

## R. K. Narayan: A Messiah of Feminism. A Critical Study

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### Abstract:

*The concept 'feminism', is a western phenomenon. It emerged in the late nineteenth century with plays such as Henrik Ibsen's The Doll's House and G.B. Shaw's Candida which has exercised a profound influence on the world of literature. The movement champions the cause of socio-economic and political rights of women. Acknowledging the term in the Indian context, this wave has extensively fought against the orthodox social milieus related to women and many writers have extended their support to make aware the women of the ruthless oppression and exploitations they have undergone and sought for a 'New Women' who can break away the shackles of gender discriminations in the rampant male chauvinism. Moreover, the Indian feminists have strived to challenge the evils of existing patriarchal systems which deny women's liberation, emancipation and privatization. R.K Narayan's The Dark Room, Mr. Sampath, The Guide, The Painter of Signs, Waiting for Mahatma and Grand Mother's Tale can be considered a reflection of this particular scenario in the literary realm. Through the study of these novels, I want to show and analyze how the women have been put into psychological anguish and angst, borne out of male chauvinism and male superiority with unbending and unmending behaviour. Characters like Savitri, Shanti, Rosie, Dasie have been subjected to subversion, torture and suffocation in the face of stiff male-domination. In addition, my paper brings to light how some of them have been dull*

*and puppets in the hands of their husband and gasping for breath to raise their voice and concern in the men-made Indian society.*

**Key words:** R. K. Narayan, Feminism, Indian feminists

## INTRODUCTION

Born in 1906 and brought up in a conservative, orthodox Hindu society, Narayan sees and witnesses the plight of women locked up within the confines of an orthodox society, which has nothing to offer a woman except material refuge. In this society a woman has nothing of her own except her body. The speech: “what possession can a woman call her own except her body? Everything that she has is her father’s, her husband’s or her son’s (Dark Room, p. 88)” helps us realize the real position of women in the society.

Besides his firsthand experience, the fictional town Malgudi, too, is a telling testimony about the tell-tale condition of women in the pre and post-Independence India. It provides Narayan a rich social platform to portray all sorts of characters with a realistic touch. Often compared to Hardy’s Wessex, the topography of the mythical town offers an arena and platform to sketch female character who is out either half way or full way of the orthodox, conservative Hindu society to assert the right to live with dignity and freedom. Narayan in his memoir *My Days* speaks of Malgudi as representing: My own values in milieu and human characteristics. (24).

Whether Narayan is a feminist or not/ whether he is concerned with the plight of women or not/ whether he champions the cause of women or not, is apparent from his autobiography, *MY Days* where he emphatically admits, “I was somehow obsessed with a philosophy of woman as opposed to man, her constant oppressor. This must have been an early testament of the ‘Women’s Lib’ movement. Man assigned her a secondary place and kept her there with such subtlety and

cunningness that she herself began to lose all notion 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)

Thus, R.K. Narayan’s approach towards women is apolitical and feminist but with a difference. Though he believes in the inevitability of the western notion of emancipation of women, he, unlike the radical Western one, does not want to follow the perilous western ideal of movement for women’s movement in India.

A critical reading of Narayan’s novels published in succession from *The Dark Room* to *The Painter of Signs* will suffice Narayan’s advocacy about the emancipation of women from servitude in the Indian orthodox Hindu society. In this context, his *Swami and Friends*, *The Bachelor of Arts*, *The Dark Room* (1938) and *The English Teacher* (1945) – written in pre-Independence India – describes women as down- to- earth, docile and submissive and engaged in household chores and menial jobs. Means, we get a calm and quiet picture of Malgudi with its age-old customs and traditions. No woman shows any sign of feeling suffocated, or feels that her freedom is thwarted by the taboos she has been observing in the society; rather all are quite satisfied, loyal and committed to observing what they have been doing unfailingly and invariably since time immemorial. For example, Krishna’s mother in *The English Teacher* provides us with a glimpse of the traditional Indian domestic setting where a woman has her well defined place. As she says, “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).

