

R.K. Narayan's *The Dark Room* – A Critical Approach

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ABSTRACT

Rasipuram Krishna Swamy Narayan is popularly known as R. K. Narayan. He is, beyond all shade of doubt, one of the most distinguished Indian novelists writing in English. He is a keen observer of human life and the problems that are involved there in. He looks at life with absolute detachment and with artistic objectivity. He presents life as it is and as he sees and understands it. Narayan's range of the vision of life is limited to the people of the middle class. An artist is known by what he omits; and in this aspect, Narayan is compared with Jane Austen and Narayan is content with his 'little bit of ivory just so many inches wide. Narayan's third novel entitled *The Dark Room*, which is the least characteristic of Narayan as a novelist, is ideological in theme. He looks like a feminist in this novel espousing the cause of an ideal Hindu married woman who has been savagely mistreated by her tyrannical husband. Savitri, the female protagonist, is conceived as an ideal Hindu wife embodying all the virtues of an archetypal womanhood; she is a dutiful wife and a loving mother; she is perpetually ill-treated by her peevish, ill-tempered, cynical and sadistic husband – Ramani, an Insurance Officer in Malgudi. *The Dark Room* as a novel of protest serves its purpose. It is one of the earliest attempts at presenting the 'plight' of a middle class married woman; and Savitri is not a solitary case of this type. She is symbolic of the unfortunate tribe of women; enlightened society needs to discover ways and means – and there are the right ways and means – of emancipating women like Savitri and her ilk.

Keywords: plight, humiliation, feminist, disparaging, embodiment.

The Dark Room, Narayan's third novel, was published in 1938. His debut novel rather novella "Swami and Friends" was published in 1935-and it enjoyed a phenomenal popularity since the adult reader is transported back into his carefree, golden period of boyhood days, indulging in puckish pranks and juvenile antics, which might annoy the seriously-minded elderly people but are always entertaining-It was a world of innocence and filled with harmless acts of folly and frolic; and his second novel "The Bachelor of Arts" which was published in 1937, the hero or protagonist of which is Chandran, a college student in his B.A. final year. He is at the advanced stage of adolescence when he leaves home, after all his efforts having been proved futile to marry a girl with whom he has become infatuated since their horoscopes did not tally. Being disappointed and dejected, he becomes a sanyasi and after a bout of checkered career, returns home and marries a young, lovely maiden of his parents' choice and happily compromises with his fortuitous circumstances. At times, it seems that compromise is the inevitable part of life, although it entails some small sacrifices.

One would naturally expect that the next novel i.e. the third novel would deal with a young married man; for that would be in the rightness of things, as a sequel to the bachelor and fulfilling the norms of Varnashra Dharma.

But contrary to our expectation, Narayan's third novel entitled *The Dark Room*, which is the least characteristic of Narayan as a novelist, is ideological in theme. He looks like a feminist in this novel espousing the cause of an ideal Hindu married woman who has been savagely mistreated by her tyrannical husband. Savitri, the female protagonist, is conceived as an ideal Hindu wife embodying all the virtues of an archetypal womanhood; she is a dutiful wife and a loving mother; she is perpetually ill-treated by her peevish, ill-tempered, cynical and sadistic husband – Ramani, an Insurance Officer in Malgudi. Savitri, the helpless victim, ill-fated wife and

mother of three children, Babu, Kamala and Sumati, suffers a hell at the hands of her despotic husband for no fault of hers. He is the very *bête noire* of all the members of his family including the cook-cum-servant Ranga. Savitri's home is anything but cheerful, the whole atmosphere is dull drab and dreary. Savitri, in spite of herself, is morose and gloomy-for there is no whit of that flavour of domestic felicity there. It is more like a prison-cell than like a home – a prison guarded by a heartless warden. It is, metaphorically speaking, a little inferno where sorrow and suffering choose to dwell there forever. Such is Savitri's wifely-life in that god-forsaken-house.

