

R.K. Narayan's Treatment of Women in His Works

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Abstract:

This paper deals with, how R. K. Narayan molded women in his works. This paper aims at portraying the women characters in his works and also speaks about how he deals about issues that women are facing since ages, root causes. And gives few examples with suitable solutions needed.

Keywords: women, characters, issues, solutions etc

Introduction

R.K. Narayan is an eminent Indian novelist who created wonderful and marvelous women characters full of vigor and vitality. His portrayal of women characters attempts at establishing human values within the existing background of Hindu metaphysics. R. K. Narayan is a writer with native talent who has been natively nurtured. Of all the writers of Indo-English novels, he is perhaps the major one who sticks to a purely Indian atmosphere. Though the vehicle of communication used by him is English, the persons traveling in the vehicle are only Indians, and the vehicle roams mostly within a limited area of Malgudi of South India. His stories are

mostly located in this small imaginary town of Malgudi which, according to some critics, is identical to Mysore. His description of the geography of the town is, however, so thorough and consistent in all his novels and stories, that he has succeeded in bringing this imaginary place alive as much as Hardy has done in regard to Wessex. Narayan provides a glowing example of how well an English literary form can be adapted to develop Indian themes. He says my attempt here is to examine the portrayal of women characters and how they evolve against the changing social scenario.

In contrast to traditional characters, the modern sets of female characters of R.K. Narayan's novels are known for their relationship with men. Such a relationship is subtle and varied. These women are further known by the characteristic of modern civilization which clings to them as dangerous endowments. They simultaneously electrify their environments by the enthusiasm and desires they show for life and independence. The hypnotism of modernity outweighs their inert desire to follow tradition. In the early novels, the character of women is depicted just as they were in the pre-independence era. Alteration and disagreement of tradition

and modernism are visible in the novels of the middle phase. In his later novels, modernism has finally enslaved Malgudi and its people shook the roots of tradition. The alteration of Narayan's women from Savitri of *The Dark Room* to Daisy of *The Painter of Signs* 'fortifies foregoing' statements.

The heroines of Narayan's novels are weak and fragile. He himself has accepted this fact in his interview with Onlooker. He finds women strong and forbearing. Their life is directed by rules and regulations and they are basically clearly headed. Narayan could detect through his insight in human beings that men have a tendency to fumble and they are usually uncertain. He found women more conventional than men. He developed minor characters in the course of the progress of the story as he had said in his interview with W.E. Walsely. There are a variety of minor characters that are supportive and adjusting in the development of the protagonist's character and over a period of time they appear as important and attractive as the main characters. Some of them are Ponni, Mari, Gangu, and Janamma in *The Dark Room*, Susila, Kailas, and Mohan in *The Bachelor of Arts*, Ravi and the house owner in *Mr. Sampath*, Rang, Sastri, Sen, the Nehru - baiting journalists in *The Man-Eater of Malgudi*, Dr. Krishnan in 'Second Opinion' and Captain's wife Rita in *A Tiger For Malgudi*, Grace in *The Vendor of Sweets*, Charu and Saroja in *The World of Nagaraj*. These are all memorable characters of flesh and blood, of virtues and vices, as real as

their counterparts in real life. Narayan uses both common and unique personalities who are based on culturally convincing traditional images.

My attempt here is to examine the portrayal of women characters and how they evolve against the changing social scenario. The earlier novels of Narayan, having been written in the pre-Independence era, do not fail to be influenced both by the then obtaining social status of women and by the social world of the author himself. These novels are *Swami and Friends* (1935), *The Bachelor of Arts* (1937), *The Dark Room* (1938), and *The English Teacher* (1946). To quote William Walsh again:

One of the themes deftly and thoroughly worked in the early novels is the domestic one. Family life is the ultimate registering of the Hindu tradition since this tradition, like the Hebrew one, enfolds both the ultimate and the immediate texture of experience, (Walsh,41).

