

Voice of Protest against Discrimination in R. K. Narayan's Fictional Women Characters

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Abstract

This research paper seeks to study R.K.Naryan as a writer voicing the discrimination and emancipation of women in the Indian orthodox Hindu society where men hold a superior position and women are confined to the home and hearth with all sorts and of taboos and tradition clamped on them. The study shows that Indian women exist among conditions often bordering on despair. Yet as the anxious manager of home and culture, she is on a ceaseless quest for a credible meaning to life along with her male counterpart. But we cannot consider Narayan a feminist in terms of western feminism because his attitude is shaped with a strong Indian sensibility that stands to resist the possibility of any foreign cultural aggression in the movement that he launches to being about a change in the status of Indian women. It's true that Narayan favours the western notion of liberated women, but he also considers and depicts in his novels, the perils of following western wave of movement for liberation and freedom of women in India. He shapes this movement of women's freedom in India's own traditional and religious perspectives by blending both tradition and modernity in the contemporary context.

Keywords : *Emancipation, taboos, aggression, discrimination.*

The present study seeks to study Narayan's fictional women characters voicing against discrimination faced by them, in traditional, orthodox Indian society. Narayan portrays the Indian women turning from meek, passive role to active, vibrant role models. He tackles the problem of modern, independent women who crave for individuality and self identity.

The study shows that Indian exist women among conditions often bordering on despair. Education attainments, participation rates, occupational structure, private and public laws, family planning systems, technological advancement and above all, socio-cultural attitudes are all weighed against the Indian women. Yet as the anxious manager of home and culture she is on a ceaseless quest for a credible meaning to life along with her male counterpart. It is worthwhile to find out how far do the women in the novels of R.K.Naryan, reflect the status of women in society where the group is more highly esteemed than the individual (male or female) and the male more than the female, where role expectations are highly specific and institutionalized.

This research paper attempts to look into the position of women in the pre and post independence period of India and its socioeconomic background in which Narayan portrays the women characters in his novels. Born in 1906 and brought up in a conservative, orthodox Hindu society, Narayan sees the plight of women locked up within the confines of an orthodox society, which has nothing to offer a woman except material refuge. In this society a woman has nothing of her own except her body. The speech: “what possession can a woman call her own except her body? Everything that she has is her father’s, her husband’s or her son’s (Dark Room, p. 88)”helps us realize the real position of women in the society Narayan has depicted in his novels. We also get a clue of the regrettable position of women when Narayan says in his *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, her individuality, stature and strength. A wife in an orthodox milieu of Indian society was an ideal victim of such circumstances (119).

Savitri (The Dark Room) shows us how an ordinary Indian wife suffers the woes of ordinary domestic life in a male dominated society, how she rebels and finally submits due to love of her children and family. She also bows down before her domestic duties to Karma.

Savitri leaves her husband empty-handed, leaving everything behind given her by men. Before leaving, when Savitri puts off ornaments, Ramani says that “this ring and this necklace, and this stud were not given by me. They are your father’s.” Savitri protests by saying that “they are also a man’s gift.” (88) Savitri does not find any difference between a husband and a father or a son. All men, she finds, are alike having the same concept about women’s position in the male-society. She attempts to bring an end to her dependency on men and establish her as a human being. But, ironically enough, soon she discovers that a woman cannot be anything else but a dependant on men: “If I take the train and go to my parents, I shall feed on my father’s pension; if I go back home, I shall be living on my husband’s earnings, and then on Babu” (93).

Savitri’s revolt resembles Ibsen’s Nora’s as they both stand against the society that keeps them in servitude. Savitri’s, or Nora’s stand is not against any particular Ramani or Helmer[1], but against the society where a wife is never a better-half, rather a much “worse-half”[2] only worthy of being played with by a man as he pleases. Savitri rightly observes: “What is the difference between a prostitute and a married woman? – the prostitute changes her men, but a married woman doesn’t; that is all, both earn their food and shelter in the same manner” (93). But Ibsen’s Nora comes into conflict with Savitri in that Nora slams the door behind her husband and children never to come back, while Savitri returns in humiliation to Ramani to be his worse-half that she had been long. As A. N. Kaul, in his article entitled “R.K. Narayan and the East- West Theme,” comments: “... unlike Ibsen’s heroine, Narayan does not bang the door but has it banged and that in the end, her dream of feminine independence and dignity over, she returns submissively to the house never again to stray in thought or deed” (qtd in Biswal 50).

