

Feminism in the Novels of R. K. Narayan: A Critical Study

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ABSTRACT

This paper investigates the position of women in the pre and post independent India and shows how R. K. Narayan delineates female characters written during the period in his novels. R. K. Narayan was born and brought up in a zoologist Hindu family. He saw closely the pathetic plight of women confined in the house. They were deprived of everything and treated as puppets. In his novels, he wanted to develop a different set of laws through which the deprived women of the society would be emancipated from the male servitude. This paper shows how his women break the traditionally accepted customs about women status in India and rebuild a new status to establish them as human being in their own light.

1. Introduction

The greatest problem of women in the patriarchal society is that they got adjusted to the male tastes and totally forgot that they were a different gender with different nature. Their mind got twisted so much that they started accepting their inferiority. As a result, what the male dominated society imposed on them. They never thought that this treatment was a torture on them and they were made inferior by patriarchy. Thus the women unconsciously accepted the most talkative term in the current world "Gender Discrimination" as their lot. Narayan wanted to uphold the present deplorable plight of women. He has apparently expressed his desire in his autobiography, 'My Days': "I was somehow obsessed with a philosophy of women as opposed to man, her constant oppressor. This must have been an early testament of the "Women's Liberty 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)

Narayan aims was to make conscious women of their own entities. That's it is found in all of his novels that his women are modern in thought and belief though the old women observe the traditional customs of India with devotion. Actually Narayan wanted to create new women out of the old fashioned, who are home maker but educated. After reading aptly, all the novels of Narayan, it is seen that he has commenced a movement for the liberation of women that has gradually developed in the novels written in the succession from The Bachelor Of Arts to The Painter of Sings. In all of these novels there is one or more than one female character who is out either half way or full way of this orthodox, conservative society to assert the right to live with dignity and freedom.

We find two generation of women in his novels; the first generation comprising of mothers and grand-mothers who are obedient and loyal to the old social customs, and the second generations are comprising of young women, who unlike the old women are educated and assertive. They are out of spoken

and assert power whenever possible and necessary. It is mentionable here that Narayan's Women's Liberty movement is slow and gradual, not drastic and that he uplifts the status of women within India's own norms, not by imitating the western feminist trend. Narayan's Women's Liberty Movement cannot be termed through the following four phases:

- Women's Elementary Dilemma.
- Emergence of New Women.
- Two sides of Women's Revolts against Subordination.
- Overcoming Barriers and Achieving Freedom.

However, an attempt has been made to investigate how Narayan has delineated female characters with references to his four pre independence novels and three post-independence novels. The novels are: The Bachelor of Arts, The English Teacher, The Dark Room, and Mr. Sampath, Waiting for Mahatma, The Guide, The Painter of Signs.

The findings of the study have been discussed under the followings.

2. Women's Elementary Dilemma

Since women had long been living in the patriarchal society, they are reluctant to incur any change in their status. If anyone rebelled, they would think it a blow to the established customs. In The Bachelor of Arts, Chandran's mother is such a woman, who is happy with the age old tradition of India, imposed on women. She accepts any established customs without any questions. Even beliefs that are ridiculous and superstitious today are strongly believed by her. As we notice, while discussing Chandran's marriage with Malati. She believes in horoscope. She strongly says that if the horoscope is not matched between Chandran and Malati, the marriage would not be possible. She becomes surprised hearing Malati's sage: "they cannot be all right if they have kept the girl till sixteen. She must have attained puberty ages ago. They can't be all right". (70) She gets a great shock in her mind when she learns that Malati's horoscope has not matched with her son's. Chandran an educated person, regards this old custom silly but his mother considers she "belonged to a generation which was

in no way worse than the present one for all its observances" and she vows that "as long as she lived she would insist on respecting the old customs". (70)

Chandran's mother is accustomed with the existing status of women. She never thinks taking dowry a bad practice or an insult on womanhood .She thinks taking dowry will upgrade their status .When his son compares dowry to extortion, she proudly argues that "my father gave seven thousand bin cash to your father, and over two thousand in silver vessels and spent nearly five thousand on wedding celebrations". (84)

Like Chandran's mother, Krishnan's mother in *The English Teacher* is fully satisfied with the age old tradition of India .She never raises any questions .As she speaks, "Unless I have cleaned the house, I can't go and bathe. After bathing, I've to worship, and only after that I can go near the cows" (29). Her character provides us with a glimpse of the traditional tasks and status of women in India .We find the same attitude in the character of Raju's mother in *The Guide*. She becomes startled hearing that Rosie has come their home alone with escort .She reacts, saying: "How courageous you are! In our day, we would not go to the street without an escort." (141) Hearing Rosie's story, she: "Living with a husband is no joke, as these modern girl imagine .No husband worth the name was ever conquered by powder and lipstick alone."(154) she advises Rosie to listen her husband whatever a man the husband may be like. Husbands may be "good husbands, unreasonable ones, savages one, slightly deranged ones .moody ones, and so on and so forth; but it was always the wife, by her doggedness , perseverance, and patience , that brought him round" (155) .