Swami and Friends (1935):

In *Swami and Friends*, women characters are given minor importance. They mainly remain in the background, providing just a supporting role to the main story which the author wants to communicate. It is, therefore, no wonder that the first woman character - the granny - appears after twenty pages. Narayan has,

however, shown an acute sense of proportion in designing and creating, and developing his women characters insofar as they are neither too hazy nor too prominent to distort the other main characters of the novel.

The small incident in which Swami feigns illness in order to avoid going to school is a revelation of the victory of sentiments over rational thinking. Especially in women full of motherly affection. Neither Swami's granny nor his mother is prepared to believe in what the thermometer indicates, once they decide that Swami is really ill and should not be forced to go to school! And it is a matter of no small wonder that the father acquiesces in the decision, knowing full well that the boy has no temperature!

Swami and Friends would have made as excellent a story as it is in its existing form, even if the author had completely dispensed with the two women appearing therein - the mother and the grandmother. However, the author's introduction of these two characters appears neither maneuvered nor labored and interweaving them in the story is so natural that the story thereby seems to assume a neatly woven texture.

The Bachelor of Arts (1937):

In *The Bachelor of Arts* (1937) the chief protagonist Chandran who is a modern young man caught in a conflict between the western ideas of love and marriage. He gets infatuated with Malathi. There are three women characters Malathi, Chandran's mother and Susila who are traditional women. Chandran's and

Malathi's horoscopes do not match. He has courage to revolt against his parents and the irrational custom of horoscopes. The circumstances have forced him even to leave home and wander like a sanyasi. However, he returns home and marries another girl named Susila according to the wishes of parents. Chandran's mother is a typically tradition-bound, orthodox, conservative and a homely woman.

The English Teacher (1945):

Narayan delineates the growth of artist in him through Krishnan, the central character in the novel. The experiments in psychic communication with his dead wife Susila that has occasioned the novel are Narayan's own contact with the spirit of his dead wife Rajam. Susila is the main female character in the novel. She is a traditional woman as she believes in the worship of gods. She is educated and she loves books. She is modern as well as spiritual. She is an expert in domestic affairs. The domestic life of Susila and Krishnan is full of love and emotional strength.

Man-Eater of Malgudi (1961):

There is the fifth novel of Narayan which he wrote much later after Independence, in 1961, namely, *The Man-eater of Malgudi*, which, however, logically claims a place in this chapter because of the type of the two women characters depicted therein. *The Man-Eater of Malgudi* is Narayan's mature novel, an outstanding work of his creative genius. It is based on a well-known mythological episode, the story of Mohini and Bhasmasur. Nataraj is the chief protagonist. He is timid, submissive and good for nothing. He lives with his wife and child. Their happy life is disturbed with the entry of Vasu. The portrayal of Vasu is based on mythological Bhasmasur. Narayan

has presented him as a modern rakshasa who kills wild animals in Mempi forest. Nataraj's wife and Rangi are the main women characters. Nataraj's wife plays a vital role. When Nataraj fears Vasu, she takes good care of him. Rangi is a bad sort of woman. She is a temple dancer. She belongs to a low caste and they are disreputable women. Narayan has presented how evil is self-destructive and that there is always an end to evil. Vasu and Nataraj are contrasting characters in the novel. Vasu is self-centred egoist and the other is self-effacing altruist.

Mr. Sampath - The Printer of Malgudi(1949):

Mr. Sampath - The Printer of Malgudi is yet another novel of R. K. Narayan in which women characters have only a secondary and indirect role to play. The story's main character is Sampath, a versatile personality, who jumps from the business of printing to film production, only to invite his ruin by losing his wits in the mire of his lust for Shanti, the heroine of his first film under production, which is never completed. There is, however, another, equally important, character, that of Srinivas, a philosophically orientated young man, highly dissatisfied with almost everything around him, but generally taking up a charitable, benign and stoical attitude. The most important among the female characters is Shanti who, apart from raining Sampath, also unknowingly becomes the cause of total collapse of Ravi's life, who is terribly in love with her, an absolutely one-sided love which ultimately shatters his

mental balance. On the whole, the women characters in this novel are indicative of a shift in their social positions. Though the shift may seem almost insignificant it does herald a transition period, from silent sufferers of tyranny to a semblance of recognition for women.