While his later novels like *Mr. Sampath* (1948), *Waiting for the Mahatma* (1955), *The Guide* (1958), and *The Painter of Signs* (1977) fall under the category of post-Independence novels when a wave of modernism was blowing. The heroines of

these novels are forceful, vigorous and artful. They are of stronger will power and firmer belief.

Thus Narayan's reformist zeal and extended support towards the cause of women paved way for "Women's Lib Movement", as he called it in his memoir, *My Days*.

Such a vision- emancipation of women- and the pro-women treatment/attitude is reflected in *The Dark Room*. Written in the 1930s, the novel revolves round Savitri, the protagonist, is a middle class housewife having three school-going children. Meek and obedient, as she needs to be as a wife in the India of the 1930s, she is a frustrated, tormented and helpless Indian wife. She is neglected, abused and dominated by her husband. A victim of the existing patriarchal society, she represents a true Hindu wife who is supposed to be dutiful, obedient and loyal; to be fondled or kicked at their own sweet will. The protagonist, a middle- class little educated woman, is married to an errant and worthless man Ramani, an insurance employee. When she suggests something, Ramani dismisses them saying, "Go and do any work you like in the kitchen... It is none of a woman's business". (TDR 1). P.K. 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)

However, a tsunami came in the domestic life of Ramani-Savitri. Ramani meets Mrs. Shantha Bai in Bangalore in an interview in his office, and is immediately drawn by her beauty and develops an illicit relationship with her. This shatters Savitri and she leaves no stone unturned to win him back. Despite, all possible means, everything ends in a vain. So she weeps, obsessed with feeling of helplessness, she is utterly left into the 'dark room', the only way of protest against her husband's tyrannical behaviour. The dark room is a room which is meant for storing up of junks. When Savitri's 'self' is hurt and wounded deeply, she takes shelter in the dark room. She identifies herself with a useless domestic refuse which has

outlived its utility. The 'dark room' here metaphorically highlights and represents the miserable condition of a woman and the oppression imposed upon them by men. Savitri leaves the house of her husband in a fit of rage, anger and disappointment. Venting ire, she says, "Do you think that now I will stay in your house, breathe the air of your property, drink the water here and eat food you buy with your money? No, I'll starve in the open under the sky, a roof for which we need be obliged to no man". (87-88)

Savitri's use of 'we' in the last sentence is worth noticing. This signifies that this is not her lone voice rather the voice of those who are suppressed, marginalised and refused liberty, equality and freedom in the dichotomy of sex. That way, she metaphorically represents the whole Savitri, who are at the receiving end of the tradition-bound Indian society. Though she was not successful in winning the heart of her husband, the Ramani-Shantabai romance compels Savitri to discover her identity. She becomes conscious of her existence. She says, "I am a human being. You men will never grant that. For you, we are playthings when you feel like hugging and slaves other times. Don't think that you can fondle us when you like and kick us when you choose. (110)

Savitri's use of 'us' again in the last sentence shows her vigour in assuming a representative role of the whole race of woman from the tyranny and injustice of the male. What Justice V.R. Krishna Iyer says in another context validates Savitri's protest, "The fight is not for women's status but for human worth. The claim is not to end inequality of women but to restore universal justice. The bid is not for loaves and fishes for the forsaken gender but for cosmic harmony which never comes till woman comes." (31)

Savitri's predicament is not peculiar. It is an archetypal pattern of Indian woman in general. She remembers her own grandmother who enslaved herself cheerfully to her husband who had concubines at home, her aunt who was beaten

everyday by her husband and had never uttered a word of protest for fifty years and another friend of her mother's who was prepared to jump into a well, if her husband so directed. These memories indicate the critical position of a wife as she is bullied not only physically or abused sexually but traumatized mentally as well.

