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Family, Freedom and Feminism: Re-reading R. K. Narayan's The Dark Room

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Abstract

R. K. Narayan's men and women who populate Malgudi, represent the indigenous and appropriated cultures in India. Almost every major character is seen to be engaged in a quest for indigenous roots and identity and in this way, he/she discovers a distinctive space in the social milieu of Malgudi which as a credible literary universe, reveals the essence of India and of human experience. But apart from being simple chronicles of Indian life and sensibility (as the writer proudly bears the mantle of a 'storyteller'), Narayan's novels in particular reserve the potentials for critical analyses in the praxis of attitudes and inferences gained from the postmodern and postcolonial fields of study. In the novel The Dark Room for example, Narayan consciously explores the question of Women's Liberation and its viability in the context of Indian customs and tradition that are sustained over the ages by the hegemonic forces of patriarchy. In the novel, every stratum of protagonist Savitri's experience – her quest for an authentic space within her designated role[s] as a mother and wife, -- frets in the blind alley of perpetual indifference and indignity (induced by patriarchy) that turns her world as a woman as it were, into a blighted, claustrophobic sphere, very much like the 'dark room' in her house. The present study thoroughly charts Savitri's courageous struggle that pathetically ending up in despair though, nevertheless testifies to Narayan's commitment as a realist fiction writer.

Key words: Sensibility, Patriarchy, Tradition, Hegemonic, Woman

INTRODUCTION

With heads bowed and patience wearied

Why should we keep awake at road side;

Expecting some day as a gift from destiny,

To see our fervent hopes come to reality?

[Tagore's Sobola (The Vocal), from Mahuya. lines 4-7, trans.]

Over the years, R. K. Narayan has been regarded as a significant story-teller who, gifted with a genial comic sense, presents a calm and quiet picture of Indian life in his fictional locale 'Malgudi', and the quality of Malgudi life allegedly seems to be resistant to contemporary changes and complexities of present-day life. Interestingly, recent literary and cultural studies have offered some complex theories and insights that help to locate certain elements of conscious artistry in Narayan's novels. The increasing awareness of the complexities of Narayan's fictional art is suggested by P.S. Sundaram who affirms that a novel by Narayan is

'not done when it is done' and that 'the feeling (after reading a novel by Narayan) is nearly always of a puzzle that seems to admit more than one solution.'[1] For a careful reader, such elements of complexity in Narayan's fictional art can be located with the help of certain concepts and principles gained from post-modern and postcolonial fields of literary studies. The present article seeks to appraise Narayan's deliberate treatment of the Women's question in terms of the protagonist's search for identity in his third novel The Dark Room (1938).

In fact, the treatment of an individual character, in the context of his/her development, forms the core of Narayan's 'writerly' concern as he once confessed to William Walsh in an oft-quoted B.B.C interview in 1968:

My main concern is with human character - a central human character from whose point of view the world is seen, and who tries to get over a difficult situation or succumbs to it or fights it in his own setting.[2]

But beneath the façade of Narayan's simplistic and unpretentious stand as a writer; his apparently naïve and unproblematising treatment of the individual and the calm and quiet rhythm of [South] Indian life and tradition as perceived in the comic-ironic vision of the writer in the fictional locale called Malgudi, it's not difficult to locate an element of a deliberate craftsmanship in the writer. This becomes manifest in the projection of a character's negotiation of two alternate possibilities as suggested in the expressions cited above – 'either resolves it' and 'or lives with it.' This note of ambivalence points to a problematic of space, an alterity of subject-position in a character's struggle for the acquisition of an autonomous identity. Given the context, it is worthwhile now to discuss Narayan's The Dark Room as a significant case-study.

