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## RK Narayan's the Dark room

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#### Abstract

R.K. Narayan is one novelist whose works have been under public scanner for long. R.K. Narayan portrays with sympathy the sufferings of women and shows the readers how important are their roles both in family and in social life. A systematic analysis has been made in this paper to put R K Narayan's female protagonists in the right perspective highlighting his feminist concern starting from Savitri in the Dark Room. R.K. Narayan's novels may be termed mythical comedies or Modern fables, because they reflect quart authentically the absurdities and incongruities of the modern Indian society in a fictional form. He has been used novel as an art form to reveal to the masses the evils inherent in their Society.

**Keywords:** Images of women in rk Narayan's the dark room and life characters

#### Introduction

R. K. Narayan was an Indian writer known for his works set in the fictional South Indian town of *Malgudi*. He was a leading author of early Indian literature in English, along with Mulk Raj Anand and Raja Rao.

Narayan's mentor and friend, Graham Greene was instrumental in getting publishers for Narayan's first four books, including the semi-autobiographical trilogy of Swami and Friends, The Bachelor of Arts and The English Teacher. The fictional town of *Malgudi*, was first introduced in Swami and Friends. Narayan's The Financial Expert, was hailed as one of the most original works of 1951, and Sahitya Academy Award winner The Guide, was adapted for film and for Broadway.

Narayan highlights the social context and everyday life of his characters, and he has been compared to William Faulkner, who also created a similar fictional town, and likewise explored with humor and compassion the energy of ordinary life. Narayan's short stories have been compared with those of Guy de Maupassant, because of his ability to compress a narrative. However, he has also been criticized for the simplicity of his prose.

#### Images of Women in R. K. Narayan's the Dark Room

My purpose is to highlight R.K. Narayan's sympathetic portrayal of women in many facets of their life. This short monograph presents a critical analysis woman characters in R. K. Narayan's Novel. R.K. Narayan portrays with sympathy the sufferings of women and shows the readers how important are their roles both in family and in social life. A systematic analysis has been made in this paper to put R K Narayan's female protagonists in the right perspective highlighting his feminist concern starting from Savitri in the Dark Room.

The most interesting feature of the novel is Narayan's conscientious effort to present the entire narrative from the perspective of Savitri. Hence, the world of "The Dark Room" is the world as Savitri perceives it, and not Ramani. The novel begins on a mundane note with a detailed account of an Indian middle-class family. Ramani is ruling deity here, while his spouse and three children are enforced worshippers. And this happens because of Ramani's unpredictable whims. Whether it be his food or his office wear, Ramani's wrath never seems to be appeased. The children are afraid to talk loudly when their father is at home, heaving a sigh of relief the moment he steps out of the house. So is the case with his wife Savitri. On a superficial level, the storyline of the novel "The Dark Room" appears to be rather bleak. But on a closer analysis, we realize it to be a documentation of two levels of existence, by the two central characters-Ramani and Savitri. At the beginning, Ramani is happily married man whose fidelity is beyond question. But with the arrival of Shanta Bai, Ramani is changed

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man. Likewise Savitri unquestioning, submissive female presence of Ramani's household transgresses her boundaries of a model wife and Daves questioning the validity of conjugal fidelity of her husband.

Pompous and proud of his acquired position in the company Englandia insurance; Ramani is of little use both to his wife and children. His presence in the cause of awe to the household and only with his departure to office every day, do the other inmates find time to relax and breathe freely. To worsen matters. Ramani is infatuated by Shanta Bai who joins his company is the first female probationer. Savitri feigns ignorance initially, but finally when Ramani fails to turn up one night. She decides to strike back. Unlike the previous occasions when she had sought refuge in the "dark room" of the house, she now dares to venture out, to the dark room of a local temple. This dark room, therefore, has a different connotation in a different context. The difference is. Savitri here has chosen the dark room of the temple willingly, with a feeling of acquired emancipation while, in the former case, the refuge of dark room is enforced upon her.

From the days of the Ramayana, Indian women have sought the recluse of a dark room to score a point in familial matters. Savitri's effort to bring back her wayward husband to her folds by retiring to the dark room is both strategic and propitious (at least that is what she likes to believe). But her strategy fails and Ramani does not bother to appear of parental estrangement.

