

Representation of Marital Dissonance in R.K.Narayan's *The Dark Room*

Seema Gupta

Associate Professor

Department of English

R.K.S.D.College

Kaithal, Haryana

India

The Dark Room is the only novel in the whole oeuvre of Narayan's writings which deal exclusively with the problems of an Indian housewife who is financially dependent on her husband. In the novel Narayan has exhibited his understanding of the socio-economic dimension of marriage. The major motif in the narrative is the marital dissonance which arises from maladjustment. Narayan takes the subject matter of *The Dark Room* from the socio-political events of the thirties when All Indian Women Conference was organized to further the women cause in general and their economic Independence in particular. Founded in 1927, the AIWC was at first dedicated to the cause of women education. By the thirties, it emerged as an influential social reform organization which was determined to fight for the cause of women. Kamala Devi Chattopadhyaya, the secretary of AIWC is committed to the improvement of status of women in India. She moved a campaign which was intended to make all people aware of the subjugation under which women are forced to live after marriage. In 1936, a book named *Our Cause: A Symposium by Indian Women* was published which is an attack on the institution of marriage. The editor of the book Shyam Kumari Nehru writes: "it is a cunning device to keep women economically dependent on men, chained with the four walls of the zenana, confined to the performing of household duties alone. Usually marriage is thrust on her much before she can think for herself, and the tie is indissoluble." (xii) G.J.Bahadurji, one of the contributors of the book considers marriage as bondage. According to her, marriage not only transforms a woman into either a "dressed-up-doll" or a "beast of burden" but its corollary, motherhood, ensures her lifelong slavery: her creations become the bonds that tie her to the yoke of family life, which,

once entered, leaves no room for self-expression, or self-realization” (324). This discourse later became the main agenda of AIWC. Like these women, Savitri is concerned with her economic dependence. *The Dark Room* is centered on Savitri’s revolt on these issues from the 1930s women’s movement. The present paper tries to explore how Narayan grounds his novel on the female politics of the time, which reveals the reality of women’s lives in the thirties. Narayan himself writes about this novel in *My Days*:

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, individuality, stature, and strength. (Narayan: 1975, 119)

The theme of economic independence of women is reinforced not only from the character-focalizer Savitri’s situation but from Shanta Bai’s and 200 other women applicants at Englandia Insurance Company. Savitri is very keen to see her daughters educated and independent: “Sumati and Kamala must study up to the B.A. and not depend for their salvation on marriage.” (*The Dark Room* 93) But the narrator also seems to suggest indirectly that women should throw this oppression from their minds only then their access to work can bring them self-reliance. Shanta Bai who is modern and self-reliant but carries this oppression inside her and enjoys the subjugation forced on her.

The opening sequence of the novel introduces us to the nature of the action of the novel and also the three major characters – Ramani, Savitri and Babu. The nature of interaction between the two main characters Ramani, and Savitri foretells the nature of action during the whole narrative span of the novel. The nature of action revealed in the first paragraph is reinforced again in the succeeding paragraph: “I don’t know when I shall have a little decent food to eat. I slave all day in the office for this mouthful. No lack of expenses, money for this and money for that. If the cook can’t cook properly, do the work yourself. What have you to do better than that?” (*DR* 2) Ramani’s outburst makes the dominance clear and Savitri’s subordination to masculine authority sets the nodes and anti-nodes of the tension that shapes the narrative.

In his novel, *The Dark Room*, Narayan deals with the theme more serious than that of his earlier novels *Swami and Friends* and *The Bachelor of Arts*. In it he draws the picture of a middle class South Indian domestic life run by an irritable and whimsical husband. The novel is different from the other novels of Narayan in that it was written with the definite social purpose. Set in the pre-independence India, it was written to project the helpless position of a housewife in a man-dominated society. The novel centers on Savitri, middle aged wife of Ramani, an officer in an Insurance company. She is conscious of her identity, self-respect and rights as an individual. But she has adjusted herself to the role of a self-less mother, and never complains the tyrannical behavior of her husband. The novel can be divided into three parts; each part shows different aspects of a middle class house-wife in an Indian society. The first part of the novel introduces Savitri who is struggling as a woman and finding herself unable to maintain a rapport between her role as a mother and as a wife. In the second part, the narrator has focused on the institution of marriage in India where husband has all the liberty to the social norms. A husband can maintain an extramarital affair and his wife has no right to question it. It is just “a little fun now and then” (DR 109) for a husband and a wife is left to her own gloom and misery which Savitri experiences at her marital discord. In the third part, Savitri learns to live with her problems. She realizes that facing them is a part of her married life. A woman has to learn how to manage her emotional and social problems in order to survive in the society. Despite having failed in finding a solution to her problems, she being with her dead part finds solace in the company of her children.

