

Reimagining 'Savirti' in Narayan's 'The Dark Room'

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Abstract: The paper critically examines the author's portrayal of the woman characters, especially 'Savitri' in *The Dark Room*. It attempts to look into how Narayan depicted women's sentiments, sensibilities, ideas and perspectives. It tries to establish the author's concern about the internal struggles of women's life. As his third novel, *The Dark Room* depicts 'Savitri' as a silent sufferer in the role of wife at the hands of the male—a continuous tyrant as a husband..

Keywords: Savitri, R.K. Narayan, Indian Women, *Dark Room*

INTRODUCTION

R.K. Narayan is an established novelist in the Indian literary plane. Of the three famous trio in Indian English fiction, Narayan carved his own identity. His "delicate blend of gentle irony and sympathy, quiet realism and fantasy stands poles apart" (Naik 168) from his contemporaries like Anand and Rao. Although most of Narayan's critics acknowledge his excellence as a comic-ironist dealing with life's inherent absurdities and incongruities, they never cease to register a distinct note of dissent as regards his characterization or the 'flat' characters in his novels. Narayan's characters, particularly the protagonists, seem to be growing on a different plane of realization, which,

being mostly spiritual, remains imperceptible. What in fact begins as a common need for a device to deal with the traditionally conceived and realized characters in the novels of Narayan, eventually become a necessity for a much wider framework to underline the essentials of the novelists, synoptically though. As an author, R. K. Narayan trusts in the thematic which is intricate to keep up. The author has a fair grasp over the thematic. There is no refuting the actuality that there is no judgment based on personal impressions, opinions and feelings rather than external facts in his writings. It does not get meddled in his selection of socio-cultural inclination. In his depiction of characters, the reader sees him positioning at a remoteness watching analytically. "In spite of his attraction for a typically Indian tradition of story-telling, Narayan is able to maintain his objectivity. He does not take sides and his novels have no message to deliver (Kumar 137)." The characters in the author's works of fiction not merely imbibe the creator's spirit but are also realized through it. Reasonably enough, in their domain of acceptance rebellion has barely any implication. In the light of the above observation, this paper critically examines women characters in Narayan's *The Dark Room*.

WOMEN IN *THE DARK ROOM*

R.K. Narayan's not-so-popular novel *The Dark Room* is a tale of a typical Indian woman faced with a dilemma of either remaining true to her 'name' at one hand and breaking out of the tormenting life at the other in her marriage with Ramani. It is "a wholly serious tale of silent suffering and abject surrender" (Naik 169). The plot gets interesting twist with the entry of 'other' woman i.e. Shanta Bai—thus completing the love triangle. Savitri was married to Ramani and bore three children. However, she never gets true love, care and attention from her husband. On the contrary, she suffers at the house because of him. He is not only a bad husband but also a worse father. He would reprimand his children even on trivial matters. He could not show any kind of love and care for his own offspring for being a self-obsessed individual. To her surprise, she accidentally learns about his extra-marital relationship with Shanta Bai. A colleague at Ramani's company, Shanta Bai is a beautiful and ambitious middle-aged woman who loves to flirt with men in the office. He falls for her beauty, visits her house and starts an illegitimate affair. Besides from these two women characters, the third significant one is Ponni, the wife of Mari. When Savitri finds herself hopeless, Ponni presses Savitri to come to their village where she could devote herself to Gods at the temple. In his tale, Narayan tries to portray an ideal Indian wife who is obedient, submissive and self-sacrificial besides being beautiful. The image of Savitri that the author creates in his novel resembles the

mythological character of 'Savitri' from *Mahabharata* who is known for love and devotion to her husband Satyavan. In the novel, Savitri hailing from the middle-class lacks the courage to desert her husband, instead chooses to suffer in silence. She becomes the victim of domestic abuse, intimidation, physical violence, among others. As a typical Indian woman, she sacrifices her destiny for the betterment of her children and husband.

THE LONELY WOMAN IN *THE DARK ROOM*

Within the house of Ramani and Savitri, there is a dark room—a symbolic place, like a black hole, having some kind of heavenly powers to suck out frustration and pain of those who visit it. In the family, it is Savitri who visits the dark room often when the frustration, pain torment, and disgust become unbearable. Furthermore, it may be remarked that the author chooses an appropriate title *The Dark Room* that illustrates a dual purpose. It evokes heart-rending feelings and also exemplifies the despair and wretchedness that Savitri undergoes when there is household conflict. It has been elucidated that dark room "used to be as indispensable a part of an Indian house as a kitchen and was a place for 'safe deposits', both a sanctuary- and a retreat; but modern houses are apt to dispense with *The Dark Room*" (Iyengar 371). She is antithetical to her husband. He vents his anger at her and she suffers it in meek silence. To endure it, she goes into the dark room. Ramani fails to appreciate her beauty and personality. He does not show any affection and warmth to her. In

their 15 years of marriage, Ramani only found faults to abuse and torment her while completely disregarding her care, service and love towards him and the family. After knowing about her husband's infidelity from Gangu, she is heartbroken but chooses to suffer in silence. Rather than holding the husband to account, she becomes self-critical and questions her own beauty and fertility. She starts to win her husband back. She prepares to seduce her but eventually bursts out when he touches her. Her repressed emotions come out in the form of meltdown. Perhaps like Nora from *A Doll's House*, she dares to leave the house but to end her own life. She goes to a river and jumps into it. To her luck, a blacksmith named Mari sees her and saves her life.

