

Depiction of Women in the Selected Works of R. K. Narayan- An Analysis

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ABSTRACT

R. K. Narayan, one of the greatest Indian writers and a major contributor to English fiction, has presented the lives of women around and depicted women characters with varied facets in his fiction. Most of his works reflect the predicament of women and the social reality in which they try to assimilate themselves at times. He is a writer who could portray women depicting their psychological urges. Narayan's works depict the role of women in family and society and show a gradual transformation in these women characters and evolve them to their best at the societal spectrum. He portrayed his women characters with all shades creating a signature effect with regard to characterization of women in society.

This paper examines the various female characters – modern as well as traditional and the differences in their thought patterns, habits, ambitions, beliefs, conduct, aspirations and their way of looking at life. My research focuses on few observations on the portrayal and depiction of women in the selected works of R. K. Narayan with a view of exploring the female characters and different aspects of human nature and human life. This paper also proves the fact that apart from providing aesthetic pleasure, these selected literary texts depict the various facades of women in our everyday lives. It also portrays a paradigm shift that the female characters experience by rendering a message to the world around. This paper gives few insights into life and the predicaments which as human beings we falter on. This paper also suggests and recommends the readers to explore such texts and characters to develop an aesthetic ability and a sense of appreciation for the works of R. K. Narayan.

Keywords- Women, Fiction, Human nature, Characterization.

I. INTRODUCTION

R. K. Narayan, one of the greatest Indian writers and a major contributor to English fiction, has presented the lives of women around and depicted women characters with varied facets in his fiction. Most of his works reflect the predicament of women and the social reality in which they try assimilating themselves, at times. He is a writer who could portray women depicting their psychological urges. Narayan's works depict the role of women in family and society and show a gradual transformation in these women characters and evolve them to their best at the societal spectrum. He portrayed his women characters with all shades creating a signature effect with regard to the characterization of women in the

society. The characters thus woven bring out a complex piece of work with a novel entity reflecting varied aspects of human nature and human life.

As a matter of fact, it is very well known that R. K. Narayan is one of the greatest Indian writers who contributed to English literature. He is credited with creating a fictional imaginary town in South India, called 'Malgudi'. He essentially focuses on the middle class characters of that fictional town. He has painted both the male and female characters in a simple fashion in his writings. In most of his works, we find at least one female character who occupies an important place in the story. Narayan holds his grip on his characters at the psychological front. Through his writings it is quite clear that he has a deeper understanding of human psychology

as his characters are very much close to reality. It is not an exaggeration, if we say that he had a great insight into the emotional world of the women folk. He thus understands and portrays the turmoil, inner conflict, sufferings and trauma of women. In his works, it is observed that the women characters struggle to free themselves from the stereotyped gender roles but, however, ultimately, they rely their faith in the conventional and traditional value system of the society. Women in Narayan's works are quite conscious of their career, their disposition and ultimately their individuality.

The feminist movement which had started in the west spread gradually to India and other countries. This resulted in a good number of Indian writers contributing to English literature voicing the concerns of women. Narayan's women characters show a massive transformation in the course of such work. His characters are quite realistic, modern and also traditional possessing strong determination with a positive outlook towards life. In India, the personality of a typical Indian woman was tossed with the scent of patriarchy which was deeply-rooted in the society. As a matter of fact, it was assumed that she, the woman, being the central figure of the family, suffers relentlessly without voicing out her concerns and complaining about them for the welfare of her family ties. Such women who assimilate themselves are more prone to infliction and dehumanization at the mercy of their male counterparts.

As Molly Daniels Ramanujan, the author of 'The Salt Doll', remarks about the essence of being a woman:

It takes Mira years to realise that her mother is female incarnate. She has no shape or form; she is everything or nothing. She is fluid; pour her into any mould and she takes it. Set her in any group and she becomes it.

Except that she is all impulse and all imagination, a child forever, to be brought up by her six children, each born at five-year intervals – with each child, she the mother again the child, reshaped and reared by the growing child, but as now, in the presence of the Mother Superior, superior to the child that raises her, by virtue of the very Presence in Front of Whom She Becomes It. Ideals and principles lie outside her nature. Shapeless as water, necessary as water, these were the good moments, but what about when she becomes pure air, beyond touch?