A young married lady, having deserted her husband, has been recruited by Ramani as an assistant officer in his Insurance Company; and she turns out to be a flirt and a woman of doubtful virtue. She is, no doubt, a seductress – and Ramani, a spoilt man, having no scruples, makes advances to her and they have, in no time, reached a stage of compromise. When Savitri finds out this illicit affair between Shanta Bai and her husband, it became the last straw; she could hardly bear it.

The Dark Room doesn't bear comparison either with his two previous novels or those that followed it. Narayan seems to have been possessed by this thought of gross injustice done to an ideal wife at the hands of her self-willed husband who is nothing short of a brute and tyrannical bully! *The Dark Room* is an incipient attempt to touch upon the 'feminist' issue, the unaccountable plight of a married woman so inhumanly treated. R. K. Narayan's *The Dark Room* offers a feminist view of the contemporary South Indian society. *The Dark Room* is used as a symbol that entails the frustration of a tormented, helpless Indian wife. There is an element of irony-inherent in the situation; a maiden at a marriageable age entertains dreams of happiness in her prospective married life in the company of her young husband; but in nine out of ten cases, these delightful dreams turn out to be nightmarish. The basic irony inherent in

the life of a Hindu woman is that in order to disburden her parents, gets married and wishing to lead a free, independent life as a wife and mistress of the house finds herself like one who has fallen from a frying pan into the fire! However, it is noted that R. K. Narayan has hinted about the exploitation of the wife by the husband.

Narayan writes in his autobiography,

"I was somehow obsessed with a philosophy of woman as opposed to men, her constant oppression. This must have been an early testament of women's lib movement. Man assigned her secondary place and kept her there with such subtlety and cunning that she herself began to lose all notions of her independence, individuality stature and strength. A wife in an orthodox milieu of Indian society was an ideal victim of such circumstances." (*My Days*-119)

Most of the early Indian reviewers had disparaged this aspect of the novel. The critical reader is at a loss to know about the real motive of the author. Does he want to expose the plight of a married woman in her domestic domain where she is inhumanly treated? Do all married women pass through these excruciating sufferings that Savitri most undeservedly and unfortunately is experiencing? Does the author want to generalize the fact that all married women have to undergo the same fate as Savitri has? Or does the author wish to create a savage-like husband: a male-chauvinist, cynic, sadist and bully, all rolled in one? If so, the author has immensely succeeded!

Ramani seems to have imbibed the spirit of the ugly side of the tradition; tradition has given men of Ramani's sort that a woman (a wife) is but a piece of his chattel; but they never realize that a woman is as much a wife to man as much a mother to his children. He proves himself a typical Indian man full of male chauvinism with unbending behaviour.

K. N. Singh rightly points out:

“The hero Ramani, a man of middle-class family, belongs to the old conservative set of husbands and regards marriage an institution in which a wife has to have implicit obedience.” (86)

The Dark Room Narayan's third novel was published in 1938. Somehow this novel which deals with the life of an ideal wife and loving mother, who has been tortured and mistreated by a brutish, husband Ramani. He is at the officer secretary of the Engladia Insurance Company situated in Malgudi. The theme seems to be un Narayan like, since he takes a feminist' stance, exposing the brutal treatment meted out to a woman who is the very embodiment of all wifely virtues that tradition enjoins on an ideal wife; such men as Ramani, would always turn a blind eye to all that is good in society.

Narayan has painted his wicked character in a few masterly strokes. He has the least respect even for his father who advises him to continue his studies; he vainly retorts that elderly man that he-Ramani-knows what he should do! The implication in his tone is as much as to say, “Please, dad, mind your own business; there's no one here so stupid as to seek your advice.”

His very presence is forbidding and it vitiates the whole domestic atmosphere. Neither the wife nor his children have ever been cheerful in his presence. His sinister person dispels the natural felicity of that sweet homely atmosphere. He is a kill-joy in the domain of their domesticity. He has neither the husbandly affection for his wife nor any fatherly affection for his children.

The Dark Room has failed to attract the reader's attention; the reason not far to seek; it lacks his characteristic Narayan comic sense which emerges from that unfailing element of irony which is not there. The whole atmosphere of Savitri's domestic life is grim drab, dour and somber. The lady of the house, Savitri and her three children along with the servants, all of them live in perpetual state of terror. His over-bearing manner and domineering presence turns the home atmosphere into a kind of inferno.