The Financial Expert (1951):

Faced with two opposing pulls, love for the son and greed for wealth, the dominant character of the novel, Margayya, is able to save neither, his son completely ruined, his wealth totally evaporating. As is the general trend in several of Narayan's novels and stories. *The Financial Expert* too is a male dominated narrative wherein Margayya and his son play major roles. The third, Dr. Pal, is the villain, the evil that brings tragedy in Margayya's life. There are only two women characters of any importance in the novel, Margayya's wife and his daughter-in-law, but both play only secondary roles and neither has any impact on the development or the twists and turns of the story. The wife, Meenakshi, exercises little or no influence over her husband.

Waiting For Mahatma (1955):

Waiting for the Mahatma (1955) appears to be a political novel. The Mahatma is pictured as a saint propagating certain ideals. Narayan appears to be least interested in the political happenings in the country. He says in his interview with Susan E. Croft, "I liked Mahatma's personality, and I wanted to somehow recount this. He was a very impressive person. I didn't know him personally but I went to many gatherings he addressed. The novel deals with a conventional love story of Sriram and Bharati at the backdrop of freedom struggle. Narayan has presented

Mahatma's ideals through Bharati who is a disciple of Gandhiji and has also focused the problem of untouchability

The Vendor of Sweets (1967):

The Vendor of Sweets (1967) is a sociological study and the east and west encounter is remarkably visible in the novel. Grace is the major woman character. She is of alien origin. She is half-American and half-Korean. Her father is an American soldier serving in the Far East. While in service there, he marries a Korean girl. The development of the Grace Mali association is the result of a mere coincidence. Mali is the son of the protagonist Jagan. Mali has gone to Michigan to learn the art of writing fiction after giving up his studies for a B.A. degree unfinished in a college at Malgudi. When he returns to Malgudi he introduces Grace as his wife to his father. Narayan has portrayed an alien woman against the background of tradition-ridden and orthodox milieu of Malgudi. Grace is efficient and skilful in house-management.

The Painter of Signs (1976):

The Painter of Signs (1976) presents an authentic picture of India in the post-independence era. Daisy is a new woman. She is of rebellious nature going against the social customs and orthodoxies against the wishes of her parents. She is educated, talented and highly ambitious. She has accepted social work and decides to live independently without anybody's support. Raman, a young painter of sign boards lives in Ellaman Street in Malgudi, He belongs to a traditionally superior caste. He loves Daisy and wants to marry her but she is

keen on pursuing her social commitment and Raman gets back to his signboard painting.

A Tiger For Malgudi (1983):

A Tiger For Malgudi (1983) is based on the life of a tiger. It is a recapitulation of his past by the tiger who looks back upon various aspects of his life and narrates it to the reader. Narayan presents the progress of a tiger towards wisdom and spiritual maturity, aided by an ascetic. Rita is the major female character. She is an example of synthesis in her personality of modernity and traditionally characteristic loyalty and sincerity of a wife to her husband. She possesses the skill of performing the acrobatic feats which require masculine strength and stamina. She is devoted to the welfare of her husband who is the captain and owner of the Grand Malgudi Circus. The news of the unexpected and sudden death of her husband saddens and depresses her to the extent that she is not able to survive. Her association with her husband is so deep that she cannot survive without him. So, she commits suicide.

The World of Nagaraj (1990):

The World of Nagaraj (1990) is a story of Nagaraj and his family members. Nagaraj lives with his mother and wife. Nagaraj's mother is a traditional woman. Nagaraj's wife Sita is a traditional woman but also practical woman. Nagaraj is always in need of her suggestion whenever he is in a critical situation. She is the woman who runs the family very smoothly and peacefully. She is different from her sister-

in law Charu. Sita is preoccupied with the domestic affairs of daily chores of the household whereas Charu is concerned only with her husband and son.

