

The Bonds of Matrimony and Portrayal of Its Heroine in the Major Novels of R. K. Narayan

Dr. Parth Dipakkumar Madhu

Assistant Lecturer, Saraswati College of Science, Viravada, Gujarat (India)

ARTICLE DETAILS

Article History

Published Online: 16 Sep 2019

Keywords

intellectual crisis, tradition and modernity, emerging class, marriage

*Corresponding Author

Email: parthmadhu007[at]gmail.com

ABSTRACT

The woman has been always the focus of many literary works in the Indian English Literature. In the age of growing intellectual crisis and more so in a developing nation like India. There has been a conflict between tradition and modernity specially in the portrayal of women. Indian English novelists have along placed their women characters within a tradition. A tradition bound woman is conditioned by conventions and she accepts the responsibility of being the custodian of family. She is one who is prepared to sacrifice her own comfort for the happiness of the others in the family. R. K. Narayan has also highlighted the woman class and sufferings of the emerging class of Indian women. His characters raise many questions regarding the conventional definition of class and marriage.

Indian Independence produced radical and lasting changes in Indian social and cultural life. Besides new technology, knowledge, Institution, beliefs and values also dominated the Indian social minds. Subsequently, many cultural practices changed slowly and they started acting as a barrier to successful social adjustment.

R. K. Narayan's in fact, is interested in the whole society. He tries to identify with the mundane realities and complex structure of society as perceived by women. His characters represent a group of declassed women, a set of educated women as well as educated traditional women. His novels deal with social issues and depict conflicts of women with family, with the male world and society in general.

The woman has been always the focus of many literary works in the Indian English Literature. In the age of growing intellectual crisis and more so in a developing nation like India .There has been a conflict between tradition and modernity specially in the portrayal of women. Indian English novelists have along placed their women characters within a tradition. A tradition bound woman is conditioned by conventions and she accepts the responsibility of being the custodian of family. She is one who is prepared to sacrifice her own comfort for the happiness of the others in the family. R. K. Narayan has also highlighted the woman class and sufferings of the emerging class of Indian women. His characters raise many questions regarding the conventional definition of class and marriage.

Women Class and Marriage hold a central place in R. K. Narayan's novels. The novelist presents an analysis of social issues along with various conflicting phases, which they generate. It becomes more interesting, hence, to analyze the bonds of matrimony and women class in his novels. He analyses in his novels the lives of women; in particular, along the axes of class and gender. R.K. Narayan himself has strong convictions about woman class and marriage. He believes that in a society, as traditionally male dominated as the Indian Society is, women have difficulties to find their identities. However, the modern Indian women, as represented by the

characters of R.K. Narayan's novels are definitely working towards the goal of defining their identities.

In the novels that have been taken into consideration, one finds that R.K Narayan has portrayed women in different roles- as mother, housewife, lover and guide. She could choose to conform to traditions and get married or she could choose to stay unmarried. Today, the choice is more open to the women. The situation of fifty years ago was very different. In treating of this, traditions and customs are viewed in the context of another important theme, viz. Marriage. What R.K. Narayan makes very clear is that marriage plays a very important role in a woman's life in Indian society.

Being sophisticated and independent does not prove to be an alternative for remaining bachelor. Society did not give the choice to the female. In the male-dominated society, women have been taught treated that they are the inferior. For centuries, women have remained under male suppression. All the scriptures of the world including 'The Bible', 'The Quran' and 'Manusmriti' have defined the role of women, placing them within the 'confines of the household'. Manu, the famous codifier of Hindu laws has viewed women solely as subject- as Mother and Wife.

Rosie, in *The Guide*, has been born into a family of traditional dancers. In order to get out of the inhuman circle of caste and birth and the stigmas attached to it, she gets herself educated and has a Master's degree in Economics. However, as she soon finds out, Indian society shuns women who are not married and does not look at women leading a lifestyle without a companion with a kind eye. Like Shanta Bai in *The Dark Room*, Rosie too laments that women like her.

... Are not considered respectable; we are not considered civilized.¹

Rosie desires to practice dance but is all too aware of the stigmas society attaches to a dancing girl. Faced with the choice of being a housewife or a dancer, she chooses the

former. She replies Marco's matrimonial advertisement and gets married. Her mother persuades her to marry Marco and she does readily, showing a complete absence of liberty and choice of a husband. It also shows that she marries out of her desire as well as the necessity for social approval. In fact, there is no love in the relationship. When you marry a person purely on the basis of objective reasons, the question of freedom and love does not arise. She says:

All the women in my family were impressed, excited that a man like him was coming to marry one of our class, and it was decided that if it was necessary to give up our traditional art, it was worth the sacrifice.²

Modern and Educated though she is, her views are, very much in line with what conventional society expected of a woman. Marriage was the final goal, even at the cost of her passion (dancing) and the suppression of her talents. M.K. Naik has rightly pointed out:

Rosie's submission to an arranged marriage follows the consideration of economic security and high social standing which is very much an obtaining reality.³

The attitude of the older generation of women towards marriage is brought out in the portrayal of Chandran's mother in *The Bachelor of Arts*. Faith in astrology and the thought of arranged marriage dates back to the age of the ancient. Continuity of these thinking is re-instated by Narayan in the scene when Chandran's mother rejects Malathi's coalition because their horoscopes do not match. Narayan accepts that free communication between an orthodox boy and girl before marriage is impossible. Malathi whom Chandran first falls in love with, and Susila whom he later courts and marries.