They realize that something is wrong between their parents, but fail to fathom out the exact cause, for they are too young and inexperienced. Finally, Savitri decides to leave the house for good. And it is at this point we perceive the emergence of a different Savitri. This transformation is so marked that Savitri herself is amazed. "Am I the same old Savitri or am I someone else". Walking down the streets Savitri is at loss and ultimately, unable to come to terms with reality, chooses to commit suicide. Lady luck in the form of a Black Smith-cum-burglar saves her and she decides to dwell in a nearby village temple. In two days" time, however, the thought of her suffering children overpowers her and she returns home. The children are naturally overjoyed and puzzled servants remain puzzled. But Ramani feigning ignorance of her absence remains as unconcerned as before. Consequently, Savitri finds herself in the same predicament.

Prior to Shanta Bai's arrival Savitri appears to be a normal housewife who is in full command of her household. Accept a few digressions, in the form of Ramani's rebukes she proves to be quite in tune with her husband regarding the workings of the household as a mistress. Savitri rants at the servants whenever she feels they are lacking in subservience and is unbending enough, in allowing the cook enough liberty to add ingredients according to his likings. Added to it, she has a nasty ward for them for every little cause and when necessary, does not desist even from overtaxing them. If Ramani finds the dishes served insipid, it is the servants who bear the brunt-a natural scenario in every middle-class Indian house hold.

"Not exactly bad Perhaps you would have done well to reduce the tamarind in the sauce. Your master does not like tamarind very much". Life apparently remains placid and event full for long in the codified world of Malgudi, and Savitri does not seem to be quite unhappy with her plight. Worrying about her children trying incessantly to pacify the

wrath of her husband and times talking to the ladies of the extension seems to be her only preoccupations. But does she willingly submit herself to the tedium of her existence? That is the million dollar question Narayan poses before his readers from the very inception of the narrative. We realize that Savitri is different from both Janamma and Gangu, the two other representative of her class. Unlike them Savitri clearly manifests her discontent by questioning the validity of her monotonous existence. Undergoing the tedium of everyday life, she often questions her self- "does life comprise of only filling one's stomach and then again worrying about ways of filling it the next time"? Yet, she complies out of compulsion, because that is her expected role in the household. In contrast, neither Gangu nor Janamma ever bothers to raise such disconcerting questions in fact, neither of them aware of it. But Savitri, right from the start, is keenly aware of the noose trap that has bound her to her husband's family. Therefore, the presence of Both Gangu and Janamma's serves two fold purpose in the narrative one, "to provide the reader with a reasonably complete picture of women in an orthodox milieu of Indian society", i.e. upper caste, middle class Malgudi in the later 1930s,

Gangu we are told, is an eccentric woman whose scholarly husband teaches her the values of women's rights. This, in a way, destroys her inhibitions. Savitri does not quite approve of her free think in, yet tolerates her because "Gangu was tolerated in the extension: she was interesting: With all her talk she was very religious, visiting the temple regularly and she was not immoral". Gangu's interesting talks fascinate Savitri but do not really influence her. Janamma, on the other hand, represents the orthodox and traditional word of Malgudi who never dreams of opposing her husband or arguing with him. She believes that her husband is her sole master who can never err. And subservience as a wife is her basic duty towards him. But Savitri does not belong to the class of either Gangu or Janamma. She is clearly different from them. Despite her submissiveness, she has her head placed firmly over her shoulder or else such question would never plague her- 'does life comprise of only filling one's stomach and then again worrying about ways of filling it the next time'? Yet, when crisis strikes, Savitri turns to Janamma and seeks her advice because she is convinced that those advices will be in keeping with wifely decorum. But within, Savitri never really cares to follow the beaten track of Janamma where a wife is a slaved cheerfully for her husband who had three concubines at home.

Ramani asked at home, 'What happened to spare cot we had?'... Send for it. I want it for the office. We are going to fit up a guest's room'. If it is for the office, buy a cot with your office money. Why should we give ours?' she dared to suggest this amendment because it was one of his good-humored evenings.