THE DARK ROOM: A DIFFERENT NOTE FROM NARAYAN'S COMIC GENIUS

In The Dark Room, Narayan for the first time in his writing career, admittedly makes a conscious fictional attempt to explore a serious issue -- the inexorable plight of Hindu women (especially the married ones) in the traditional patriarchal structure of Indian society. Narayan writes in his autobiography My Days about the genesis of the novel:

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 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. My novel dealt with her, with this Philosophy broadly in the background. (My Days.p.119)

In the novel, one sees that Savitri leaves her household in protest against her promiscuous, bullying husband who, being a perfect patriarch, jealously guards the children as exclusively his own 'property.' But she soon realises that for a traditional Hindu wife like her, it is impossible to live without either the company of children or the familiar household, which implying an inferiorisation of her status though, provides a modicum of security. Savitri's ignoble (?) return to her family towards the end of the novel apparently underscores a tame compromise with system and the writer also does not offer in categorical terms any viable

alternative here. In spite of making a spirited start, Savitri's search for identity, therefore, apparently seems to be aborted in medias res. Yet what is interesting to note is that, Narayan's treatment of the Women's question in the character of Savitri can be viewed as a strategic resistance to the Western bias for homogenising Women's identity within prevailing conceptual constructs of feminism that often tend to repudiate the vital socio-cultural realities typical of the Indian context. The present analysis seeks to trace in the writer's treatment of the character a certain problematic that theoretically refutes any sort of stereotyping or critical pigeon-holding as suggested above.

Laxmi Holmstorm in the essay "Women as Markers of Social Change", has rightly observed that the character of Savitri "... is 'placed' carefully in the book, by a number of minor portraits of women, who, by contrasting with her in various ways, provide the reader with a reasonably complete picture of women ‘in an orthodox milieu of Indian society,' in the later 1930s" (p.103)[3]. At the outset, it becomes quite obvious that Savitri is a character with all familiar emotions and responses that become an average housewife in the Indian society. She is religious and does her everything to serve her husband and children. Narayan has described the religious activities of Savitri earlier in the novel: "She went to the worshipping-room, lighted the wicks and incense, threw on the images on the wooden pedestal handfuls of hibiscuses, jasmine and nerium, and muttered all the sacred chants she had learnt from her mother years ago" (p.4-5). The traditional aspect in Savitri can further be traced in the fact that she attends her husband's call without the slightest delay and cannot think of taking her dinner before her husband Ramani has taken it. Sometimes even with reluctance, she feels obliged, as any traditional Hindu wife normally does, to obey her husband's sudden and hasty decisions as for example, going to the evening show of a cinema without prior preparations, leaving the children at home.

SAVITRI IN HER TRADITION

Savitri's basic commitment to tradition is also traceable in her typical distinction from her friend Gangu who objectifies all the aspirations and superficial attributes that an average Hindu housewife normally dissociates from: "It was her ambition to become a film star, though she lacked any striking figure or features or acting ability[...] she hoped to be sent someday as Malgudi delegate to the All India Women's Conference; to be elected to various municipal and legislative bodies; and to become a Congress leader. She spent her days preparing for the fulfilment of one ambition or another" (p.18).

It is obvious that in the character of Gangu, Narayan perhaps presents the skin-deep aspect of feminism which, bereft of any intellectual perception, simply lives even within the constraints of religious and social morality, on a sterile and vainly ambitious zest for self-assertion in [un]conscious repugnance of patriarchy. Savitri finds how Gangu has 'absolutely tethered up her poor man'(p.6). On the other hand Janamma, the other friend of Savitri, represents the tame, docile sort of a housewife who not only exists within the designated norms without grudge, but also has an unconditioned agreement with the ways of her husband: "...What he does is right. It is a wife's duty to feel so" (p.59). Savitri's preference of Janamma to Gangu is a pointer to her instinctive bias for a traditional entity.

However, it is purely the hegemonic force of patriarchy (symbolised by Ramani) which instead of approving any sort of individuality to the 'other sex' in the institutions of marriage and family, simply perpetuates chauvinistic canons of social and sexual morality, which in the present context trammel up the pattern of Savitri's existence and turns her into a rebel. In day-to-day life, Ramani is a perfect critic of whatever Savitri does and thinks. Though Ramani's infatuation for Shantabai finally leads Savitri to her frustrated quest for independence beyond the orbit of familial existence, the note of conjugal disharmony between Ramani and Savitri, which is aggravated by the husband's lack of minimum tolerance for his wife's opinion/independent identity, is unmistakable from the opening pages of the novel. For example, one day when with a mother's feelings, Savitri urges her son Babu to keep away from school for having a bad headache; she pathetically sees how Ramani snubs her with the information that 'the training of a grown-up boy' is 'none of a woman's business', and forces the boy to leave for school in such a crude and unfeeling manner that he seems to believe that his act demonstrates better than his wife's, a true insight into child psychology.