The narrative portrays the condition and atmosphere in the family of Ramani, the secretary of Englandia Insurance Company. He is presented as a very arrogant, eccentric and self-opinionated husband, and governs his house according to his own sweet will. The happiness or unhappiness of the house purely depends on his mood. As he is always irritable, the atmosphere in his house is generally very tense, and his wife, children and servants always remain in a state of terror. His wife, Savitri is a traditional Indian woman. She is very beautiful and completely devoted to her husband. But Ramani does not respond to her sentiments even with ordinary warmth. His wife has received nothing from her husband except his temper during the fifteen years of their marriage. Ramani's elaborate ritual of dressing, his elegant and prestigious Chevrolet and his enviable position in Englandia Insurance Company gratifies his

sense of self-importance but a deliberate attempt to discourage and subdue his wife's self-assertion.

Narayan's *The Dark Room* is a sociological study of an Indian middle class household. It is an example of the recreation of a middle class milieu with its agony and ecstasy fused into one structure. The narrative is structured on the interaction between the family members of Ramani. It demonstrates the typical conventional ridden Indian attitude to life where the husband is lord and master who will call for the tune and it is the duty of his wife to dance to it, for it is a sin to disobey him. As M.K Naik observes, "It is a sort of thing that takes in every society where the old double standards are still valid and the women are economically so helpless that they just have to lump what they do not like." The hapless life of an Indian housewife is vividly depicted in the novel, through the protagonist, Savitri, the wife of Ramani. The third person omniscient narrator narrates the story of Savitri as a detached observer and focuses the attention of the readers on the feelings and emotions of both husband and wife. It is very difficult to guess where Narayan's sympathies lie in the novel. But the whole discourse in the narrative is comprehended by a consciousness that makes us sympathetic towards Savitri. In Ch. 8 when Mari and Ponni come to see Savitri at river Sarayu, Savitri puts uncomfortable questions to Ponni. For example:

"Is this your husband?"

"yes."

"Do you like him very much?"

At this Ponni looked shy and smiled. Savitri said, "Suppose he took another woman and neglected you, what would you do?"

Ponni threw a suspicious glance at her husband and asked, "Have you been up to any such trick?"

"No, no," Mari said, and asked, turning to Savitri, "What do you mean by this, madam?"

Savitri explained to Ponni. "I don't say he has done it. Imagine for a moment . . ."

Mari asked indignantly, "Why should she imagine such a thing?"

Savitri persisted, "if he did such a thing, what would you do?"

Ponni said, "Let him try, then he will know what he will get?"

“But that was all I could do,” Savitri said, pointing at the river, “I have slaved for him all these years, we have children, and now he is ensnared by a—by a—by some woman. He doesn’t want me.” (DR 104-105)

Here the question “If he did such a thing what would you do?” remains unanswered till the last and inclines us to take side with Savitri, to see her as a victim of male ego. So there flows a voice through the whole narrative which is kind to Savitri. As Currie observes, “aspects of point of view in fiction are marshaled by an author in the service of an argument but an argument which operates through the manipulation of sympathy.” (19)

R. K Narayan writes in his autobiography *My Days* about the theme of *The Dark Room*: “This must have been an early testament of the women’s liberation movement. Man assigned her a secondary place and kept her there with such subtlety and cunningness that she herself began to lose all notions of her independence, her individuality, stature and strength. A wife in an orthodox milieu to Indian society was a victim of circumstances. My novel dealt with her with this philosophy in the background”. (119) *The Dark Room* is conceived of the author’s obsession with the philosophy of “Woman as opposed to man, her constant oppressor.” (Narayan: 1975, 118)

Narayan as a heterodiegetic narrator seems overtly critical about the chauvinistic husbands like Ramani whose behavior is always dictatorial towards his wife, Savitri. He believes in the women’s “primary duties being wives and mothers”. (DR 109) The narrator describes Ramani as self-willed, lawless, conceited and arrogant and a domineering husband. He is shown rash and impetuous who takes delights in belittling others by his stinging comments just from the beginning of the novel. He behaves cynically and irrationally with his wife Savitri and his son, Babu. Even the servant Ranga and the cook have to bear the brunt of his ill-will and flight of moods. He holds his wife responsible for anything and everything from the vegetables chosen to looking after the duties of cook and habits of children. The narrator depicts Ramani as a typical Indian husband who bosses over and nags his wife for the money he earns and spends over her and her children. “Brinjals , cucumber, radish, and greens, all the twelve months in the year and all the thirty days in the month. I don’t know when I shall have a little decent food to eat. I slave all day in the office for this mouthful. No lack of expenses, money for this and money for that. If the cook can’t cook properly, do the work yourself. What have you to do better than that?” (DR

2) But when he so chooses and in a romantic wood , he begins to make love to Savitri elaborately in the presence of children and the servants much to the discomfort of Savitri . Ramani is everything a husband should not be. He keeps a mistress and the revelation of the fact is too much for Savitri and she ultimately decides to leave the house.