Ramani is an indifferent husband and a loveless parent. Throughout the novel, there is no solitary occasion when Ramani has spoken to his wife, Savitri with warmth; and on those few occasions when he appeared to have spoken softly, there is a sting of irony in his tone. Savitri as a Brahmin maiden, well trained in Hindu ethos, knows how to lead the role of an ideal wife. As ill luck would have it, she had a loveless, peevish, self-willed husband. He is a domestic tyrant and Savitri is a monument of patience; she endures humiliation of every description at his hand but when she has come to know of the liaison between Shanta Bai and Ramani, it has become the last straw; and she could no longer bear it and has made up her mind to commit suicide; that is the last resort for a woman in her sad, helpless condition but she has been fortunately rescued by a blacksmith-cum-burglar when Savitri jumped into the river; Ponni, the blacksmith's wife, is kind enough to give her shelter in her poor house and takes pity on her and in genuine sympathy wants to help her in every possible way; having come to know that Savitri is a Brahmin, she feels sorry that a Brahmin lady doesn't touch or eat anything that a person of a low-caste cooks or touches; Savitri passes through a kind of purgatorial privations and hardships for no fault of hers.

There is none of the atmosphere of a home here in Ramani's house. It is more or less a guest house for him. The home of Ramani should have been a kind of a little Eden with a beautiful and obedient wife and three lovely children but his forbidding presence turns his home into a kind of hell for the rest of the members. An ominous atmosphere envelops the whole domain of their domesticity. And when he leaves home for the office in his Chevrolet, peace settles down, just as calm returns after the storm.

Savitri, brought up in a South Indian Brahmin family, having thoroughly imbibed the Hindu ethos, has made a perfect ideal wife. Tradition has taught all well-bred young girls to hold

their husbands to in high esteem, showing utmost reverence; Savitri is an embodiment of all wifely virtues Ramani and Savitri have been married for fifteen years and they have three lovely children: Babu, their eldest son and Sumati and Kamala their daughters. As a father, he has never treated them with filial love and affection. To quote William Walsh to describe the different shades of Savitri's personality:

Savitri is a middle class but not highly educated woman, who is burdened by the immense weight of the Indian past, by her caste, her religion and her role as a wife and a mother.... he is an ordinary, amiable housewife; not deeply dissatisfied with her allotted part, given on occasion to boredom with its pointlessness, but increasingly oppressed by her loud, assertive and elegant husband. (61)

He is fixated on his wife, Savitri and has never been normal in his dealings with her; any normal man, in Ramani's place, would have adored Savitri for being an ideal wife and loving mother. Her greatest misfortune, it seems, is to be the wife of a tyrannical husband. Savitri, according to Hindu Dharma, has learnt to put up with all the tortures inflicted on her by her sadistic husband. He is neither a stickler nor a disciplinarian in the strictest sense of the term. His moods are quite unpredictable; in a word, he is bumptious and self-opinionated prig!

It is common knowledge that in Shakespeare's dramas, the opening scenes strike the keynote of the whole play; and the reader is made to believe in the wisdom of the saying that coming events cast their shadows before. The novel *The Dark Room* doesn't seem to be characteristic of Narayan's novelistic genius. Narayan especially in this novel takes an ideological view of a domestic issue. Savitri, an ideal Hindu wife, has been for no earthly reason put to so much of mental torture, almost to the end of her life by her peevish, sadistic husband, Ramani, an office secretary of Engladia Insurance Company; if a husband ill-treats his wife, there must be some reason for it; some wives try to dominate their husbands in everything and if the husband is a