The social, political, economic and cultural aspects of India have undergone a tremendous transformation due to the Western influence. This selfless and sacrificing spectrum have given women a navigation which shifted their outlook towards their quest for identity. The notion of an uprising which started in the West as a result of the feminist movements took momentum in the East also. The impetus thus gained from the West pulled women, the so-called weaker section, to the warpath for establishing an identity of their own without seeking help from man. This agenda of identity-

quest gradually spread to various other fields – society, politics, workplace, education and most importantly 'home'. The new dimension of womanhood in a challenging domain started reflecting in literature as well. With the texts flowing in, women started looking at themselves from a different perspective. This remarkable facet of the new woman which resulted from the Western awareness, has exemplified woman as a symbol of growth and development rather than a symbol of submission, personal regression, and self-pity.

Rasipuram Krishna Swami Ayyar Narayanswami, shortened as R. K. Narayan, who spent his life in the city of Mysore in South India, contributed vastly to Indian Writing in English. His one of a kind, contributions to fiction, short fiction, stories, journals and magazines and few film adaptations gained him great repute as the most popular of the three founding fathers of the modern Indian English novels, the others being Mulk Raj Anand and Raja Rao. This sensitive storyteller who created a fictional and imaginary town in South India, Malgudi, celebrates humor and pathos glorifying the lives of the middleclass men and women. His works are simple, trivial, quite natural, unpretentious tossed with a witty flavor and harmony.

Narayan's friend and mentor, Graham Greene, helped Narayan get his first four books published which also include his semi-autobiographical trilogy of Swami and Friends, The English Teacher and The Bachelor of Arts. In Narayan's Swami and Friends, we are introduced to the fictional South Indian town, Malgudi. His work, The Financial Expert, was regarded as the most original works. He was awarded Sahitya Academy Award for his novel, The Guide, which was adapted into a film. He focuses on the characters of a middle-class society and social issues which are prevalent in his time. Most of the literary critics compare Narayan's style to William Faulkner and Guy de Maupassant who etched stories of ordinary life and compress the narratives. The imaginary town, Malgudi, is a literary microcosm which most of the literary critics have compared to William Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha County. Many short stories and a dozen novels were set in this fictional town.

During his literary career of sixty years, Narayan received many awards and honors including, the Padma Bhushan, the Padma Vibhushan in 1994, the AC Benson Medal from the Royal Society of Literature and Sahitya Akademi Fellowship which is the highest honor of India's national academy of letters.

Most of his novels like Waiting for the Mahatma, The Man-eater of Malgudi, Mr. Sampath and The Vendor of Sweets gained reputation in the West. Graham Greene, a well-known English writer and journalist, and Narayan's mentor and friend, shares his views on Narayan's writings:

"Whom next shall I meet in Malgudi? That is the thought that comes to me when I close a novel of Mr Narayan's. I do not wait for another novel. I wait to go out of my door

into those loved and shabby streets and see with excitement and a certainty of pleasure a stranger approaching, past the bank, the cinema, the haircutting saloon, a stranger who will greet me I know with some unexpected and revealing phrase that will open a door on to yet another human existence."

Donna Seaman, the Editor for Adult Books at Booklist, commented on the collection of short stories: "an excellent sampling of his short fiction, generally considered his best work" from "one of the world's finest storytellers." Narayan attributes huge value to family traditions and marital relations. He is against extra-marital and pre-marital affairs and strongly stresses on fidelity.

This paper proposes to study the characterization of women characters in his selected works and to draw insights into the human nature and psyche. The observations deal with how women are portrayed, their education, background and the socio-cultural settings they dwell in and their transformation towards progressive outlook tossed with individual consciousness. It talks about how the Indian women progress from traditional frame to modern and then march towards a progressive one. It tries to analyze the paradigm shift that the female characters experience in their settings. The paper examines the ability of characterization and appreciates the progressive outlook of the characters during their course of the text. Through a close observation of the texts, it is quite evident that Narayan shows submissive, humble, suffering women transformed into active, matured, educated and independent individuals.

