

IMPACT FACTOR: 7.86

ISSN0976-8165

THE CRITERION

AN INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL IN ENGLISH

13 Years of Open Access

Vol. 13 Issue-IV AUGUST 2022

Bi-monthly Peer-Reviewed e-Journal

DR. VISHWANATH BITE

Editor-In-Chief

DR. MADHURI BITE

Managing Editor

www.the-criterion.com

AboutUs: <http://www.the-criterion.com/about/>

Archive: <http://www.the-criterion.com/archive/>

ContactUs: <http://www.the-criterion.com/contact/>

EditorialBoard: <http://www.the-criterion.com/editorial-board/>

Submission: <http://www.the-criterion.com/submission/>

FAQ: <http://www.the-criterion.com/fa/>



ISSN 2278-9529

Galaxy: International Multidisciplinary Research Journal
www.galaxyimrj.com

Analyzing Gender Roles and Family Issues in R. K. Narayan's *The Dark Room*

Suresh Kumar
Assistant Professor,
Department of English,
Govt. College Indora,
Kangra, Himachal Pradesh, India.

Article History: Submitted-31/07/2022, Revised-26/08/2022, Accepted-27/08/2022, Published-31/08/2022.

Abstract:

Examining the status of women in the family, husband-wife relationships governed by the dominating ideology like patriarchy, stereotyping the roles of females in society and gender as construction of prevalent socio-cultural norms are the objectives of this paper. Besides, the marginalizations of women in their homes by suppressing their voices, and the infidelity of men whereas expecting loyalty from their female counterparts are the chief concerns of the paper while portraying British India in the third decade of the twentieth century.

Keywords: Gender roles, family issues, patriarchy, marginalization, suppression, socio-cultural norms.

R.K. Narayan (1906-2001) is considered one of the most significant Indian authors writing in English along with Raja Rao and Mulk Raj Anand, primarily known for his fictional setting in the town of Malgudi. In *The Dark Room* (1938), the novelist acquaints the readers with Ramani, a hedonist, dominating and patriarchal figure who suppresses the individuality of his wife, Savitri, the central character of the novel, either by his authoritative attitude or by ignoring her emotionally in advertent or inadvertent ways during 1930s British India.

Gender studies examine how gender is less determined by nature than it is by culture (Guerin 236) Ross C. Murfin considers gender as a construct of culture, language and its institutions (Murfin 339). Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary defines gender as the fact of being male or female, especially when considered with references to social and cultural

differences, not differences in biology: issues of class, race and gender or traditional concepts of gender, gender differences or gender roles (644).

While distinguishing sex from gender, the feminists assert that sex is biological but the values and meanings associated with the female and male body are socially ascribed which is gender. Sex is nature and gender is about social and culture. 'Female' and 'male' refer to their biological characteristics whereas 'feminine' and 'masculine' refer to the social and cultural values assigned to them. Taking the simple biological fact that women are biologically capable of bearing children. The statement is indisputable. Looking at the values and meaning associated with the act of childbearing: motherhood is a symbol of a true female, no woman is complete unless she bears children, and nurturing a child is the woman's natural job. Feminists point out that none of these three is biological rather they are social values assigned to biological acts. This simply means that women's biology and biological functions are determined, evaluated, and governed not merely by biology but by the social and cultural values attributed to them. This attribution of values constitutes gender. In other words, gender is a social construction, whereby meanings are allotted to the acts like birth, sex, intercourse, homosexuality, heterosexuality, nurture etc. The woman is made to accept the dominating idea that she is born to be a mother, a device for procreation and nurture. Lower wages for women are justified by convincing they a woman is less efficient and weaker than a man (Nayar 89-90)

Regarding conditioning and socialization, Toril Moi differentiates between the terms 'feminist', 'female' and 'feminine'. She explains that the first is a political position, the second is a matter of biology and the third is a set of culturally defined traits or characteristics (Bary 117).

Simone de Beauvoir believes that "one is not born, but rather becomes a woman...It is civilization as a whole culture that produces this creature...which is described as feminine" (Abrams 101). Through this cultural process in course of time:

the masculine in our culture is widely identified or recognized as active, dominating, adventurous, rational, and creative; the feminine by systematic binaries to such traits as passive, acquiescent, timid, emotional and conventional. These gender roles have been used very successfully to justify inequalities, which still occur today, such as excluding

women from equal access to leadership and decision-making positions in the family as well as in politics, academia, and the corporate world. (Tyson 85)

In the opening of the novel, the novelist acquaints the readers with gender roles in society through the dialogues of Ramani and Savitri over their son, Babu's sudden illness immediately before going to school. As Savitri comes to know about Babu's fever, she tells Babu to lie down in the bed to rest, but Ramani is adamant about not missing school at any cost and when he knows about Savitri's intentions as she argues in favour of fever, Ramani shouts, "No, he hasn't. Go and 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" (1). Ramani does not give any space to his wife's advice whatever he decides; he imposes and sends feverish Babu to the school. This reveals Ramani's mindset that men are good decision makers than women.