tough guy and egoistical, he will try to cut her to normal size; but Savitri has never been given a chance to oppose her husband, for she knows pretty well that her husband is self-willed and head strong. He is a little perverse; and is not easily amenable to reason; especially, where his wife is concerned. And Savitri has lived with him for fifteen long years; and he has three lovely children through her. Having children is no real sign or proof that there is a strong bond of love between them; True love binds man and wife emotionally despite many a difference in other respects. We know that Savitri has been more than half dead in spirit; and the other half survives only for her children. Narayan very well succeeds in presenting Savitri as a victim of a ruthless self-willed cynic; he has the least consideration for the feelings of others; but for all this, he is not a misanthrope; he is not even a misogynist: if he were a misogynist, he wouldn't employ Shanta Bai as a trainee under him; he is capable of romantic, amorous feelings and he takes Shanta Bai on joy-rides to the banks of the Sarayu by moonlight; as an Insurance secretary, he must be a man of successful dealings in public affairs. His amoral dealings with Shanta Bai reveal that he is nothing if not practical. A.V. Krishna Rao writes about the Indian tradition:

The darker shades of moral aberration are noticed in this novel *The Dark Room*. Ramani, temperamentally a callous man, violates the traditional family morality under the alien influence of modernity represented by the coquettish Shanta Bai with her Greta-Garbo manners. (74)

But, then, what must be the reason for his being so indifferent, cynical and peevish towards so good a lady as Savitri? Our inference may not be much wide of the mark if we attribute all this on his part towards his wife to her being too traditional and unromantic either in her looks or in her approach to him or is it the reason that familiarity breeds contempt or is he a psycho who needs to be sent to a psychiatrist's clinic?

The badge of most middle class women is sufferance; and Savitri is the most pitiable one. It is said that the curse of God visits upon men in multiple forms; and in Savitri's life, that curse visits on her in the form of a tyrannical husband. What cannot be cured must be endured; but human endurance has its own limits. Experience tells us quite clearly that it is degrading for a man and woman to live together when one refuses to accept other as a socially responsible individual with independent views or ideas.

"Nothing seemed to matter now, not even one's children" This sense of indifference seems to reach the highest pitch as a response to what Ramani tells her rather bluntly and in a mood of utter nonchalance that "the children will get on splendidly well without her and gave her a mock advice that she need not worry about them at all. No one is indispensable in this world". These cynical words of Ramani have hurt her beyond surgery; and these remorseless words of Ramani have become the last straw on her back and she has made up her mind to put an end to her life by throwing herself into the river Sarayu.

When a person is in the grip of a sense of depression, and is determined to commit suicide, it does admit of no other thought; such a person is completely possessed only by the thought of committing suicide: and the thing is done. Especially as the psychologists tell us, those who wish to commit suicide innately suffer from 'suicidal tendency' or 'death-wish' and in a moment of irresistible impulse, the final act is committed; and at this fatal moment, the faculty of 'reason' is completely dethroned or eclipsed before the final act is performed!

But Savitri doesn't suffer from any death-wish; she even in the most depressing moments, has not allowed thoughts of suicide to hover about her. But when Ramani, in a mood of ruthless rejection, tells her that the children no longer need her protection and that no one is indispensable in this world, she has been hurt beyond surgery. These words of Ramani, pierce

through the very core of her being and her thread-bare-patience gives way to thoughts of suicide. All these days she suffered and suffered a hell at the hands of Ramani; but she has borne all this excruciating suffering for the sake of her children; All mothers, especially mothers of middle class families get used to sufferings of every description just for the sake of their children! A women's patience, in suffering any amount of hardship in life, has been well glorified by poets and writers of all ages; but few women who possess even an iota of self-respect can tolerate the very thought that 'the other woman's sharing her husband as an equal partner! And this exactly is the crux of the whole problem – the other woman – and Ramani's persistence in continuing his illicit affair with Shanta Bai is like rubbing salt into her (Savitri's) wound!

The Dark Room as a novel of protest serves its purpose. It is one of the earliest attempts at presenting the 'plight' of a middle class married woman; and Savitri is not a solitary case of this type. She is symbolic of the unfortunate tribe of women; enlightened society needs to discover ways and means – and there are the right ways and means – of emancipating women like Savitri and her ilk. A grave problem of the first magnitude, it should be deemed. Narayan, through the mouth-piece of Savitri offers a kind of solution-that education, in such a tragic context, as Savitri finds herself enmeshed in the story, is a possible answer offered by Narayan! And Shanta Bai, her character apart, leads a confident life as she is educated and can get some kind of employment to eke out her livelihood without depending on others.

