

Indian Womanhood: A Picture of Freedom and Fear in R.K. Narayan's *The Dark Room*

- Prashant Mahajan & Pragya Gupta

Abstract: This paper is an attempt to study freedom and fear in the women characters of the novel, *The Dark Room*. Here, Narayan draws the poignant picture of a middle class south Indian domesticity run by an irritable husband. It is a tale of a tormented wife, Savitri. She is a true symbol of traditional Indian womanhood.

Keywords: R.K. Narayan, Indian Womanhood, Domesticity.

R.K. Narayan is one of the greatest of Indian writers of English. He occupies remarkable position among the top ranking Indian novelists in English, for his great achievements. About the writings of the novel in India as a literary phenomenon, K.R.S. Iyengar says:

For the novel, properly so called, we have to wait till the latter half of nineteenth century when the Western impact on India's cultural front has resulted among other things in the development of formal written prose in the regional languages, first as a financial and presented as an artistic medium. (314)

R.K. Narayan is the most artistic of the Indian writers; his sole aim begins to give aesthetic satisfaction, and not to use his art as a medium to serve some social purpose. He gives the reader a picture that strikes him as typical of everyday reality. His picture of life is always true to facts. *The Dark Room*, published in 1938, is the third novel of R.K. Narayan, which did not receive much appreciation. It is entreated only on the plight of women locked up within the confines of an orthodox society. In the novel there are many interesting aspects as the concept of Indian atmosphere and reality. But this paper is an attempt to study freedom and fear in the women characters of the novel. In the novel, Narayan draws the poignant picture of a middle class south Indian domesticity run by an irritable husband. It is a tale of a tormented wife, Savitri. Ramani, the office secretary of Engladia Insurance Company, is very domineering in his ways, and hence governs his home according to his own sweet will. Savitri is a true symbol of traditional Indian womanhood. All goes well, till there arrives at the scene a beautiful lady, Shanta Bai, who is able to seduce Ramani. Ramani is attracted by her beauty. This upsets the peace of his domestic life, till seeing no way of correcting her husband, Savitri revolts against him and leaves the house to commit suicide. She goes to the river and throws herself into it. But the blacksmith, Mari, saves her. Persuaded by Mari's wife Ponni, she goes to their village and lives upon an independent living of her own by working in temple. The feeling of home

sickness and anxiety for her children however, soon make her restless. She realizes the futility of her attempt at escape from her bonds and returns home. The novelist presents the aesthetic realization of the predicament of women in a particular social context. Savitri, the heroine is a traditional Indian woman, who leads a life of neglect and emotional torture and suffers under the dominant authority, her husband and always remain faithful to her husband and home. In her, Narayan depicts all the peculiarities of a suffering and drudging middle class Indian women. She is a model Indian wife-modest, obedient, religious and loving. Her only anxiety is the welfare of her husband and children and her only happiness is their happiness. Generally she is satisfied with her environments and has no desire to break away from it. But if circumstances compel her, as they do in her case, she is forced to leave her house to assert her personality and turn over a new leaf in her life. By act of leaving her home, she acquires freedom from her responsibilities as a mother and housewife. She realizes her dignity as a human being. While greatly excited by her husband's infidelity, she says to him through her heavy breathing:

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).

She also realizes that a woman is denied the dignity of a living human being because she is dependent for her feels that in this materialistic world, "No one who couldn't live by herself had a right to exist" (94). It is to assent her right as a feeling and thinking creature of flesh and blood that she leaves her husband and thinks of starting her life independent of any man's support. After her escape from her husband's house, she does not accept charity from any one and remains hungry till she earns her own meals. When pressed by Ponni to eat some fruits, she says emphatically, "I am resolved never to accept food or shelter which I have not earned" (122). But, the fear of loneliness in the temple at night, anxiety for the welfare of her children, a feeling of home sickness and accustomed comforts seized her resolve to lead an independent life and brings her back to her house and its routine life:

I am afraid to go even a hundred yards from the house unsorted; yes, afraid, afraid of everything. One definite thing in life is Fear. Fear, from the cradle to the funeral pyre, and even beyond that, fear of torture in the other world... Afraid of one's father, teachers and everybody in early life, afraid of one's husband, children, and neighbours in later life -fear, fear, in one's heart till the funeral pyre was lit, and then year of being sentenced by Yama to be held down in a cauldron of boiling oil. (91)

Nostalgia for children and home makes her realize the futility of her attempt to escape from them. As the realization of her own inescapable weakness draws in her mind, she cries in a fit of utter despair, "What despicable creations of God are we that we want' exist without a support.

I am like a bamboo pole which cannot stand without a wall to support it. .” (146). Apparently it appears that the object for which she has so boldly left her house and husband is defeated for her return does not seem to have brought about any change in her position or life. The blow dealt by Savitri's revolt gives a significant hint of the strength of woman and foreshadows the probable consequences of the disharmony between husband and wife. Savitri moves from the darkness of house to the darkness of the temple, both the house and the temple being considered as sacred social institution, in spite of the oppression they inflict. Shanta Bai is another important character in the novel. She is beautiful, glamorous and charming not very particular about chastity and virtues. She was described in the novel as more modernized and unconventional in her views of life. She says to Ramani, "Oh, I love unconventional things,... Otherwise I shouldn't be here, but nursing children and cooking for a husband" (62). Shanta Bai lives an independent life, life of freedom by earning her own. In her there is no such feelings of fear as Savitri has, she proudly declares, "If I had a family to hinder me shouldn't have come here with my application" (94). In the character of Shanta Bai, Narayana has given a vivid description of artful and cunning flirts, whose only vocation is to satisfy their own requirement and wreck the domestic lives of many as indiscreet man. She combines her independence with a shrewd opportunism that characteristically belongs to that New Civilization. Ramani's romance with her and his willing servility to become a toy in her hands only makes him look ridiculous. She explains her own philosophy of life in the following words:

Tonight I feel like pacing the whole earth up and down. I won't sleep. I feel like roaming all over the town and the whole length of the river. I will laugh and dance. That's my philosophy of life. Laugh, clown, laugh it was a film I saw years ago. Laugh, clown, laugh, though your heart be torn. (69)

Narayan has created many strange, fascinating and memorable male but among his women characters, none even Rosie of *The Guide* is so impressive and well-drawn as Shanta Bai. Ponni is another character of the novel. She is the Wife of Mari. She maintains a strange but sweet relationship with her husband. Their peculiar world seems to be a pleasing liberation from the oppressive inhibition. She lives her life as she likes, not confined within the boundary of rules and regulations. In her life, we find freedom that is freedom to live a life, as she likes. And not fear, as we find in Savitri's life. Ponni said to Savitri, "Sister remember this, keep the men under the rod, and they will be all right" (105). To conclude, we can say that the atmosphere in the house is peaceful and pleasant if the master is in good humour. And also how a helpless woman expresses her anger against her husband by lying hungry in a dark room and how her husband and children react to her self-inflicted torture. The various problems of household life which are often faced and witnessed by all of us in our own life have been rendered very faithfully and

artistically by the novelist. Narayan's women emerge stronger than their male counterparts; therefore they dominate the page of the novel. It suggests no solutions to the problem; still it clearly brings out Narayan's concern for the Savitris of our country.

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