Though Chandran's mother is back dated in her ideas and views on many things, she supports the practice of dowry and the customs of sending marriage proposals from the bride's home first, but she does not think of woman's rights. To her, marriage is not a child's game, and a woman is not a doll that can be danced by a man according to his wish. She believes that a woman should have equal right like a man to choose or refuse somebody. Because of her belief in such rights and dignity of women she tells her son Chandra -when he is one-sidedly thinking whether he will like the girl named Susila and he does not, how he will tell the bride's family that he has not liked their girl- that his marriage Susila does not depends solely on his liking her; it equally depends on her liking him as well. Though Raju's mother is an old fashioned lady, believing that the age old tradition of India appreciates Rosie's education and capability of doing her things by herself. When she is informed that Rosie is an M.A., she calls her a brave girl and admires her thus: "Good, good, brave girl .Then you lack nothing in the world .You are not like us uneducated women .You will get on anywhere .You can ask for your railway ticket, call a police man if somebodies worries you and keep your money. What are you going to do? Are you going to join a government service and earn?" (142)

3. Emergence of New Women

While the old women are in dilemma, carrying out the age old customs and sometimes believing in some rights of women and appreciating girls' education, the young girls seem to have an advanced position in the society and they look forward.

They enjoy a considerable freedom without fearing Taboos and other social inhabitations are not so heavily clamped on them. They are aware of their female personality. They are free, have participation at micro levels in family matters .And the emergence of these new women launches Narayan's Women Liberty Movement. The first woman who among all Narayan's women seems to enjoy a better position in the superstitious society of Malgudi is Malati in *The Bachelor of Arts*. Malati is young, educated and assertive. She is outspoken in the patriarchal society. She is a marriageable girl of sixteen years but enjoys the freedom of having evening walks on the river bank. She stays on the river bank until darkness descends and returns home alone without any escort. Thus, she is free and is not forced to be confirmed always within the house like a show piece. She enjoys the status of an independent human being.

The second women is Susila who enjoys a better position than Malati's in *The English Teacher* .She is an educated ,outspoken and believes equal rights of women .She has an equal participation in all decisions of the family matters .This position of Susila in her husband's family has been possible because of her enriched education . Her studying Ivanhoe from Sir Walter Scott and Lamb's Tale from Shakespeare indicate her rich education. Besides, Susila reads the other variety of books. In fact , Narayan wanted to establish women as modern women who would be enriched in knowledge and education , but who at the same time would foster and enrich Indian traditional reality .Her liberty contained a book of hymns by a Tamil saint , a few selected stanzas of Kamba Ramayana , Palgrave's golden Treasury and leather bound Bhagavad Gita in Sanskrit . Susila is more advanced than the old women of her times in her thought .While in other novels of Narayan, people visit temple to seek Gods' and goddesses' blessings to have only male children and believe : the more children a house has , the more blessed by God the house has, Susila is completely satisfied as the mother of a female child .She is determined and even has secured a promise from her husband that Leela would be their only child . Actually, Susila is very much determined in her decision.

4. Two Sides of Women's Revolts Against Subordination

In *The Dark Room*, a pre independence novel published in 1938, Narayan first shows women as victimized though they were docile and subservient to men. Yet there was another group of women who were growing conscious of being exploited and victimized. *The Dark Room* which Narayan calls his "early testament of women's Liberty Movement" (*My Days*, 119) , portrays four women characters: Savitri , Shanta Bai Gangu and Poni , and all of them want to break the culturally accepted beliefs about women's status in the superstitious Hindu society in India. Narayan chooses Savitri as a protagonist for this novel, who like Ibsen's Nora, rebels against the forced loyalty and dedication of women. Savitri, a middle class house-wife having three school-going children is meek and obedient to her philandering and bullying husband Ramani . She serves him until she is middle aged, digesting all his injustice and betrayal. But she starts resenting when she sees her husband's intimation with Shanta Bai, a glamorous woman tempered with western craze. Being shocked by her husband, she realizes that she has been treated as a puppet, firstly by her father before marriage and secondly at her husband's

house, she grows into a rebel against the male dominated society in India. A meek Savitri turns against the mythical implication of her name, protesting: "I'm a human being. – 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"(85). Savitri leaves her husband empty-handed for establishing her as a human being without depending on others. But ironically, soon she discovers her self-dependant on men. She says "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 the revolt of Ibsen's Nora as they both protest against the patriarchal society. But Ibsen's Nora comes into conflict with Savitri in that Nora slams the door behind her husband and children never to return, while Savitri returns in humiliation to Ramani. As A.N.Kaul, in his article entitled "R.K.Narayan and 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).