The story of *The Dark Room* would have ended in a tragic manner, hadn't Mari, the blacksmith, the lock mender cum burglar chanced to pass by that way and rescued Savitri from her perilous condition. But Narayan who is an incurable optimist and a confirmed man of comic vision, would not have such an end! He would not have such an end in an atmosphere which is

dour and somber: So he has chosen to introduce a fortuitous turn of circumstance to let the tragic shade be subdued beneath his inevitable comic vision.

Critics are often tempted to draw comparison between Ibsen's "A Doll's House" and Narayan's *The Dark Room*. For instance, Nora of "A Doll's House" abandons home, husband and children as a challenge to assert herself and to tell the world who is right? She or Society? But in Narayan's *The Dark Room* Savitri leaves home, husband and children in utter despair and despondency to commit suicide only to get an exit out of the world of endless, undeserving suffering. Narayan leaves a suggestion that education is one of the ways of solving the problem of this kind. And he contrasts Shanta Bai's position of independence to lead her own life because she is a graduate with Savitri's only to emphasize this fact that education for a woman stands in good stead in the hour of her dire need. The European playwright's view point is different from the view point of the Indian novelist. They are incompatible with each other either in spirit or in treatment. Nora leaves home throwing a challenge in the face of society in a spirit of assertion of her individual self-whereas, Savitri returns home in a spirit of compromise with her lot – be it for the sake of her children. "A doll's House" is a question-asking drama. Once, Ibsen said that it was not the business of the writer to offer solution to the problem. Perhaps, he implies that it is the whole responsibility of the society as to how best it could solve this problem.

Narayan, a champion of Hindu ethos, presents Savitri as one who is steeped in Hindu tradition and Savitri says that a woman has to live constantly in a state of fear to the end of her life; and this fear continues to haunt her even beyond the grave that Yama might punish her for being disobedient to her husband. Thus these two works have nothing in common except that they deal with the same issue of a married woman's predicament in a house where the husband totally ignores

existence of his wife. They are poles apart viewed from point of view of the dramatist except for this fact that the women protagonists in both the plays have been ill-treated by male protagonists. One striking difference between them is Helmer of "A Doll's House" is a self-opinioned person believing that a woman is incapable of performing anything in this practical world but Ramani of *The Dark Room* is an adulterous rogue besides being a crude despot in the domestic sphere. Narayan's *The Dark Room* as a piece of feminist critique touches on two pertinent points. And to underscore this point, Narayan draws a contrast between the two female characters Savitri and Shanta Bai. As a young lady of South-Indian orthodox Brahmin family, she is not given proper education and the want of it renders her helpless after abandoning her home, husband and children whereas Shanta Bai is able to get a job because she has acquired B.A. degree which fills her with confidence and enables her to get a job, even after divorcing her husband; and secondly, Narayan points out that the Hollywood films are making their inroads into Malgudi Suburban civilization to leave the marks of modernization. Santa Bai, for instance, models her manners on Greta Garbo and she comments rather in a denunciatory tone that Malgudi must outgrow the stage of the production of the nonsensical mythological picture like the Ramayana. Narayan at least in an undertone makes his comment that the Malgudi's quiet atmosphere, slowly but steadily gives way to modernity; thus Malgudi is no exception to the law of inevitable change at least in its physical and materialistic content.

And in conclusion it may be observed that Nora of "A Doll's House" leaves her home, husband and children in a spirit of challenge but Savitri of *The Dark Room* returns home as a defeatist, putting her pride aside; and all this, for the sake of her children. If we stretch the argument to its logical conclusion, it can't hold water. Did she not think of her children at the time of leaving them behind with a view to committing suicide? But for the accidental appearance of the lock-repairer-cum-burglar, the

story would have ended as a grim tragedy. But, as we know pretty well, Narayan, by temperament, is much averse to giving tragic end to his stories; and, moreover, the traditionalist in him comes at the right moment to give the story a tradition-upholding-close.

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