It is already said that Narayan first draws the picture of women suffering in *The Dark Room*, but his movement is not drastic. What mainly he attempts in this novel is that he shows the actual position of women in the India of 1930s. As the heroine for *The dark Room*, Narayan’s objective of choosing the name Savitri, the name which points back to the mythological Savitri and her unquestioning devotion to her husband Satyavan, is, as Krishna Sen comments, “to deconstruct the archetypal Hindu myth of the devoted wife by showing how the myth loses its meaning in a society where the women’s loyalty and dedication are

forcibly extracted, rather than freely given” (56). Narayan obviously does not advocate female subservience in the conclusion of the novel by bringing Savitri back to her bullying husband, rather problematizes the culturally accepted beliefs about women’s position in the tradition-ridden Indian society by drawing the circumstances under which Savitri feels compelled to walk out of the house and then to come back. The novelist exposes the hypocrisy of the patriarchal society that uses even religion to exploit a woman. Savitri after she has left her house finds a job and a place to stay in a priest’s temple. F. Alam, in his essay “*Reading R. K. Narayan Postcolonially*”, terms the priest as “the most disagreeable character” saying that “clearly Narayan has no sympathy at all for the official upholder of tradition and religion and caste.” More important, unlike a tradition-bound woman accepting fate as destined, Savitri accepts her fate as associated with her mythological namesake only after discovering the reason that makes them subservient to men. As she says to her husband, “We are responsible for our position; we accept food, shelter and comfort that you give, and are what we are” (87).

Shanti in *Mr. Sampath* (1949) seems to carry Savitri’s movement a step ahead. Outwardly what Shanti does here may seem to be an echo of the failure of Savitri, but, if deeply seen, Shanti’s failure is glorified and victorious. Narayan’s major concern regarding the woman is to establish her individual right to decide what she would be. Shanti revolts against the traditional life of a widow, and leaving her son to the care of strangers, she becomes the mistress of Mr. Sampath who promises to bring her fame by casting her in a film. She chooses this life of easy morals of the celluloid world and thus gets deviated from the customary life of a widow. But eventually she comes back to the life traditionally prescribed for a widow in Malgudi. Here Shanti’s return to the traditional life of widowhood should not be viewed as a failure on her part in the step she takes, rather she comes back crowned with success, securing the right of making her own decision as to whether to be an actress or a traditional widow. Just as in *The Guide*, a novel published later, Rosie decides whether to be staying with Marco or Raju, or to leave both, in the same way in *Mr. Sampath* Shanti presents her as a woman having complete freedom to choose whether to be staying in the film-world as an actress, or to come back to the traditional life of Malgudi to lead the austere life of a widow.

Narayan's next novel *Waiting for the Mahatma*, set in pre-independence India when the traditional inhibitions and orthodox taboos are still current confining women to the four walls of the house, portrays Bharati as the young heroine who defies the traditional duties of a woman by dedicating herself to the service of Gandhi. In fact, Bharati is the most patriotic and most sublime of the characters of this novel as it is only she who out of patriotism joins the movement Gandhi has launched to bring about the independence of India, and all other characters, who are all male, join this movement out of self-interest. While Sriram starts committing crimes, and in defiance of Gandhi's non-violent programmes, joins Subhas Chandra Bose's programme of driving the British from India by force, while dishonest people like Jagadish are busy making fortunes unscrupulously in the independent India by playing up their contributions made to the independence war, it is only Bharati, a woman who pursues Gandhi's principles till the end and wins to be named by Gandhi "daughter of India". Bharati's participation in the liberation war of India is surely a blow to the taboos which for long had kept women in servitude to men.

The post-independence era witness a lot of changes in the country in all spheres of life-solid, economic, political and religious and a decline of values in all spheres of life. The role of various social reformers has brought favourable changes in the Indian society, which has considerably improved the position of women in India. The changes in the position of women in India marks a shift in Narayan's attitude towards his female characters. He presents before us the new woman of New India - Bharat, Grace, Rosie, Brinda. The women in India are no more confined to the four walls of the house and so represent the New Woman of Malgudi.