This incident, however little in itself, clarifies Savitri's predicament at the very beginning and enlists the readers' sympathy for Savitri whose concern and sacrifice for the family fail to elicit the least recognition from her husband. Savitri's helplessness, her lack of the power to assert herself for a genuine cause even at her middle age, stands for the real 'dark room' in the novel - the space of unmitigated suffering, neglect and torment for a traditional housewife like her. Narayan here aptly records the inner turmoil in Savitri: "How impotent she was, she thought; she had not the slightest power to do anything at home, and that after fifteen years of married life"(p.6). Savitri's pathetic realisation that 'she ought to have asserted herself a little more at the beginning of her married life and then all would have been well', is only a comic illusion in the eyes of the readers who may easily identify Ramani with the uncompromising and unrelenting force of patriarchy that relegates the identity of women to a condition of perpetual dependence and sacrifice.

Yet it is noticeable that till the disclosure of Ramani's adultery with Shantabai, Savitri's character manages to retain a balance between an allegiance to her usual dharma of a housewife even at the constant loss of dignity on the one hand, and her occasional, uncontrollable urge for self-assertion on the other. It is Ramani's maltreatment of his son Babu for a petty offence before the Navaratri festival that prompts Savitri for the first time in the novel to retire to the dark room in the house in protest and there, she lies down with her face turned to the wall and refuses food. Her reaction, an anguished expression of a non-violent form of protest though, is only unproductive 'crude sulking' in the eyes of Ramani and he demonstrates "his calm indifference by humming a little song, whistling loudly and talking to his daughters, whom he saw in the hall sitting near the pavilion" (p.53). Clearly, Ramani's reaction throws light on the common attitude of male chauvinism that neither considers women as an indispensable lot nor attaches worth to their sentiments. But if it is the inefficacy of her form of protest that makes Savitri ultimately come out of her self-chosen confinement, it is nonetheless the practical wisdom of her friend Janamma and her narratives of tolerant housewives that practically help Savitri to re-discover the role of a mother or a wife in maintaining the health and well-being of the family. One finds that she hates herself

for her 'selfish gloom' on such an auspicious occasion and comes out of the dark room to celebrate Navaratri with the family.

This sort of resilience in Savitri is also marked in her initial reaction to the rumour of her husband's connection with a woman. Before she takes a resolute stand in protest when Ramani's promiscuity is confirmed, the instinctive perception of the Patideva myth in the collective consciousness of the Indian Women's psyche (that traditionally recommends total subordination of wives to the husbands viewed as manifestations of God) as if comes to be articulated in Savitri's consolatory thoughts: "How well he looked in his silk suit! It was sheer envy that must have made Gangu and the rest talk scandal about him, they with their husbands all crooked and paunchy" (p.97). Even when she is made sure of Ramani's relation with Shantabai, it is noticeable that her immediate reaction is not of anger, but of self-pity typical of a traditional housewife who is not prepared to tolerate even in her dream, the share of her husband's love. As she thinks: "Perhaps she is very good-looking [...]. Let me admit my complexion has become rather sooty [...]. I am getting careless about my hair; it's hardly his fault if he can't like my appearance very much" (p.104).

REBELLION & RESUBMERGENCE

But soon the stage arrives when Savitri has to assert herself but Ramani refuses to be dictated. In a climactic scene one night, when Ramani realising her moods, tries to pacify Savitri with a deliberate pretence and take her to bed, Savitri vents out the trauma of gender-discrimination that women have borne as their cross through generations at the hand of male chauvinism: " 'I'm a human being,' she said through her heavy breathing. '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' " (p.110). Savitri's impetuous plea for Ramani's sanity ('give up this harlot') receives a snobbish refusal from Ramani and Savitri in a desperate bid tries to leave the household with her children though in no time she learns that for Ramani, Savitri has no right over her children and that 'a woman' as a sentient individual 'owns nothing' in the family governed by a patriarch who even legitimises promiscuity as a matter of right. Finding it impossible to stay at her tainted home, Savitri leaves her family preferring to 'starve and die in the open, under the sky, a roof for which women 'need be obliged to no man' (p.113).