The novelist shows how society programmes and trains individuals to inculcate particular roles as per their sexes. Citing an example from Ramani's family, the novelist says that towards Navratri the family arranges an exhibition of different kinds of toys, and when Babu shows his willingness to prepare the platform for the dolls, his sisters jeer, "Are you a girl to take a hand in the doll business? Go and play cricket. You are a man" (30) Setting the novel in 1930s Malgudi, Narayan simplifies that how the minds of the children are trained to behave in particular ways as expected by the society. Games and sports have to have opted as prescribed the stereotypical socio-cultural norms. When Babu's father finds him engaged in the doll's arrangement, Ramani shouts, "Who asked you to go near the dolls' business? Are you a girl? Tell me, are you a girl?" (38). Losing his control, Ramani slaps Babu who cries not to beat him. In the meantime, Savitri intervenes to save her son but Ramani terms her involvement as a sentimental show.

Further, Narayan reveals that male domination remains prevalent in family matters of even the economically lowest class of society. After Babu's beating by his father and arguments between his parents, the situation compels the servant and the cook of the house to share their own experiences over the issue. Ranga believes that it is not a wife's business to interfere when the father is dealing with the son, "It is a bad habit" (40), thus, supporting Ramani. The cook says, "Only once has my wife tried to interfere, then I nearly broke her bones. She has learnt to leave me alone now. Women must be taught their place" (41). From their life-long experiences,

the novelist presents that men consider themselves rational whereas considering women irrational and dominantly suppress female voices.

Thereafter, R.K. Narayan acquaints the readers with women's internalization of gender biases in society through the characters of Janamma and Gangu, Savitri's friends. After having arguments with Ramani to protect Babu, Savitri falls ill, her daughters call Janamma who consoles her. When Savitri says that there was no quarrel as she uttered not a single word, Janamma says, "That makes it worse. You should either let your words out or feel that everything your husband does is right. As for me I never opposed my husband or argued with him at any time in my life. I might have occasionally suggested an alternative, but nothing more. What he does is right. It is a wife's duty to feel so" (46). She counts instances of wives' tolerance: her grandmother lived happily with her husband who had three concubines; her aunt used to get beaten by her husband every day for fifty years but never uttered a single word in protest; her mother's friend prepared herself to jump into the well as directed by husband. On listening to these narrations, Savitri starts feeling lighter.

The novelist reveals the psychological and emotional agony of women resulting from the suppression of their individuality by their male counterparts through the character of Savitri. Over time, indifference goes on building in Savitri's relationship with her husband as he gives her no rights in decision-making and turns domineering as time passes. Ramani considers himself a sacrosanct figure of the family as he is the bread runner of the family in Englandia Insurance Company. He gets infatuated with Shanta Bai, a probationary officer in his company. When miscommunication with her husband increases and she comes to know about his affair, she becomes unwell and turns depressed while undergoing mental agony. She envisions numerous flashbacks of the past and attempts to anticipate the future. She decides to end her life by drowning in the water:

She rose and stepped down. There was still one step, the very last submerged underwater, very slippery with moss; and then one felt the sand under one's feet; water reached up to one's hips, and as one went further down, to one's breasts; and now the running water tripped up one's legs from behind. She stood in the water and prayed to her God on the Hill to protect the children... "In Yama's world the cauldron must be ready for me for the sin of talking back to a husband and disobeying him, but what could I do? What could I

do... no, no, I cannot die. I must go back home. I won't, I won't." The last sensation that she felt was a sharp sting as the water shot up her nostrils, and something took hold of her feet and toppled her over. (94)

Even after offering her body to the river, Savitri undergoes emotional crises when she thinks of her children and the role of a wife in a stereotypical Indian society and she starts finding herself faulty for running away from her responsibilities by committing suicide which results in 'to be or not to be state of mind. Depression, suppression, and alienation keep overpowering her over spells of time. Finally, she gets swept by the river flow.