On the other hand, while portraying Savitri the attitude of the narrator is not so critical. Savitri is depicted as a docile, traditional Hindu wife who is devoted to the household and her husband even though the husband treats her badly. Savitri “never interrupted the running commentary with an explanation.” (DR 3) “As this was almost a daily lament as regular as her husband’s lecture, Savitri ceased to pay attention to it.” (DR 5) The narrator focalizer also makes passing observations on the institutions of marriage in India. It is not inter- personal man -woman relationship. William Walsh, who is less than enthusiastic about certain aspects of *The Dark Room*, has no doubt about its central theme:

“It is the account of marriage given throughout from the point of view of wife, in which the image projected is that of the Indian woman as a victim, written, it should be remembered, some thirty five to forty years before the current talk of woman’s liberation.” (43)

After fifteen years of married life, the protagonist Ramani and Savitri portray a marriage crisis, which despite its receptive superficial tranquility is beset within by discord because Ramani’s behavior with his concubine in the office is directly in contrast with his attitude towards Savitri in the house. In the name of tradition and so called ancient cultural views about women, Ramani tries his best to exploit his meek and docile wife. He is shown as a man who is of the opinion that India owes its spiritual eminence to the fact that the people here realize that woman’s primary duty is being a wife and a mother, and a woman who disobeys her husband cannot retain the right of being called a wife.

Narayan as a heterodiegetic narrator ushers the narratee in the realm of a variety of wifely role models, but none of them appears to be sufficient which can grant the equality to women. It appears as if the narrator constructs marriage as a form of slavery in which women are kept in bondage for life. The narrative conforms to the statements made by women activists of the thirties that the Institution of marriage in India instead of making the women happy subjugates them. Gangu’s marriage is an example of freedom but at the cost of social acceptance;

Ponni reveals a tyrannical power in marriage; Janamma shows an extreme submission and Savitri finds herself trapped in a marriage which she can neither end nor alter. The narrative voice projects the sad truth of women's helplessness to the task of living alone. Throughout the text, the narrative voice remains third person. However towards the end of the novel and particularly in the final section of the text, Narayan takes the step of switching it into the first person plural:

“What despicable creations of God are we that we can't exist without a support? I am like a bamboo pole which cannot stand without a wall to support it” . . . “This is defeat. I accept it. I am no good for this fight. I am a bamboo pole.” (DR 146)

The incorporation of collective voice ‘we’ is a way to make the novel multi-voiced. The plural use is an effective device in creating a sense of inclusiveness and shared identity. All Indian women are included in Savitri's condemnation of herself and the text becomes a testament to a particular kind of female loneliness and loss. Savitri is shown oscillating between several competing models of womanhood—the traditional, westernized and the lower caste woman. Out of these the traditional model is most unambiguously critiqued by the narrator. Savitri's name on a traditional Hindu wife of the *Mahabharata* is a clear sign of this critique. Savitri of the *Mahabharata* is most obedient and devoted wife of a loving and respectful husband Satyavan and his parents. Ramani, however, is no Satyavan and Savitri's retreat to her home is not presented as an acceptance of a traditional role, but as a defeat.

References:

- Bahadurji, G.J. "Women and Political Struggle." *Our Cause: A Symposium by Indian Women*. ed. Shyam Kumari Nehru, Allahabad: Kitabistan, 1936. Print.
- Currie, Mark. *Post Modern Narrative Theory*. London: Macmillan Press Ltd., 1998, Print.
- Naik, M. K. *The Ironic Vision: A Study of the Fiction of R.K.Narayan*. New Delhi: Sterling, 1983. Print.
- Narayan, R.K. *The Dark Room*. Chennai: Indian Thought Publications, 2013. Print.
- Narayan, R.K. *My Days*. Mysore: Indian Thought Publications, 1975. Print.
- Nehru, Shyam K. "Introduction." *Our Cause: A Symposium by Indian Women*. Allahabad: Kitabistan, 1936. Print.
- Walsh, William. *R.K. Narayan: A Critical Appreciation*. London: Heinemann, 1982. Print.