As she reaches river Sarayu and sits on the river step, Savitri recollects her unrequited sacrifice in her role as a wife and mother in her husband's house but at the same time she diagnoses the lack of education and economic identity as the roots of her present plight. It is in the point of economic worth that Savitri's sensibilities ironically link her condition with that of Shantabai. Shantabai can be viewed, as G. P. Baghmar thinks, as the traditional archetype of Mohini, the mythical enchantress like Surpanakha of the Ramayana, who always lays snares for men to lead them astray. Nevertheless, such manifestations of Mohini (in the epics and myth) too, have to depend on Man to fulfil their roles. Leave alone the question of sexual morality, a part of a housewife's dharma in the Indian context, the basic question of dependence/economic insecurity remains, in Savitri's enlightened vision, in the existence of every woman, whether she is a housewife or a prostitute: "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" (p.120). Savitri's decision of plunging into the river is preceded by the conviction that 'No one who couldn't live by herself had a right to exist' and the question of returning back to her family seemed to her an impossibility, an abject surrender to an unedifying dependence: "[...] if I go back home, I shall be living on my husband's earnings, and later on Babu. What can I do by myself"? (p.119).

Theoretically speaking, Savitri's unsuccessful attempt of suicide, far from its moral implications, is a radical step to self-assertion through self-immolation and therefore a concrete proof of the 'growth' in Savitri's character which the narrator has deliberately chosen as the mouthpiece to deal with the question of 'Women's Lib'. But it is notable that even when Savitri is losing her sense after plunging into the river in desperation, her mind feels a pull of tradition. She is going to die with a desire for a reparative identity in the matrix of socially designated existence (in the family) where myth also has its role to play: " 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 can't die. I must go back home" (p.121).

Savitri's rescue by Mari, a locksmith-cum-burglar, is strategically linked with the authorial purpose of studying her predicament in yet another perspective offered by a low-caste woman like Ponni, Mari's wife. Laxmi Holmstorm finds Ponni both contrasted and linked with Savitri in so far as, like Savitri she also has the courage to stand against her husband but she enjoys more freedom than Savitri (and even Shantabai) in the sense that 'she cannot be oppressed, leave alone intimidated by the male world' (p.104). In the treatment of the couple (submissive Mari and his over-riding wife Ponni), Narayan seems to have used, as Pier Paulo Piciucco has mentioned in the essay, "Femininity in the Fiction of R. K. Narayan", the theme of 'gender-switching' or 'sex reversal' as functional to the authorial stand against 'any form of abuse of power between husband and wife'(p. 45)[6]. Ponni reveals to Savitri the know-how of Women's independence: "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"(p.136). It is important to note that Ponni is the only character in the novel who shows a genuine sympathy for Savitri and actively tries to materialise in her own way, the latter's urge for a life of independence, an acquisition of the 'right to live' though it turns out to be very brief.

At the behest of Mari and Ponni, Savitri secures the job in a temple of Lord Subramanya where she is intended to tidy up the complex, pluck flowers for puja in exchange of half measure of rice and the quarter of an anna each day. She is accommodated in the dark, almost desolate temple shanty, a den of rats and bats, where light and air 'were admitted only by the chinks in the joints of the iron sheets' (p.180). Notwithstanding the loss of her expected dignity, Savitri accepts her new job to live without anybody's 'charity' and one sees how thrilled she feels while cooking a little rice for herself on the very first day of her employment: "This is my own rice, my very own; and I am not obliged to anyone for this: This is nobody's charity to me" (p.184). But this initial spell of triumph however does not last long. The departure of the temple-priest in the evening leaves Savitri alone in the big temple complex and the dark solitude of the place begins to tell on her nerves and the instinct of

'fear' that once stifled her entity in familial existence, seems to encroach in her self-chosen new life too though in an altered form: "Everything terrified her. The whole air was oppressive; the surrounding objects assumed monstrous shape in the solitary hour. She fled to the shanty and bolted the door" (p.189). With the approach of night and the pervading stillness, Savitri's fear increases and she grows homesick. She feels that she is incompatible to face the ordeals of her choice to live alone and accepts defeat in her quest for an independent space of existence outside the patriarchal structure of family:

The futility, the frustration and her inescapable weakness made her cry and sob. "A wretched fate that wouldn't let me drown the first time. I can't go near the water again. This is defeat -I accept it. I am no good for the fight. I am a bamboo pole [...]Perhaps Sumati and Kamala have not had their hair combed for ages now [...]"(p.190).