With the progress of the novel, it is found that Savitri tries to commit suicide and is saved by Mari, the robber blacksmith, from the extreme step. Though she manages to find a job in a temple as a caretaker, the role of a temple assistant confined to a dark room is of no comfort. She is again here exploited by the temple priest. Savitri's agony is well expressed in the following fiery speeches. She thunders, "I am a human being ... you men will never grant that. For you we are playthings when you feel like hugging and slaves other times. Don't think you can fondle us when you like and kick us when you choose (82).

*The Dark Room* reveals the traces of the 1930s Women's Movement in India in its intersection with Indian nationalism of the time. Narayan himself mentions in his interview with S. Krishnan at a much later date, "In *The Dark Room* I was concerned with showing the utter dependence of woman on man in our society. I suppose, I have moved along with times. (92)

Shanti, a widow, in *Mr. Sampath* (1949) seems to carry Savitri's movement a step ahead. A stormy petrel, she revolts against the traditional life of widowhood and braving the *laxmanrekha* (societal taboos) drawn against her, she decides to establish her individual rights and identity. A firebrand Malgudian female, she leaves her son at the care of strangers and becomes the mistress of Mr. Sampath who promises to bring her fame by casting her in a film. She chooses this life of easy morals of the celluloid world and thus gets deviated from the customary life of a widow. But eventually she comes back to the life traditionally prescribed for a widow in Malgudi. Here Shanti's return to the traditional life of widowhood should not

be viewed as a failure on her part in the step she takes, rather she comes back crowned with success, securing the right of making her own decision as to whether to be an actress or a traditional widow. Just as in *The Guide*, a novel published later, Rosie decides whether to be staying with Marco or Raju, or to leave both, in the same way in *Mr. Sampath* Shanti presents her as a woman having complete freedom to choose whether to be staying in the film-world as an actress, or to come back to the traditional life of Malgudi to lead the austere life of a widow.

Narayan's next novel *Waiting for the Mahatma*, set in pre-independence India when the traditional inhibitions and orthodox taboos are still current confining women to the four walls of the house, portrays Bharati as the young heroine who defies the traditional duties of a woman by dedicating herself to the service of Gandhi. In fact, Bharati is the most patriotic and most sublime of the characters of this novel as it is only she who out of patriotism 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 dishonest people like Jagadish are busy making fortunes unscrupulously in the independent India by playing up their contributions made to the independence war, it is only Bharati, a woman who pursues Gandhi's principles till the end and wins to be named by Gandhi "daughter of India". Bharati's participation in the liberation war of India is surely a blow to the taboos which for long had kept women in veil and servitude to men.

However, a fulfillment of the failed revolutionary zeal of Savitri in *The dark Room* we find 20 years later in the character of Rosie in *The Guide*, a classic of Narayan's works published in 1958 when India had already become independent.

The independence had brought not only political changes, the social, economic, and even religious milieus of Indian had also been greatly influenced, although people were still trying to rigidly cling to their social traditions. A great change also came in the intelligentsia of women. Rosie, an M.A. in economics, challenges the orthodox Hindu conception of what a woman should be. She leaves her husband who shows his apathy and indifference towards her feelings and desires for dance, and thus moves out of the walls of her family on a path usually unchartered for women in an Indian society.

Rosie, born as Debadashi in India, carries a westernized name – a name ever heard in Malgudi. This westernized name of Rosie situates her as an outsider in the conventional world of Malgudi, which is ruled strictly by the long established traditions and customs. Even Raju, in whom she finds a patron, wonders: “Why did she call herself Rosie? She did not come from a foreign land. She was just an Indian, who should have done well with Devi, Meena, Lalita, or any one of the thousand names we have in our country” (9).

Malgudi’s traditional domestic setting has no place for any such woman having non-traditional identity. Raju’s tradition-bound mother also “looked anguished for a moment, wondering how she was going to accommodate a Rosie in her house” (140), when Rosie, driven out by her husband Marco, arrives at Raju’s home.