In creating Savitri for his novel, the author reimagined the mythical figure, which Sri Aurobindo calls "The Divine Word, daughter of the sun, goddess of the Supreme Truth, who comes down and is born to save" (Naik 55). The author specifically traces typical womanly features and qualities that the reader can easily identify and connect with—affection, dedication, fidelity, sacrifice and valor. It may be noted that Narayan's *The Dark Room* portrays the female as a sufferer at the hands of the male—a continuous tyrant. The author seems to have contemplated profoundly and observed in *My Days*, "I was somehow obsessed with a philosophy of women as opposed to Man, her constant oppressor." (1) He further noted "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,

individuality, stature, and strength." In addition, he opined about his novel thus "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 (Narayan 119)."

Following this, it may be emphasized that the character, Savitri, as the person's name advocates, is a devoted, compliant homemaker who by no means had the liberty to educate herself. Savitri is completely embarrassed having needed to submissively put up as a wife and a mother is depicted in the opening scene of the narrative when Ramani inquires on her respectability as a mother. At a certain point in the novel, the author describes the conversation that goes on between Savitri and her husband, "Lie down, Babu. You are not going to school today." Ramani said, "Mind your own business, do you hear?" "The boy has fever." "No, he hasn't, go and do 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" (*The Dark Room* 1).

Savitri appears to be just a powerless, whispering, cowardly and meek being. Most likely, she has her good points too. As a proficient housewife, she realizes how to manage abrupt visitors. After several such episodes, Savitri painfully grasps by way of self-assessment. She is found mentioning, "we are responsible for our position. We accept food, shelter and comforts that you give, and are what we are. I don't possess anything in this world" (8). Savitri was ordered to operate her household works within the matrimonial

framework. The author in this story very plainly and easily clarifies his vision of life. He champions the liberation of Indian women in the social order of the traditional Hindu society—which gives men a superior position over women and restricts her to the household chores along with a range of customs and taboos imposed on them. At best Narayan could be considered a champion of Indian women rather than a feminist in the strict Western interpretation of the term.”

In a sternly male-dominated culture, her obedient manners rather obviously render her as a prey to her spouse. Savitri, apparently handles to endure in her house until the day her spouse begins to devote his nights with Shanta Bai. In the novel, the character, Shanta Bai is portrayed as an eye-catching, seditious and menacing female who is hired as an insurance probationer in Engladia Insurance Company situated in Malgudi. Being the only female member of the staff in Ramani's office, her personality probably would have appeared rather remarkable assuming only Shanta Bai had showed herself at employment and not made it her profession to trap Ramani in her luscious affectations.

Subsequently, Savitri restricts herself to a “dark room” and attempts several other techniques of getting her spouse back, although Ramani does not pay any attention to her. Annoyed with her lifestyle of subjection, Savitri tries to kill herself nevertheless is rescued. “Savitri is too spineless to become a tragic figure, her husband is cad and Shanta Bai, the ‘other’ woman remains a shadowy figure.” (Naik 169)

Despite the fact that “a part of her is dead”, for having acknowledged rejection, she stops to be the submissive ‘Savitri’. At this juncture, it may be stated that the story appears very much relevant to the present-day scenario as it was at the time of its first publication in the year 1956. Moreover, it indeed prompts for an interesting study. It echoes the discriminatory fundamentalism of the male-dominated social order.

In the traditional Indian society, the Western idea of liberated women appear too much for a change. A woman holds an extremely bizarre spot in the Indian culture. She would be loved and hailed for being ‘sati savitri’, but despised and deserted on becoming a widow, infertile or for failing to bring dowry in marriage. Nonetheless, the Indian women have been undergoing a transformation with the advancement in time and knowledge. Narayan portrays the character of Savitri as mere orthodox, god believing and traditional. The two female characters Savitri and Shanta Bai are just reverse in their social behaviour pattern. Savitri works within the matrimonial structure whereas the ‘other’ Shanta Bai merely co-exists inside a codified social framework. Legally, Savitri is married to Ramani in the novel whereas Shanta Bai exists in his life as ‘the other’ woman.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, it may be remarked that the narrative is concerned with Savitri's depiction as a tortured woman. The novel focuses on Savitri as being “related to the Sun”. But the 'dark room' in

the house appears to be only answer to her predicament” (Naik 18). The dark room becomes her go-to place for solace—thus significantly reducing and wounding her self-worth. She is made to identify herself with junk—something that turns useless after end of its utility. In the room, where she seeks refuge to vent her frustration and anger, is dark with no sign of light for her. The reason for her patience is due to her two children, for whom she has a lot of hopes. The scenes of marital discord in the book have been repeated over thousands of homes and will continue to do so. In the modern age where one finds a lot of marriage’s coming apart, the messages the novel tries to convey are educative and indeed eye opening for many.

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