flings her into a role which leaves her with no room for her own interest. After the initial reveling in her new status is over, Rosie becomes restless with a man so much obsessed with the past. As the wife of Marco, she has no occupation to engage her time and attention. She is deprived of the companionship of her husband who is deeply engrossed in his archaeological studies and takes her for granted. She therefore reverts to her first love dance-much to the dislike of her husband. She cannot understand his reverence for sculptured figures on walls and caves while she is herself a living representation of the sculptured figures which she embodies in her dance.

The tension of the relationship between the husband and wife, Marco and Rosie in this case, which Narayan seems to portray is between the imaginary ideal of the past and its living tradition in the present. Rosie is accomplished enough to try the ancient musical notations on the wall and looks for ideas in *The Ramayana* and *The Mahabharata* but her husband dismisses these as monkey tricks. Dance is her life stream and when Marco tries to obstruct it, it changes its direction, and Raju is merely instrumental in enabling her to achieve her goal as he later admits: “At that time I was puffed up with the thought of how I had made her. I am now disposed to think that even Marco could not have superadded her permanently; sometime she was bound to break out and make her way”. Raju’s interest in her art inclines her towards him and their affair starts because he gives her the long needed sympathy.

She is filled with a sense of guilt whereas Marco has completely forgotten her. She keeps on saying “After all he is my husband. I have to respect him. I cannot leave him there”(The Guide,198) By all these statements Narayan perhaps is trying to win sympathy for Rosie in the orthodox Indian milieu where an illicit relation is disgraceful whatever may be the circumstances. She tries her best to regain Marco’s sympathy and follows him like a dog but when all her efforts fail to win him over she turns to Raju to provide the stimulant to her dormant talent.

Her art has a sublimity about it which elevates her; Raju too admits being freed from any carnal thoughts while watching her. While dancing Rosie appears like Nataraja, the god of dance, or Saraswati, the Goddess of Learning, and beyond the reach of an ordinary mortal. She is not concerned with the money she makes or with fame and becomes disgusted with Raju for the commercialization of her art.

In Rosie, Narayan has created a character that is neither like Sita nor like Savitri, the eternal ideals of womanhood. The elevating quality of her above the routine level of mortals. Her art gives her individuality and distinction which cannot be hidden for long. As Raju later realizes: “Neither Marco nor I had any place in her life, which she herself had underestimated all along. (The Guide, 199).

Raju’s mother tries to limit her by narrating to her the mythical ideals and how these women, through their perseverance and endurance, won over their husbands. But all these ideals are for common women; Rosie herself is capable of creating a myth and halo around her. Her

devotion to her husband is not different from any ideal Hindu wife's, yet she is not a prototype figure.

Rosie is a new and novel experiment in tradition and not a break-off from it. Narayan tries to draw reader's sympathy for Rosie and keeps her free from any ironic or adverse comment. She loses her chastity but Narayan preserves her form inner taint. Her art gives her certain autonomy and independence. This constitutes her basic personality and marginalizes her role as Marco's wife and her relation with Raju. She is presented as women who can rise above the humdrum and has strength to be true to her. In her the ideals are being redefined. Social castigation is not necessarily justified. Nor is it the end of the world.

In the conservative and conventional milieu of Malgudi comes Daisy, a very contradiction of the traditional Sita and Savitri ideal. The very name Daisy is non-denominational and Raman in the painter of signs is tempted to ask: "Daisy who?" There is no surname or any other indication of her caste and background. She is educated, single, independence and lives all alone, something unthinkable in the malgudain context where women do not step outside the four walls of the house, unescorted. She looks down upon the conventional roles allotted to Indian women of wife, mother and sister. She evolves new cultural pattern for herself. points out; "In her story we see how what was once a wholly patriarchal culture begins to evolve, fragmentarily, sometimes haltingly, sometimes convulsively but always irreversibly into a masculinity feminist culture." (Shanta Krishnaswamy, 1990). She usher's in a rapid social change in which Raman's authority is diminished and her responsibility increases. She is very different from a conventional woman. She is slender and looks very India and traditionally dressed up in sari, in spite of a western name. She dispenses with her work briskly and resolutely. She fits in every kind of surrounding, be in an office, or Raman's home, patiently explaining her work and its purpose. She is a fanatic for her cause and cannot tolerate anything contrary to it. Raman compares her to queen who would saw off the organ of generation to stop the population growth. In her campaign she follows a steel- framed itinerary travelling by all available mean and many a times on foot with all her luggage strapped to her back. She becomes grim and non- talkative when population problems oppress her mind and smiles when she forgets her mission.