Like her unconventional name, her marriage is also quite unconventional. As Jayant K. Biswal comments: “For a marriage, horoscopes must be consulted, caste must be considered, and Malgudi holds the old way of marriages decided by parents and horoscopes.” But Rosie, belonging to a caste and a class outside the pale of organized patriarchal Hindu society, marries one archaeologist husband with no matching of horoscopes and no consideration of caste. 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 certificate, we went to a registrar and got married” (75).

But however unconventional Rosie may be in the social set up of tradition-bound Malgudi, Marco’s apathy and indifference towards her feelings and desires for dance and Raju’s intentional failure to understand the cause of her dedication to dance make Rosie win the readers’ sympathy. Marco loathes her dance, and tries to make her feel ashamed of it, associating it with the cults of the devadasis. But, for Rosie, dance is a form of self-expression and a way to show her devotion to her god. Unable to find a fulfillment of her natural instincts for dance in Marco’s company, she leaves him and finds a patron in Raju who appreciates her dance. But when she realizes that Raju’s appreciation of her dance is only due to the fact that it brings in money and fame, she leaves him, too, and thus walks on her own way.

By throwing both Marco and Raju away from her life, Rosie strongly defies the well-defined place of women in Malgudi where a woman is never allowed to go on her own way, but is made to remain a puppet. An inner strength, until unseen and undiscovered by herself, leads her to soar so far out of Marco’s and even Raju’s reach that neither Raju nor Marco can control her. Raju at last comprehends that “she would never stop dancing ... whether 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).

Through the character of Rosie, Narayan further questions the position of women in the tradition bound Indian society. Rosie is an educated woman, an M.A. in Economics, but her education fails to promote her status in the society. As she says: “We are viewed as public women. We are not considered respectable; we are not considered as civilized” (75). As they were viewed as public women, Rosie, perhaps, had no other way

except following the “unconventional” way for marriage, which, she realizes, reduces her from an M.A to a puppet. Her husband Marco Polo, as nicknamed by Raju, never tries to understand her mind. Not a single day, as Rosie says to Raju, goes quiet without a quarrel between them. Marco, in spite of being a scholar, behaves like a traditional husband never evaluating Rosie’s likings. It seems that he has married not to have a wife, but one to do only his household chores. Raju rightly comments about Marco that “perhaps he married out of a desire to have someone care for his practical life” (100). Rosie’s expectation from her husband is not much. What much she desires is an approval of her desire for dance, but she is never granted. Moreover, he compares her dance with monkey-tricks, and thus humiliates her quality that she values as a form of worship to her god. Not only that, even her presence is thought as a kind of disturbance in his work. Marco completely forgets that Rosie is a human being needing husband’s presence beside her. Even after coming to Malgudi, he grossly occupies himself with his archeological research, never allowing her beside him. Rosie-Marco relationship can be understood clearly from the following conversation between her and Raju:

RAJU: ‘Why don’t you stay up with him?’

ROSIE: ‘He sits up all night writing and –’

RAJU: ‘If he sits up all night writing, during the day you should talk to him.’

ROSIE: ‘But all day he is in the cave.’

RAJU: ‘Well, you may go and see it too. Why not? It ought to interest you.’

ROSIE: ‘While he is copying, no one may talk to him (107)’

Thus, Narayan draws the circumstances under which Rosie feels compelled to tear the traditionally held sacred bond with Marco. By tearing the sacred bond with Marco, Rosie seems to stand parallel to Shanta Bai in *The Dark Room*, but unlike Shanta Bai, Rosie is portrayed sympathetically. But Rosie definitely stands champion to Savitri because Savitri, defeated,

comes back like a dead horse to her husband, while Rosie, unlike Savitri, does not go back to her husband to be his worse half, nor does she ever think of going under the guardianship of Raju after she is cheated by him, rather when she, left by Marco and cheated by Raju, is alone, she is strong and experienced enough to guide herself properly without a Marco or a Raju beside her.