It is Shanta Bai's defiance of the existing patriarchal order that actually captivates Ramani during the interview when she candidly admits to Ramani, "if I had a family to hinder me I shouldn't have come here with my application'. She is presumed to have done away with all sorts of family ties, husband parents, and siblings' *et al.* "by defying and despising the traditional values." Her drive enthalls Ramani as he remarks, "Yours is a very interesting story". Fair complexion coupled with guts, she simply mesmerizes him and he does not even care to authenticate her story. "He liked her pluck". After all, pluck is an admirable quality in

one's mistress while blasphemous in a wife! While Shant Bai, much in keeping with her image, seems absolutely impervious to everything else other than fulfilling personal ambitions. Feigning ignorance to Ramani's material status continues to entice him further to her end justifies the means, and not the other way round. She combines her feminine justifies the means, and not the other way round. "She combines her feminine independence with a shrewd opportunism that characteristically belongs to the new civilization" comments Jayant Biswal. Self-indulgence is her philosophy of life. Hence even though aware of her existence being palpably threatened without the benevolence of Ramani, she dreams of owning a Baby Austin. And it is this attitude of hers which Biswal terms as the product of 'New civilization', is at odds with the social set-up of Malgudi. Unlike Savitri, she dares to abandon her drunken husband and her family as a mark of protest against her race. But she carries her newfound liberty to achieve a perverted goal-breaking a family to satiate her growing materialistic thirsts.

Ramani, however, fails to fathom out her exact stand in this regard. What makes Shanta Bai's presence significant in the novel is the author's dear intention to establish the fraudulence inherent in Ramani. At home in the company of Savitri Ramani remains cool and aloof, decidedly maintaining a distance. But in the presence of Shanta Bai, he epitomizes servility-ready to convert himself to a toy in her hands: 'I will see if the probationary period cannot be cut down, and if the stipend cannot be put up a bit. But that's all by and by. You must rest assured that your interests will have the best support and protection possible.' It is really hard to believe that Ramani is capable of uttering such sugar coated sentences to his subordinate the inherent hypocrisy of the Indian middle class men.

Savitri's worst suspicions are cannoned and not knowing what to do, she initially decides to mend her appearance, which till then was vastly neglected. Believing in the ancient adage that feminine charms lure back an errant husband, Savitri decides to dress up as a young bride. But, as ill luck would have it, the evening Savitri is thus adorned to charm Ramani, he chooses to spend it with Shanta Bai And Savitri, not knowing how to express her disillusionment stays awoken the whole night. Expectedly, therefore, when during the following night Ramani appears only for dinner. Savitri works herself up to serve him an ultimatum. Serving dinner silently, she allows him to settle and then threatens him with. "This sort of thing has to stop understand"? Ramani pretends unawareness but Savitri is unremitting. "I'm not going to, till you promise to come to your senses. She stood hardly beside his cot". Ramani is taken could a dormouse like her react like this? He tries enticing and coaxing and Savitri momentarily loses her edge. Ramani feels relieved at the fact the crisis has blown off so easily. But savitri's subservience is short lived. The moment he refuses to renounce Shanta Bai, she is back to her former self, "You won't give up this harlot", and she yells drawing her up. "You are not having me and her at the same time, understand? I go out of this house this minute. She does exactly that. But before walking out, she makes a desperate effort to take sway her children with her; but Ramani intervene and she has to leave empty handed. Before parting, however she serves her challenge.

Do you think I am going to stay here? We are responsible of our position: We accept food, shelter and comforts that you

give, and are what we are. Do you think that I will stay in your house, breathe the air of your property, drink the water here and eat food you buy with our money? No I'll starve and die in the open, under the sky, a roof for which we need be obliged to no man "Very well. Take your things and get out this moment." I don't possess anything in this world. What possession can a woman call her own except her body? Everything that she has is her father's husbands or her son's. So take these too..." she removed her diamond earrings, the diamond studs on her nose...

She quietly walks out of the house. All the hereby about a woman accepting her husband's concubine gracefully, narrated to her by Janamma by way of instruction, goes a waste. Savitri is not ready to share her bed with Shanta Bai. On the contrary, she castigates him as impure and refuses to accept his or, for that matter, anyone else's munificence for survival. She realizes for the first time that as a married woman, she is no better than Shanta Bai whom she calls a prostitute. Both have to beg for male benevolence for sustenance and shelter. One who cannot live by herself has not any right to live either, she argues and walks out of the house.

As she walks along, she realizes her helplessness. Sitting on the banks of River Sarayu she reminisces her past. 'Am I the same old Savitri or am I someone else.' She asks herself. She is surprised at her own transformation, yet she cannot gather enough courage to live singly like Shanta Bai. After all, Savitri is an Indian woman who cannot think of a life beyond marriage: hence: calamity strikes, she turns fatalistic. It is this transformation of Savitri that has provoked many Critics to compare her with Nora, the protagonist of Ibsen's Doll's House. But Narayan does not prefer Savitri to turn into another Nora, a crusader says P.S. Sundaram.