II. WOMEN CHARACTERS IN THE SELECTED TEXTS

A. THE GUIDE

The Guide, being the widely recognized text of R. K. Narayan fetched him Sahitya Academy Award in the year 1960 and was also adapted for a film. He also received the Filmfare Award for the best story when the book was made into a film. Every text of Narayan leaves his readers in awe and triggers an emotional connect with the female characters. In the most received work of Narayan, The Guide, Rosie, is a character which leaves a lasting impression on the minds of the readers. She is portrayed as a modern woman, educated, ambitious and strives for economic stability. She is also very passionate about dance.

Marco, Rosie's husband, embarrasses Rosie's dancing skills as street acrobatics and compares her dance to monkey dance. Her husband does not allow her to dance in spite of her passion for art. Eventually, this condemnation encourages her in establishing an extra-marital relationship with Raju who, at the initial stages, genuinely supports and encourages Rosie's passion for dance. However, after reaping the success as the dancer, Nalini, Raju begins to exploit her success by playing a manager's role. His series of lies and deception prove his

motives of jealousy for Nalini's success. Finally, Nalini, the dancer, who is the protagonist, Rosie, being a free-spirited, brilliant passionate dancer, with feminine powers discards and disowns the relationships that she had long sought after and transforms herself into an independent and successful woman witnessing a bright future with all her might and strong determination.

However, the relationship between Rosie and Raju ends when the female protagonist, Rosie, feels guilty for encroaching the social, nuptial and ethical codes of conduct. She finds herself in a state of confusion and bewilderment while she is in relationship with her lover, Raju. At the end she realizes her worth and detaches herself from her lover in order to save marital ties with her husband Marco. In Rosie's words:

"After all, after all, he is my husband... I do and I deserved nothing less. Any other husband would have throttled me then and there. He tolerated my company for nearly a month, even after knowing what I had done."

In contrast to the character of Rosie, Raju's mother is depicted as a conservative orthodox woman who follows her tradition and culture that she has been born into. However, at the same time, she is a loving mother and a dutiful wife. She counsels Rosie and Raju about the rights and wrongs of life. But when she realizes that her advice is not taken into consideration, she leaves the place to stay with her brother. Here, irrespective of showcasing her as born into a conservative family, she is also shown as a woman of self-respect who does not heed to unhealthy compromises in life.

B. MR. SAMPATH

In the novel Mr. Sampath, the protagonist, Sampath, violates the ethical codes of society and gets into an extra-marital relationship with Shanti Devi, a film actress. He tries to justify his illegitimate relationship with Shanti Devi. Sampath remarks:

"Some people say that every sane man needs two wives – a perfect one for the house and a perfect one outside for social life... I have the one. Why not the other? I have confidence that I will keep both of them happy and if necessary, in separate houses."

However, in the later part of the story, Shanti Devi rejects Sampath. Narayan employs in his women characters a guilty conscience when they protest and violate prevalent societal and moral norms. With this peculiar intervention and characterization, Narayan, denounces extra-marital relationships and tries to protect family values. He rouses the intellect of his protagonist and enlightens her with a positive frame of mind.

C. THE PAINTER OF SIGNS

In The Painter of Signs, Daisy, the female protagonist portrayed as a population control officer,

arrives as a new woman charged to fight the orthodox patriarchal society. She re-invents the traditional social value system in the village with her new ideology. However, as an effect of the modern era, Daisy is completely against old traditional practices and the long prevalent caste system. She is depicted as a woman who is against the institution of marriage. She considers it as an obstacle in the path of her career and growth. In order to succeed in her mission of controlling the population growth in the village she sacrifices her own comfort and proves her strong determination and will power to surpass her biological urges in her journey in the novel.

Daisy is a village girl born into a large joint-family setup. In order to achieve her childhood mission, she escapes from the arranged marriage and reaches Madras city. She is later seduced by a higher caste man. She couldn't detach herself from the identity as an object of beauty and vulnerability in spite of merits in her account. This character of Daisy has been portrayed by Narayan witnessing a major transformation in her quest for identity.