Actually, Narayan does not advocate female subservitude. He draws the circumstances under which Savitri feels forced to walk out of the house and then to return. The novelist satirizes the hypocrisy of the male dominated society that uses even religion to exploit a woman. After leaving her house, Savitri finds a job and a place to stay in a priest's temple. Fakrul Alam, in his essay "Reading R.K.Narayan Post Colonially", 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 cast." Savitri's achievement from her revolt is that, she is not a traditional-bound woman accepting her fate as destined. She discovers the reason that makes women 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).

Again Narayan does not show only westernization to enhance the plight of women. Savitri's rival, the single career woman Shanta Bai who quotes Omar Khayyam, hates Indian mythological films and has a great interest for Garbo and Dietrich, is narrated as a destroyer of homes. Shanta Bai comes out full way, rejecting the traditional customs of women in the patriarchal society in India. She rejects her drunkard husband with her family and thus demolishes the four walls of the doll's house. But she perverts her feminine independence by devastating the peace of Savitri's family and by making Ramani, a womanizer. Thus, Narayan problematizes the long established position of women in the tradition bound orthodox society of India through Savitri's revolt, and shows his abhorrence towards westernized attitude by portraying Shanta Bai negatively as a drifter and wrecker of homes. However, while Savitri is vanquished and Shanta Bai is a destroyer of homes it is Savitri's close friend Gangu who succeeds in keeping a balance between tradition and her independence. Gangu is educated and is, as we find, training to be a film star, a professional musician, the Malgudi delegate to the All India

Women's Conference, and a politician. She gets full support for her school master husband who believes in women's emancipation. Narayan delineates another woman named Poni in *The Dark Room*. She is a wife of the blacksmith-burglar who saves Savitri's life from drowning. She is a childless middle aged woman who should be especially vulnerable in that society, but still she gets complete freedom dominance over her husband. Mari, Poni's husband, enjoys a sweet relationship with his dominating wife who is only most outspoken and the bravest character in the novel. Besides, Poni teaches the vanquished Savitri how to manage and treat a man: "keep the men under the rod, they will be all right. Show them that you care for them and they will tie you up and treat you like a dog."(105) Shanti in *Mr.Sampath*; *The Painter Of Malgudi* revolts against the traditional life of a widow. She refuses to wear white cloths as was customary for them. She becomes the mistress of Mr.Sampath and joins the celluloid world leaving her son to the care of strangers. But seeing the outside world unfriendly and not helpful for women, she finally returns to the life traditionally described for a widow in Malgudi.

Though Savitri and Shanti fail in their revolts against the patriarchal society of Malgudi, it comes as a source of inspiration for future women. Both of them realize their cause of retreat. The oncomers take lessons from them and equip themselves with the necessary weapons for want of which Savitri and Shanti have failed, and other inhibitions that have treated them as dolls and kept subservient to men.

5. Overcoming Barriers and Achieving Freedom

Narayan's women are now much advanced in thought and mentality. They strongly flout all traditional inhibitions and are also conscious of their dignity and rights. Now they are defying all traditional custom. Such a young woman is Bharati in *Waiting for the Mahatma*. Defying the traditional duties of a woman, Bharati dedicates her to the service of Gandhi. In fact, Bharati is a patriot who 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 corrupted people like Jagadish are busy to be enriched unscrupulously in the independent India by playing up their contributions made to the independence war, it is only Bharati, a woman who follows Gandhi's principles till the end and is named by Gandhi "daughter of India". After independence a great violence is spread, she accompanies Gandhi all India to establish peace and discipline and after Gandhi's death, moves here and there to finish the unfinished task of the father. Bharati's involvement in the liberation war of India and in the rebuild of post-war, India is surely a blow to the taboos which for long had kept women in servitude to men. *The Guide*, the most famous novel of Narayan in which he draws the character of a woman named Roise who defies almost all traditional customs to establish herself as a human being like Savitri in *The Dark Room*. While Savitri fails to establish her as a human being, Roise in *The Guide* is successful in her mission. She gets her emancipation and moves all over India without escort to work. Thus Savitri's failed revolutionary mission gets success in Roise twenty years later when India had already become independent. The Independence of the country had