Narayan is a conservative and is deep-rooted in his culture. At the same time, it is my contention that he is not trying to present a picture wherein all his female characters conform to traditions, get married, etc. He also presents the other kind of woman who lives without the bonds of matrimony. In doing so, he is being realistic because, all said and done; society is not made up of only married men. Narayan chooses to be realistic rather than present an idealistic picture of a society with only married women.

Shanta Bai and Rosie the heroine also falls into this category. Shanta Bai has questioned the traditions and conventions of society. She defies them in leaving her husband and ending her marriage. The need to be free from the bonds of matrimony and commitment is great. In the modern woman's quest for self-fulfillment, apart from facing personal and social conflicts; she also has to suffer the painful experience of severing the family bonds and re-establishing herself. R.K.Narayan has created Shanta Bai not just to reveal or portray the other type of women but also to point out in some way the hypocrisy implied in middle class value systems. Shanta Bai represents the pseudo- emancipated woman who,

in her outward manner, seems to know exactly what she wants and how to get it. And get it she does.

In the novels, traditions, conventions and marriage are binding and restrict R.K.Narayan's women from expressing their inner selves. However, there are other dimensions to Narayan's attitudes and some of these are seen in his treatment of a happy marriage in *The English Teacher* and in his portrayal of its heroine, Suseela. Suseela is the representative of woman class who epitomizes what is supposed as best in Indian womanhood. Krishnan, her husband, grows along with her in love and caring and learns life a new with her, his partner in life. Suseela has been portrayed by Narayan as a typical Hindu wife. It is rather an idealized portrayal of an Indian wife. Narayan's concept of a classical Hindu wife is epitomized in the character of Suseela. Even after death, she turns into a spirit and, "undertakes the task of guiding her husband, Krishna, through his maze of grief and apathy to a higher harmony of the soul beyond life and death." (38) In doing so, she fulfils the classical concept of womanhood. The Hindu wife has to adjust to the immense psychological demands placed on her.

The classical Hindu wife has to be the wife, the counselor, the playmate, the partner, the guide, the beloved, the disciple and learned enough to educate her husband. Suseela conforms to this concept, even after death and guides Krishnan towards a higher knowledge of the soul. The small family, constant and nurtured by one and all shows how well the traditional marital set-up could work, given the right conditions and partners. Though it is a rather idealistic relationship, R.K. Narayan wants to actually show us though this relationship is the positive side of tradition. Tradition does not seem and need not be merely restrictive. It could also be affectionate, protective and nurturing. It is remarkable to note that in the novels, even when romantic love is fulfilled in the traditional roles within marriage. It ends in unhappy or disillusionment. Susila dies and one of the terrible lessons of the undoubtedly loneliness. Shanta Krishnaswami seems to echo R. K. Narayan's point of view when she says:

Tradition is an emblem of the promise of happiness that human society holds out to rational and well balanced couples in married life.⁴

One finds the treatment of marriage rather than romantic love in Narayan's novels. Romantic love leading to marriage is one of the themes in his novels and this theme is played in the treatment of disillusionment within marriage. Romantic love in a society where free choice is restricted and which is determined by fate and astrology is rather a rare experience, and Narayan in sociable with this view, is being realistic and practical. Again, he does not impose this opinion on his readers. In fact, he gives his heroes and heroines the experience of breaking away from the system, learning through their own mistakes. In *The Bachelor of Arts*, Chandran falls in love and defies tradition, only to get disappointed. Eventually, he is shown as accepting family ties and customs.

R.K. Narayan's women characters fall into two types. In the novels under study, Suseela, Savitri, Chandran's mother, Krishnan's mother and Raju's mother fall into one category. They are gentle, passive and loving women. Conventional rooted in customs and traditions, these women are generally housewives. Suseela, Savitri, Chandran's mother, Krishnan's mother and Raju's mother, all fulfill the requirements of the concept of a traditional wife of mother.

Does this mean that Narayan opposes the idea of a woman leading her own life without a companion? Narayan certainly does not criticize the modern outlook projected by women like Shanta Bai. While he looks at human life realistically, seeing it with all its flaws. He does not find anything disgraceful in the likes of Shanta Bai. If society was to be made up of only one type of woman, it would not be realistic. Moreover, if all his women were to think and do alike, everyone would be mere puppets in a show where life, destiny and character were pre-destined. There would be no scope for

human fulfillment. Life is an imperfect affair and one has to live it in the best possible way. This seems to be Narayan's approach.

R.K. Narayan is a traditionalist in his characterizations. He does not draw his heroines as extraordinary women. He is not preoccupied with religion nor does he draw his women as being product of the transitional age. His heroines are typically Indian and are drawn with the depth. No two women characters are alike yet are found in their characters. He tells the story as a distant observer and leaves the interpretation to the reader. The unsaid is sometimes more powerful and one cannot but find an underlying similarity in the superficially different circumstances. Reaction and mental make up and reaction are determined to a large extent by the fact of their being Indian women. The extent to which family, tradition, social relationships, superstition play their part in a woman's life is something that can be found only in India.

Reference

1. Narayan, R.K, *The Guide* (U.K, 1988), Chapter 5, pp.73
2. Narayan, R.K, *The Guide* (U.K, 1988), Chapter 5, pp.74
3. Naik, M.K., *The Ironic Vision; A Study of the Fiction of R.K.Narayan*, (New Delhi, 1983) pp.42
4. Krishnaswami, Shanta, *The Woman in Indian Fiction in English*, New Delhi, 1984, pp.104