Thereafter, the novelist unfolds a woman's self-respecting, self-esteeming shade of personality through the character of the protagonist, Savitri. Poni, Mari's wife doesn't leave Savitri alone after Mari saves her from the river. Though Savitri is adamant about staying alone even under the open sky, Ponni somehow convinces her to stay in their cottage. Savitri does not accept the food and shelter she has earned with her labour. When Ponni insists, Savitri says, "It is a foolish thing to say, if you don't want me to starve, give me some work. I can cook, scrub, and sew. I know a little gardening too. I had a beautiful garden once. I can look after the children. Have you no children?" (122). After observing her intentions Ponni convinces Mari to find some suitable work for Savitri. Mari enquires every home but gets no positive response. Finally, he gets a nod from the old priest of the village temple after numerous promises like agreeing to repair the priest's old umbrella, locks, trunks etc. After reaching home when the couple discusses whether the work is suitable for Savitri, she interrupts, "Any work which will keep my life in my body, though why it should I can't say, is suitable for me. I don't want to depend on anyone, hereafter for the miserable handful of food, I need every day" (131).

The most significant issue Narayan has projected in the novel is the vividly portrayed distinction between 'Motherhood' and 'Fatherhood'. After Savitri disappears from the home, Ramani lies before the children that she has gone to see her ill father (112) When Babu asks why she left crying at the midnight, Ramani finds unable to convince him and just lies. On the other hand, spending time with children, and attempting to search for his wife Ramani visits Shanta Bai and spends time with her showing romantic advances toward her. Whereas before stepping into the river Savitri envisions countless images of her children praying before God on the hilltop to protect them after her suicide. As she is saved somehow and taken to a safer place by the Mari

couple, she consistently remains worried about her children. After her day of work in the temple, lying on the rough floor, beside the hot flickering lamp in the darkly lit shanty she finds herself in a void-like state and she cried, "I must see Babu, I must see Sumati, and I must see Kamala. Oh!" (146). Her sobs continued, "A wretched fate wouldn't let me drown the first time. I cannot go near the water again. This is defeat. I accept it. I am no good for this fight. I am a bamboo pole... Perhaps Sumati and Kamala have not had their hair combed for ages now" (146) Next the morning Savitri hands over the keys of the shanty to the priest and tells him that she is leaving for her home as she cannot live without her children. One can easily see that it is a mother who accepts defeat when she thinks about her children. She improvises her well-determined decision of suicide and does not return to that home just for the sake of her children. On the other hand, Ramani, the father even does not spare time for his children. He can manage special time for Shanta Bai, but not for his children.

The Darkroom in the novel stands for a chamber or room in the home where Savitri prefers to retire whenever her heart is heavy with suffering, and agony or arguments with Ramani. Savitri suffers mainly because of the dominating nature of Ramani as he never intends to listen to the suggestions, and advice of his wife. When Ramani terms Savitri's involvement to save Babu as the sentimental show from getting beaten for indulging in the arrangement of dolls, the novelist writes, "When he was gone, Savitri rose, went to the darkroom next to the store, and threw herself on the floor. Later the cook tracked her down there and requested her to take her food, but she refused. The children came to her one by one and tried to coax her. She turned her face to the wall and shut her eyes" (39). The darkroom becomes the only companion of Savitri in her loneliness. She heals with time after having lost in her thoughts about her fate. The entire house turns gloomy in her absence.

The above analysis shows that socio-cultural norms play a crucial role in shaping the mentality and behaviours of people in any society. The society projected in the novel is predominantly patriarchal; hence more importance and liberties have been sanctioned to the males as Ramani never apologizes to Savitri when she arrives home after her disappearance. One sees how the cook and the servant express themselves more decisive and rational than their wives over family issues. Gangu and Janamma, Savitri's friends also believe that women should not speak against their husband's will. The role of nurturing children has been associated with

women. Extramarital affairs of men like Ramani in this context are open secrets, therefore, are not interrogated but it is not the case with women. In other words, women's voices are suppressed in a male-chauvinistic setup under the pretext of gender roles.

Works Cited:

Abrams, M. H., and Geoffrey Galt Harpham. *A Glossary of Literary Terms*. Cengage Learning India Private Limited, 2018.

Guerin, Wilfred L. et.al. *A Handbook of Critical Approaches to Literature*. Oxford University Press, 2005.

Murfin, Ross C. "What is Feminist Criticism?" *In Frankenstein by Mary Shelley*. Ed. Johana M. Smith. 2nd ed. Bedford/St. Martin's, 2000.

Narayan, R.K. *The Dark Room*. Indian Thought Publication, 2019.

Nayar, Pramod K. *Contemporary Literary and Cultural Theory*. Dorling Kindersley (India) Pvt. Ltd, 2010.

Turnbull, Joanna, et al., editors. *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary*. Oxford University Press, 2010.

Tyson, Louis. *Critical Theory Today*. Routledge, 2006.