brought about a great revolutionary change like political, social, economic and even religious milieu of Indian. A great change also come in the intelligentsia of women. Rosie, an M. A. in economics, challenges the orthodox Hindu concept of what women should be. She leaves her husband who is callous towards her feelings and comes out of the walls of his family on a path that was not smooth for women in the patriarchal society. Narayan satirizes the patriarchal society and delineates the character of Rosie with great sympathy. Rosie gives more importance to her personal interest than to the observation of social norms for women. She ignores all superstitions that thwart her independence and moves on in her own way with her back to the society's reaction and criticism. When her husband comes to her with passion, love and time for her, she enjoys the company of Raju, walking with him all over Malgudi and its surrounding sites, sitting with him beside the river Sarayu in the evening and even indulging him in her close room.

Rosie's first revolt is seen when she rejects the established custom of matching horoscopes and cast for marriage – a practice then held to be sacred in Hinduism. Jayant K. Biswal writes about the matching of horoscopes and cast: "For a marriage, horoscopes must be consulted, cast must be considered, and Malgudi holds the old way of marriage decided by parents and horoscopes." (11) But Rosie marries one archaeologist husband with no matching of horoscopes and no consideration of cast. Rosie recollects: "I had myself photographed clutching the scroll of the university citation in one hand, and sent it to the advertisement. Well we met, he examined me and my certificates, we went to a registrar and got married" (75).

Narayan's portrayal of the character of Rosie again exposes the cruelty and inhumanity of the patriarchal society of India. Though Rosie is educated, her education fails to raise her status. As she says: "We are viewed as public women. We are not considered respectable; we are not considered as civilized" (75). Even Marco wants to raise her as a puppet as if she were an illiterate woman unable to understand anything. Thus the society was blind between an educated Rosie and an illiterate woman. Rosie eventually comes out of this 'doll's house' and tries to stand on her feet firmly.

By rejecting both Marco and Raju from her life, Rosie strongly stands against the patriarchal society that confined them to home as puppet. An inner strength leads her to sore so far out of Marco's and even Raju's reach. Raju at last understands that "she would never stop dancingwhether I was inside the bars or outside, whether her husband approved of it or not. Neither Marco nor I had any place in her life, which had its own sustaining vitality and which she herself had underestimated all along." (222-223)

By rejecting the sacred relationship with Marco, Rosie fills up the unrequited dream of Savitri of *The Dark Room*. Savitri returns to her husband like a dead horse while Rosie neither goes back to her husband to be his worse half, nor to Raju taking shelter. Rather being frustrated, she becomes strong and experienced enough to guide herself properly without Marco or Raju beside her.

Finally, we get the echoing voices of all women of Narayan's previous novels in *The Painter of Sign*. They struggled to come out smashing the walls of the "doll's house". Like *The Dark Room*, this novel also has a protagonist named Daisy who defies the traditional customs of India. While Rosie in *The Guide* still has a traditional woman in herself, as is seen in her dependence first on her husband Marco, and then on her love Raju, Daisy is apparently modern in her spirit of independence. She protests against the established marital system of the society only at the age of thirteen when her prospective bridegroom visits her. Her individuality becomes apparent 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 that very moment, she takes decision to smash the wall 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 the trends about women in the prevailing society of Malgudi and turns into a bizarre figure wandering the country side 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). To remark 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 heart and soul dedicated to their projects – one of the archaeological survey in the Memphis 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 Liberty Movement', *The Painter of Signs* is its more pronounced representation (55-56).

Thus Daisy comes out of the doll's house and fulfils to the desire of those women in Narayan's novels, who launched the Women's Liberty Movement.

6. Conclusion

To uphold the status of women, Narayan follows a 'slow and steady method' to carry his Women's Liberty Movement' which actually launches in *The Dark Room* and comes to end in *The Painter Signs*, enclosing a long journey from Savitri to Daisy via Shanti, Bharati and Rosie. The remarkable feature of Narayan's Women Liberty Movement is that he neither encourages the western thought, nor endorses the moribund society of Malgudi in the process. He satirises the established customs that reduce a woman to a plaything of a man and thus creates a new, better position of women. But as an upholder of traditional values, he develops the movement within the traditions of Malgudi society, and so Shanti Bai is portrayed as a wrecker of home; Rosie takes the traditional name, Nalini; and Daisy leaves Malgudi.

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