Refusing to be a discarded drudge, Savitri goes out of the house, not dramatically banging the door like Nora, but fleeing like a hunted animal... Freedom is a fine concept but creatures like Savitri can do one thing with it commit suicide.

Providence however saves her in the form of a burglar-cum blacksmith Mali He takes her to his house and his wife Ponni welcomes her with open arms Contrary to her middle class friends. Ponni does not have a wagging tongue; hence she does not bother to enquire about her social status or the exact nature of her problem. To Ponni, Savitri is a burning example of patriarchal oppression and it is necessary that she should be rehabilitated instantly. Since Savitri is a verse to charity. Ponni makes it a point search an aloud for Savitri where she can both earn and live respectably.

A new life unfolds before Savitri in the dark room of the temple where she has to labor hard to earn her bread. The old priest makes it point to imprint in Savitri's mind the fact that he is doing her a favor. Her terms of employment are ironically in direct contrast to Shanta Bai's. The latter has found in her employer a paramour because she is ready to shed off social inhibitions. And because Savitri is not ready to compromise like her, she has to accept the lesser charity. Savitri is happy at first and tastes the fruits of freedom. "She felt triumphant, she lay with her head at the threshold of the shanty gazing at the blue sky... it enhanced one's sense of victory." At last, she feels that she has found a way of living alone and not be obliged to any man for sustenance. But is she really free? Shutting from one dark room to another Lying In the darkness of the antechamber of the temple, she

realizes that both the dark rooms are actually a part of sacred social Institutions. The dark room of her house merely shelters her from the outside world; while the dark room of the temple exposes her vulnerability. And none of these rooms, for that matter, are above women's repression. Hence after a day's trial, when poignant longing for her children almost overpowers her. She decides to return:

Savitri is certainly not a feminist in the modern sense of the world. Because she is not yet prepared to undertake the uncertainties and hardship that threaten to come their way, but can one refute her fear of living alone. A middle class Indian girl is nurtured in such a way that she never has to undergo the pain of living alone and how can Savitri be a deviation? The comfort to which Narayan makes a passing reference is actually the comfort of gregarious existence and it is this comfort which is missing in Savitri's life. How can she change this perception overnight? It is therefore inevitable that she has to return home but not without remonstrance. Plainly she is shamed of her pitiful plight.

As the hours advanced and the stillness grew deeper, her fears also increased. She was furious with herself at this: 'What despicable creations of God are we that we can't exist without support. I am like a bamboo pole which cannot stand without a wall to support it.'

She is not Shanta Bai and has no intention to shed off her inhibitions and responsibilities alike. And the support she is seeking is both valid and legal. No one can really deny her that. The respectful husband wife relationship, which is the dream of every married woman, remains unfulfilled for Savitri till the end. Yet, she has to return because she is unable to live alone. Before returning home, finally, she visits Ponni to thank her. Ponni has after all taught her a lesson of holding her head high. Henceforth, this is what she will try to do. On returning home, she is happy to see her children safe and sound. Yet, the earlier hankering of a stressed out mother is markedly absent in her now. "A Part of me is dead" she reflected. It is as if a part of her former self has simply disintegrated. What is left now is commitment and dutifulness of a mother and a wife, nothing more. Separation has taught her one great lesson which ultimately helps her to sustain till the end: She would harden herself not be yearn of them. She would pray for them at the shrine night and day, and God would protect them: they could grow, go their ways and tackle life as fate had ordained for each of them. What was this foolish yearning for children, this dragging attachment? One ought to do one's duty and then drift away. (Karmanya Vadhikareste Mafaleshu Kadachana the Gita) Did the birds and the animals worry about their young ones after they had learnt how to move?

And it is this lesson that really differentiates her from Nora of Doll's House Being an Indian woman, Savitri has genetically imbibed this great learning and also the ultimate knowledge of life, What was this foolish yearning for children, this dragging attachment? One ought to do one's duty and then drift away-from The Gita Ponni also proves to be a better human being, compared to all the upper caste middle class women of Malgudi in her ready acceptance of Savitri. Her edge over Savitri, however, is clearly born from her economic autonomy and that is what demarcates her from this Brahmin housewife. She has no inhibitions either to stifle her feelings and hence she can easily rebuke the priest for being over inquisitive about Savitri's post.