However, a fulfillment of the failed revolutionary zeal of Savitri in *The dark Room* we find 20 years later in the character of Rosie in *The Guide*, a classic of Narayan's works published in 1958 when India had already become independent. The independence had brought not only political changes, the social, economic, and even religious milieus of Indian had also been greatly influenced, although people were still trying to rigidly cling to their social traditions. A great change also came in the intelligentsia of women. Rosie, an M.A. in economics, challenges the orthodox Hindu conception of what a woman should be. She leaves her husband who shows his apathy and indifference towards her feelings and desires

for dance, and thus moves out of the walls of her family on a path usually unchartered for women in an Indian society.

Rosie, born as *Debadashi* in India, carries a westernized name – a name ever heard in Malgudi. This westernized name of Rosie situates her as an outsider in the conventional world of Malgudi, which is ruled strictly by the long established traditions and customs. Even Raju, in whom she finds a patron, wonders: “Why did she call herself Rosie? She did not come from a foreign land. She was just an Indian, who should have done well with Devi, Meena, Lalita, or any one of the thousand names we have in our country” (9). Malgudi’s traditional domestic setting has no place for any such woman having non-traditional identity. Raju’s tradition-bound mother also “looked anguished for a moment, wondering how she was going to accommodate a Rosie in her house” (140), when Rosie, driven out by her husband Marco, arrives at Raju’s home.

Through the character of Rosie, Narayan further questions the position of women in the tradition bound Indian society. Rosie is an educated woman, an M.A. in Economics, but her education fails to promote her status in the society. As she says: “We are viewed as public women. We are not considered respectable; we are not considered as civilized” (75). As they were viewed as public women, Rosie, perhaps, had no other way except following the “unconventional” way for marriage, which, she realizes, reduces her from an M.A to a puppet. Her husband Marco Polo, as nicknamed by Raju, never tries to understand her mind. Not a single day, as Rosie says to Raju, goes quiet without a quarrel between them. Marco, in spite of being a scholar, behaves like a traditional husband never evaluating Rosie’s likings. It seems that he has married not to have a wife, but one to do only his household chores. Raju rightly comments about Marco that “perhaps he married out of a desire to have someone care for his practical life” (100). Rosie’s expectation from her husband is not much. What much she desires is an approval of her desire for dance, but she is never granted. Moreover, he compares her dance with monkey-tricks, and thus humiliates her quality that she values as a form of worship to her god. Not only that, even her presence is thought as a kind of disturbance in his work. Marco completely forgets that Rosie is a human being needing husband’s presence beside her. Even after coming to Malgudi, he grossly occupies himself with his archeological research, never allowing her beside him. Rosie-Marco relationship can

be understood clearly from the following conversation between her and Raju:

RAJU: 'Why don't you stay up with him?' ROSIE: 'He sits up all night writing and –'

RAJU: 'If he sits up all night writing, during the day you should talk to him.' ROSIE:
'But all day he is in the cave.'

RAJU: 'Well, you may go and see it too. Why not? It ought to interest you.' ROSIE:
'While he is copying, no one may talk to him (107)'

Thus, Narayan draws the circumstances under which Rosie feels compelled to tear the traditionally held sacred bond with Marco. By tearing the sacred bond with Marco, Rosie seems to stand parallel to Shanta Bai in *The Dark Room*, but unlike Shanta Bai, Rosie is portrayed sympathetically. But Rosie definitely stands champion to Savitri because Savitri, defeated, comes back like a dead horse to her husband, while Rosie, unlike Savitri, does not go back to her husband to be his worse half, nor does she ever think of going under the guardianship of Raju after she is cheated by him, rather when she, left by Marco and cheated by Raju, is alone, she is strong and experienced enough to guide herself properly without a Marco or a Raju beside her.

Finally, *The Painter of Signs* comes echoing the voices of all women of his previous novels, who strived to come out by crushing the walls of the "dolls houses." Like *The dark Room*, this novel also has a woman named Daisy as the protagonist who defies the traditional setup for women. While Rosie in *The Guide*, in spite of having a westernized name and marrying in a way absolutely unconventional in an Indian society, still has a traditional woman in herself, as is found in her dependence first on her husband Marco, and then on her lover Raju, Daisy is strikingly modern in her spirit of independence. She rises against the long established marital system of the society only at the age of thirteen when her prospective bridegroom visits her. Her strong sense of individuality becomes evident when she says, "And then they seated me like a doll, and I had to wait for the arrival of the eminent personage with his parents" (131).