Population growth is taken by Daisy as a personal defeat and she never pats a child because she feels “you had no business to arrive—you lengthen the queues that are all. She tries to keep herself as plain as possible, wearing a sari of the drabest color, never using any powder or make-up and an indifferent hair- style, because she wants to be viewed as a worker and not an object of desire. She has spent her childhood in a very large joint family. Something quite common in Indian families and people for privacy and individuality, as these rarely exist in the Indian context. She disdains the meek transference of girls from one family to the other and therefore spurns her marriage proposal. Routine life is not for her and she cannot merge her personality in mundane household tasks as she tells Raman, “Married life is not me. I have thought it over. It frightens me.” (The Painter of Signs, 139).

To Raman she appears like Mohini, a temptress, ready to deflect people from their path. She advocates radical feminism and rejects the male order. Raman submits endlessly and is reduced to a jelly. She seems to wear the pants all the time. She does away with the entire sacred and social obligation like marriage and motherhood. Raman feels guilty in having a relationship without sanctifying it through a marriage rite, even the nominal Gandharava style would do, but Daisy does not believe in ceremonies. She finds motherhood a severe limitation and opts for a childless existence whereas a traditional woman is valued mainly by her fecundity, her capacity to bear sons. The sole concern of her life is social service, and marriage does not fit in this scheme. So she leaves Raman to pursue her ideals.

The role models in the novel seem to be reversed. Raman is ready to do the household chores and wait for her moods to be friendly. Like the Indian women worshipping her husband he is ready to worship her and follow her: “I’ll in no way interfere with you, live as you live, in the open or in a hut, walk barefoot in the forest paths, seek nothing, demand nothing, I will not mind any hardship if I can be with you” It looks like Sita imploring Rama to allow her to accompany him but here Daisy is more hardhearted than Rama and forsakes him. Raman’s comparison of their relationship with the myth of Shantanu and Ganga is also an apt one. Shantanu was a king of Hastinapur and one day while hunting in a forest near Ganges sees a beautiful damsel, Ganges herself. He wants to marry her and she agrees on the condition that he will never question her. whenever she gives birth to a child she throws it in the Ganges, and when Shantanu questions her she leaves him. Daisy too refused to have any children, and if by

mischance one is born, she plans to give it for adoption and .Raman is in no way to object or modify this. Like Ganges, Daisy too comes from an unknown destination and then suddenly leaves for an ambiguous place.

Daisy is a unique creation of R.K. Narayan .Even the talented rosier takes a second place because she needs a man's support and encouragement to discover the immense possibilities in her. The path that she has chosen is very difficult and self – sacrificing, but for her the plight of millions is more important than opting for personal comforts. She could have easily chosen to be like the other women but rejects a role in a decaying social system. Just like her name, Daisy, which is not limited by any caste or creed, she does not wish to be bound by a person or a family. Her missionary zeal creates certain oddities in her demeanors in the eyes of the society dominated by the males. She is incorrigibly committed to what she conceives her mission in life she is a working women with a mission.

Tradition women view Rosie and Daisy as some evil, spirits, Rosie is termed as a snake women by Raju's mother and Daisy is called a siren by Raman's aunt and both are held responsible for their children's undoing. These women are negatively described in myth. They are supposed to lure men to their love, but Narayan keeps them free from any active responsibility. On the other hand their lovers treat them as angels to be worshipped. In the case of Raman in *The painter of signs*: "He was struck by the elegance of her form and features, suddenly saw her as an abstraction-perhaps a goddess to be worshipped, not to be disturbed and define with coarse finger." Similarly Raju in *The guide* sees Rosie as a vision and is struck by her magnificence: " I could honesty declare that while I watched her perform, my mind was free, free, for once, from all carnal thoughts; I viewed her as a pure abstraction." They both have western names although they come from Hindu back-ground and look very traditions .Raju and Raman are surprised by their names at the same time explaining that there was nothing in their dress or demeanors to suggest any westernization.

All the modern women in these novels, like Rosie, daisy and Shanta Bai, disregard the marital bond and have their affairs without sanctifying them. They dismiss custom as unnecessary and worthless whereas tradition people view it as the gravest possible sin which no women in malgudi can commit. Another peculiarity about these women is that none of them belongs to malgudi. Perhaps the soil of malgudi cannot produce such women. They all come

from some other place and after rocking it by their activities and becoming the talk of the town leave malgudi. They are neither ordinary women, nor the part of malgudian society but they descent from some other land and Narayan color them with an aura of other worldliness and mythically.

In these characters the myths of the past seem to peep in , but at a close look the reader suddenly wakes up to find that these is a designed departure from the representation of myths.

Narayan, while portraying these characters, is aware of the fact that the eternal ideals of Indian womanhood are very much alive even today and also the unpractical of following them in today's world. The women of India are standing at the cross-roads in the modern age. The impact of western ideas and ideals on our country and society has changed our ideals to a great extent. Women in India face the dilemma of the choice between the old and the new, eastern traditionalism and western Modernism. The ancient ideals of spiritualism and homebound life seem to be out of date. Yet the eternal ideal has remained undefiled in spite of external appearances to the contrary. Narayan depicts this clash and tension between the myth of the past and reality of today.

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