Savitri's return to her family, to the joys of the children and the usual, calm indifference of her husband, hardly indicates any achievement in the plight of women like her who constantly suffer in the patriarchal society without any respite. Kirpal Singh has remarked in this connection that Savitri "displays some potential for growth when she at first rejects her traditional role and then accepts it with a new found sense of humility."[3] In Savitri's return, Holmstorm finds Narayan's return to the ‘basic paradigm' with which he began the book - 'the limited and narrow world within which many married women function[...]'(p.107)[3]. This critic also traces the pessimistic end of Savitri's struggle to the overall perspectives of 'the themes like disillusionment and sadness' in Narayan's large comic vision. In a different vein of criticism, P. P. Piciucco who studies 'Femininity' in Narayan's later-day female characters like Rosie (in The Guide) and Daisy (in The Painter of Signs) with reference to the Purusha and Prakriti concepts of Hindu Sankhya philosophy, nevertheless concludes with the impression that Narayan's 'objection to the male-oriented set of values[...]does not necessarily mean or support for feminism'(p.40)[6]. In the opinion of this critic, Narayan chooses 'a neutral position, neither in favour of male chauvinism nor in defence of feminism (p.46)[6].

CONCLUSION

What the critics in general tend to overlook is that, in his treatment of Savitri in The Dark Room, Narayan not only brings the feminist concern to the fore of his writerly attention, but also problematises the protagonist's search for an identity which seeks to negotiate a constant binary between allegiance to the indigenous roots of her culture on the one hand, and the modernist urge for an independent selfhood on the other. The object of the present paper was to trace in Savitri's character a constant ambivalence between her basic commitment to tradition as her dharma and her spirit for an autonomous self-identity, which is a pronounced Western trait. The complexity in the predicament of Savitri is brought out in the writer's conscious efforts for exploring different face[t]s of the Women's question across caste/class affiliations in pre-Independence India. Savitri's return to her family, far from being an account of the failure of an inept individual or the writer's allegedly conservative stand for maintaining status quo, can be viewed rather as Narayan's fictive intent of offering a discourse on the consecrating role of a middle-class housewife in saving the family from the threats of disintegrating forces like, say, the whimsical ways of patriarchy or the moral laxity in the changing world of urbanisation.

In an oft-quoted interview with Ved Mehta, Narayan once specified the criterion of being a good writer: "To be a good writer anywhere, you must have roots: both in religion and family. I have these things."[4] Narayan's choice of 'religion' and family' as the automatic sources of authentic identity for an Indian writer, true to his tradition and culture, is applicable to his characters also. Thus, in the context of present analysis, Narayan's rehabilitation of Savitri to her family no doubt strategically gestures to a submergence of individuality to familial/community affiliations. Yet it serves to validate in a way, not only the rootedness of the search for identity in a typical Narayan character, but also Narayan's artistic purpose to situate human relation with its 'complexities, demands and muddles of kinship within the empirical space of family'[5] which with sociological and cultural inputs in Indian life, has worked at the problem of living through generations.

Finally, taking cue from the epigraph which is an excerpt from Tagore's celebrated poem on Women's condition, one can safely infer that whereas the poet cum seer questions the inequity in the providential design in so far as determining a status of indignity underlying the women's position in a traditional society; Narayan, as a realistic writer of fictions perhaps, theoretically makes a similar attempt in his own setting by simply giving the issue, so to speak, 'a local habitation and name.'

NOTES:

1. qtd in Gupta, Santosh, "Jagan's Experiments with Truth in The Vendor of Sweets." (p.48).

2. qtd in Laxmi Holmstorm, The Novels of R. K. Narayan, p.124.

3. qtd in K. V. Surendran, "The Neglected and the Tormented in The Dark Room".p.58.

4. See, Ved Mehta, John is Easy to Please. P.148-49.

5. qtd in Krishna Sen, Critical Essays on R. K. Narayan's The Guide. p.176.

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