At this very moment, she decides to break the walls of the doll's house. She offends the groom on the face and thus offends the whole orthodox tradition. She flees her family, and never again in her life she gets herself reconciled to the idea of a family. Thus, she

shatters all routine impressions about women in the familiar background of Malgudi, and turns into a bizarre figure roaming the countryside with the mission of family planning. “She has no taboos of her own” (57) and “the only topics she could appreciate are birth control ...” (84) with a “sort of unmitigated antagonism to conception” (87) that flagrantly violates the traditional Indian notion that “God gives us children. How can we reject His gift?” (68), and that “Our shastras say that the more children in a house, the more blessed it becomes” (70). Daisy’s mission for Family Planning leaves a lasting impression on the villagers. When Malgudi is teemed with burgeoning population, in answer to a question asked by Daisy the village teacher promptly says, “Seven hundred-odd” (66). With an analytical point of view, she gives a remainder to the teacher saying: “It was just six hundred last year this time and there is an increase of nearly twenty percent ... I know that the number of houses has remained the same for decades ...” (66). About the growing population of the village Daisy’s observation is: “The implications were clear that during the rains the village folk, cooped up in their homes, had no better business than to procreate” (65). Daisy’s concept of family planning is thought by the villagers to be a palliative to rid them of their insufferable circumstances. The tradition bound people, she finds, are not easy to be motivated, rather they regard what she says and does as “sinful practices”. However, Rosie finally withdraws from Malgudi, which may suggest her failure and defeat in her mission, but the slogan that she leaves behind pestered on different walls does not wither away with her departure from Malgudi. She merely withdraws physically but remains active and omnipresent in her activities done here, that can be supposed to evolve into a social movement in future and may act in the way she desires. To comment on Daisy’s devotion to her mission, Jayant K. Biswal observes:

With rare exception to her emotionalism at times, Daisy can be said to be nearer to the female version of Marco. Both of them are not clearly cut out for a married life; both of them are heart and soul dedicated to their projects – one to the archaeological survey in the Memphi hills, the other to the cause of family planning. In Daisy, the cold professionalism of Marco and the revolutionary zeal of Bharati exist together. If Savitri and Rosie revolt against their doll’s houses, Daisy seems to carry their revolt further, even to a hysterical height. If *The Dark room* is an ‘early testament of the Women’s Lib movement’, *The Painter of Signs* is its more pronounced representation (55 – 56).

Thus, Daisy comes out of the doll's house and gives a fulfillment to the dreams of those women in Narayan's novels, who started the movement. Daisy fulfils the wish of Savitri in *The Dark Room*, who wanted to have an independent existence" (27).

Conclusion :

The way Narayan tries to promote the status of women is significant in that he follows a 'slow and steady method' to carry his 'Women's Lib'[3] movement which begins in *The Dark Room* and comes to an apparent fulfillment in *The Painter of Signs*, encompassing a long journey from Savitri to Daisy via Shanti, Bharati and Rosie. The chief reason behind it remains in Narayan's being a post colonial writer. He does not encourage the western wave in the process although he registers changes in the fabric of society under the impact of colonial rule and depicts the fissures created by modernization, nor does he endorse the moribund society of Malgudi. He often questions the thwarting taboos and orthodox beliefs that reduce a woman to a plaything of a man, but as an upholder of traditional values, he develops the movement within the traditions of Malgudi society, and so Shanta Bai is portrayed as a wrecker of home; Rosie takes the traditional name, Nalini; and Daisy leaves Malgudi.

Most of Narayan's female characters exhibit moral qualities as well as adherence to the principle of 'Dharma' and 'Fate'. Narayan female characters do not stay away from the sufferings of 'Fate'. On the contrary they accept the sufferings and pain caused by 'Fate'. They submit themselves to 'Fate' as it their 'Dharma'. A study of his women characters reveal the changes occurring in the society and position of women since the pre-independence era to the present modern world voicing a protest against emancipation and discrimination of traditional orthodox Indian society.

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