Raman, the male protagonist, rightly acknowledges about Daisy,

"I don't know if she cares for any other god or religion, and I haven't asked. Her worship takes the form of service to the poor and the ignorant and helping them live a decent life. She cares not for wealth or luxury or titles. She can live with the poorest in their huts, eat their food and sleep on the mud floor."

On the contrary, the character of Aunt in The Painter of Signs, represents a conservative and orthodox Hindu Brahmin woman. She performs all her duties, like, maintaining the house, buying groceries from the local shop, cooking food for Raman and visiting the temple, etc., as prescribed by the prevalent social system. As per the norms of the society she opposes Raman's marriage with Daisy.

D. THE DARK ROOM

R. K. Narayan's The Dark Room depicts the plight of a traditional Hindu house wife, Savitri. Relating to the title, she suffers silently in a dark room. With this text Narayan tries to elevate the position of women in the patriarchal society. The institution of marriage as per Hindu customs is founded on mutual trust and marital loyalty. In The Dark Room, Savitri, the protagonist's husband, Ramani, neglects her as he is attracted to his colleague, Shanta Bai. She refuses to be ill-treated as a pet dog or slave and she expresses her anger by quitting her husband's house. However, unable to live in isolation she is prepared to return to her disloyal husband.

R. K. Narayan portrays the concept of self-alienation, from her family, the society she is living in and is on a continuous quest for identity. By quitting her family, she goes through discontent and torment. Unlike the ancient legend Savitri who confronts even Death to

save her husband, Narayan's Savitri chooses to leave her family once she realizes her husband's infidelity. She thus keeps herself away from her drunkard husband. However, her quest for identity is quite unfavourable for her family's peace.

Narayan aptly employs the title as 'The Dark Room' in order to relate feelings of his protagonist who feels there is completely no hope and only despair. According to Harrex, the dark room referring to the title, The Dark Room, here symbolizes as:

"The emotional and domestic claustrophobia which can result from a circumscribed marital orthodoxy."

Through this text, Narayan shows two contrasting female characters – Savitri and Shanta Bai. He depicts Savitri as a docile, simple, gentle, loving, obedient and a modest woman. Hence, she is quite religious and traditional in her setting. Shanta Bai, being quite independent, more modern and unconventional is found to be flirting and doesn't care for traditional norms. It is shown that Shanta Bai is capable of managing without any support whereas Savitri, unable to live in isolation, is prepared to return to her disloyal husband. Her preparedness talks about her upbringing and her accountability to the societal norms but her quitting her husband's house echoes the unheard voice questioning her conscience.

III. CONCLUSION

Based on the observations, we can conclude that R. K. Narayan's female characters, irrespective of belonging to different classes, grow powerful and leave lasting impressions on the minds of readers. The female character portrayed by Narayan in his works has strong roots of traditional Indian values which draw a typical representation of an Indian woman. And thus, she has ensconced herself with honesty, principles, and worth suiting her stereotyped personality. Narayan's protagonists independent, simple, fair, fearless, and are conceited with assertiveness and dogmatism. His female character fights for her liberation, voices out her concerns, demands for equality, and claims for her individuality and ultimately claims for an identity of her own. In this process, she not only uplifts herself but also her entire family.

Britta Olinde, Univeristy of Gothenburg, writes about Narayan's female characters:

"They fall into three main groups: first, domineering powerful women; second, powerless, frustrated, oppressed women; and third, women accepting the system—in this case, the Indian society of strong masculine dominance—but at the same time finding ways and means to informal, indirect control of their situations." (97)

This paper discussed about various facets of women, who submit themselves to an array of discourses, and also look for ways to free themselves from the clutches of patriarchal society and establish an identity of their own. The paper also opines the fact that Narayan's psychological grip of understanding Indian women has resulted in a new dimension to his novels. As most of his works are set in his imaginary fictional town, Malgudi, they are quite different from one another despite belonging to the same location. These characters strive for identity, recognition and progress towards transformation of their self without jeopardizing the norms of the society. Such literary works which provide insights into the human life may be recommended widely for reading and analysis purposes for the young generations. Thus, Narayan has skillfully and successfully depicted his female characters with a scent of indianized context, and portrayed their lifestyles, suffering, lament, challenges and their psyche and ultimately the major elevation and transformation that follows during the course of their journey in the texts.

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