*The Painter of Signs* comes echoing the voices of all women of his previous novels, who strived to come out by crushing the walls of the “dolls houses.” Like *The Dark Room*, this novel also has a woman named Daisy as the protagonist who defies the traditional setup for women. While Rosie in *The Guide*, in spite of having a westernized name and marrying in a way absolutely unconventional in an Indian society, still has a traditional woman in herself, as is found in her dependence first on her husband Marco, and then on her lover Raju, Daisy is strikingly modern in her spirit of independence. She rises against the long established marital system of the society only at the age of thirteen when her prospective bridegroom visits her. Her strong sense of individuality becomes evident 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 this very moment, she decides to break the walls of the doll’s house. She offends the groom on the face and thus offends and slaps 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 routine impressions about women in the familiar background of Malgudi, and turns into a bizarre figure roaming the countryside 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). Daisy’s mission for Family Planning leaves a lasting impression on the villagers. When Malgudi is teemed with burgeoning population, in answer to a question asked by Daisy the village teacher promptly says, “Seven hundred-odd” (66). With an analytical point of view, she gives a remainder to the teacher saying: “It was just six hundred last year this time and there is an increase of nearly twenty percent ... I know that the number of houses has remained the same for decades ...” (66). About the growing population of the village Daisy’s observation is: “The implications were clear that during the rains the village folk, cooped up in their homes, had no better business than to procreate” (65). Daisy’s concept of family planning is thought by the villagers to be a palliative to rid them of their insufferable circumstances. The tradition bound people, she finds, are not easy to be motivated, rather they regard what she says and does as “sinful practices”. However, Rosie finally withdraws from Malgudi, which may suggest her failure and defeat in her mission, but the slogan that she leaves behind pestered on different walls does not wither away with her departure from Malgudi. She merely withdraws physically but remains active and omnipresent in her activities done here, that can be supposed to evolve into a social movement in future and may act in the way she desires.

Daisy’s independent nature is further evident when we notice that her aim is confined not only to the area of family planning, but she endeavours to enlighten the villagers with the light of education as well, that would help them distinguish between right and wrong. As she advises: “Correct posture is important. Children must be taught all the early in life” (79). Her straightforward notion of life has multidimensional implications: she encourages the people to be rational and aware so that they can judge themselves, be unprejudiced and unorthodox about life, and not drag a miserable life as they do in the state of ‘slouching’ (79).

Daisy has a tradition of her own within which she is successfully devoted to her mission. She is not defeated, rather goes on spreading her mission with rejuvenated spirit to the well being of humanity without paying any heed to criticism. To comment 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 not clearly cut out for a married life; both of them are heart and soul dedicated to their projects – one to the archaeological survey in the Memphi 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 Lib movement', *The Painter of Signs* is its more pronounced representation (55 – 56).

Thus, Daisy comes out of the doll's house and gives a fulfillment to the dreams of those women in Narayan's novels, who started the movement. Daisy fulfils the wish of Savitri in *The Dark Room*, who wanted to have an independent existence" (27).

In *The Grandmother's Tale*, Bala, was married in childhood to a boy who then deserted her. A priest ordains that the child bride must stay away from the temple unless the husband can be shown to be alive: widows are unclean, and this priest could well know all about the practice of suttee.

Bala sets off in search of her husband. Years go by in the twinkling of a paragraph. She catches up with him in Pona, where he's a thriving jeweller, married to someone else. Bala effects a ferocious and systematic, almost witch-like ouster of the second wife - a troubling act, strongly and sparsely dramatised. Her feat accomplished, she settles into the perfect woman's posture of wifely submission. But her husband is the

really submissive one. He becomes a lonely and resentful widower.

## CONCLUSION

From the on-going discussion, it can be concluded that R. K. Narayan is not prejudiced against women. He favours freedom for his 'New Women' and wants to see them educated, active and independent; he wants them in the mainstream to propel the wheels of development of society. They are the torch-bearers who can construct and destroy society. So the steps taken by him to initiate the Women's Lib movement is its testimony.

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