The basic difference between "The English Teacher" and "The Dark Room" is the difference between the two male characters, To Ramani, Savitri is nothing but an extension of his personal property that can be both used and misused according to circumstances and personal whims. But Susila, being Krishna's spiritual partner, the question of repression never arises. Therefore, contrary to Savitri who is constantly on tenterhooks when Ramani is around Susila never feels threatened in the little haven of delight? Again, contrary to Savitri's attitude towards her children, neither is Susila over protective about her daughter, because Krishna appears to be an ideal father. It is not that Ramani does not love his. Hence, it is Savitri's prerogative to look after them properly and when need even pamper them to a certain extent. Can we then attribute these distinctive deviations to the academic divergences between the two protagonists? Krishna is a college teacher with an MA in English, while Ramani is an insurance executive with little accomplishments. Does the author by any chance try to hint here that their difference of attitude is born out of their disparity in academic attainments? Even in The Dark Room. Gangu's husband is an educated youth teaching in a school, and hence, has a liberal outlook. So is it plausible that Narayan's emphasis on academic achievement is meant to convey the fact that education improves man qualitatively? Nowhere has Narayan stated this fact explicitly though. It is purely a personal assumption following the existing belief rampant among middle-class Indians that education uplifts a man qualitatively. This fascination for university degree was stronger in the previous century as we find in the writing of the authors of that period. So it will not be wrong to presume that Narayan's favor too was tilted towards the educated youth.

In short, will it be wrong then to presume that both the novels "The English Teacher" and "The Dark Room" are actually two sides of the same coin-the dictatorial patriarchy? Since one chooses to be sternly authoritarian, the ambience is that of hostility, while the other being cleverly manipulative in its benevolent disposition ensures automatic servility of its female members. otherwise, how does one explain the lacuna between Krishna's and Susila's understanding at the beginning of the second part of the novel when Susila is dead and Krishna while rummaging her steel trunk discovers a completely new facet of her personality? He is astonished to find so many tidbits in the steel trunk. Could it be his wife loved these things so much? He asks himself. Never did he suspect her of harboring an interest in thing like these. So that part of Susila had remained unknown to him as long she was alive. Later on, after her death when he tries to communicate to her spiritually, he becomes aware of all these little unknown facts.

### Conclusion

R. K. Narayan is one novelist whose works have been under public scanner for long. Critics have been vocal both against him for him. His simple narrative art form has even been contemptuously termed simplistic by a few contemporary Indian writers. Yet, one cannot simply ignore his major contribution in development of Indian novels written in English. R.K. Narayan's novels may be termed mythical comedies or Modern fables, because they reflect authentically the absurdities and incongruities of the modern Indian society in a fictional form. He has been used novel as

an art form to reveal to the masses the evils inherent in their Society. R.K Narayan, in this novel portrayed the Indian characters such as, Savitri, Janamma, who are submissive. Most of his novels deal with the south Indian milieu. There are some debates on R.K Narayan that, he has not written any work on political and freedom struggle of India. As like Mulk Raj Anand wrote on the themes of inequality, slavery protest against the British. For example, Mulk Raj Anand's "Two Leaves and a Bud", "Coolie", who was also one of the three pillars of our Indian writings in English. R. K. Narayan created the characters which are symbolic. In this poignant tale, R. K. Narayan again takes us back to Mysore and into the enchanting world of his fictitious town, Malgudi, where we are introduced to Savitri and Ramani.

As in many of Narayan's novels, conservatism and reform are contrasted with the quiet irony and subtle humor which have become so characteristic of this author. Savitri is made to feel how completely dependent she is upon her husband, Ramani, when pressure is brought to bear upon their long-standing marriage. Ramani strongly recommends that the Engladia insurance Company employ the rather elegant and fiercely independent Mrs. Shanta Bai, recently separated. Events reach a climax when Savitri's favorite piece of furniture, a bench, is borrowed by Ramani to furnish the room he has hurriedly assembled for Shanta Bai in the office. Savitri retreats into herself and lies quite still in the one private place she has of her own, the dark room. After further betrayal, Savitri gathers up the very few belongings she has and walks out of the house, leaving her children staring dumbfoundedly after her. Savitri attempts to drown herself, but is rescued. For a short time she struggles to be self-sufficient, but realizes quite soon that she must return although: part of her has died. Narayan's sympathetic treatment of his characters makes this a most fulfilling and touching book to read.

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