Grandmother's Tale (1992):

Narayan's presentation of Malgudi represents his greatest strength. Narayan's last published novel is *Grandmother's Tale* (1992). It is, in fact, Narayan's great grandmother's tale narrated by his grandmother. It is the story of Bala. She was married to Viswa when she was seven years old. Viswa leaves her after some days of his marriage and does not return home. Years passed but he didn't return. Bala is stung by the verbal taunts and gossip of the entire agraaharam, Bala, now, a young woman leaves her house and reaches Poona and finds her husband living with another woman Surma. She succeeds in persuading Viswa to return to the South and in separating from Surma on the way through she threatens him that she will commit suicide. She lives happily with her husband in Kumbakonam as his most obedient, submissive and traditional wife and has five children. After her death, Viswa also dies, after some years poisoned by his cook. It is Narayan's shortest tale which presents Bala as the strongest woman.

Conclusion:

Narayan has written quite a large number of short stories which have been collected and published in multiple volumes-*Malgudi Days* (1941), *Dodu and Other Stories* (1943), *Cyclone and Other Stories* (1944) which are out of print, but most of the

stories have been included in *An Astrologer's Day and Other Stories* (1947) and *Lawley Road* (1966). Later collections are *A Horse and Two Goats* (1970), *Malgudi Days* (1982) and *Under the Banyan Tree and Other Stories* (1985).

In most of his short stories the central character faces some crisis and either resolves it or lives with it. There are autobiographical stories "Seventh House " and "The White Flower " and certain characters like Mohan and Selvi remind one of Raju and Rosie. His short stories fascinate the readers with the universality of their appeal, authenticity of felt experience and in particular their inexhaustible comedy.

Indian women are guided by self-awareness which propels her towards self-assertion. The significant traits of female protagonists in their specific roles have revealed interesting insights for the readers in general. Indian novelists present the predicament of women and the social status of women in the tradition-bound, male-dominated middle-class society of contemporary India, in which they are struggling to welcome the constricting dilemmas of pre-fixed situations and then attempting to redefine their status.

R.K. Narayan portrays a wide spectrum of contemporary Indian women representing the average today's contemporary urban Indian women. His fiction depicts a variety of women characters. He shows a steady and constant development in the growing canon of his

works. His works present the South Indian middle-class life. His mild and gentle irony probes and reveals some of the common foibles of the Indian middle class. His characters are memorable. His works have Indian setting and are redolent of Hindu culture. His fascinating theme, living characters, narration and simplicity of language are some of the most outstanding features in his fiction. Narayan's fiction is distinguished by its sociological, psychological and literary merits.

This is an attempt to focus on the image of women in the novels of R.K. Narayan from the feminine perspective. Narayan is deeply rooted in Hindu tradition, presenting the archetypal conflict between tradition and modernity. His women characters are the product of the orthodox and traditional in the specific social group like Savitri in *The Dark Room*. His viewpoint is orthodox and conservative. But the secondary position of women and her social degradation in a male dominated society leads Narayan to portray the female characters in the image of a modern woman who is intelligent, articulate and aware of her capabilities in the changing world.

The 'woman' is the bearer of life. She is presented as 'Nari Shakti' and she is worshipped in Indian mythology. It is believed that God resides in the place where a woman is worshipped. This vision of women reflects our rich cultural heritage. Hence women always deserve a significant place in our hearts. She constitutes nearly half of the population of the world. There is hardly any work of art or literature where

the artists have not spoken of and about women. In fact, she is a riddle which has puzzled mankind over centuries. All great dramatists and novelists in all literature of the world have presented women in various ways. We wonder at their understanding, which helps them picturizing their conflicts. R.K. Narayan presents no exception in this regard.

R. K. Narayan had a deep interest in middle class Life. He therefore recognized the importance of women, the source of life. He had deep respect, love and sympathy for women in general and Indian women in particular. R. K. Narayan believes that man and woman are complementary to each other. One cannot exist without the other. He did not start with equality but asked for equal opportunity. In *Malgudi*, women are not just to be the shadow that follows the substance, but they are their original selves. He favors Inborn-Equality of men and women.

The traditional man-woman relationship was one in which men continued to be the breadwinner, assertive, bullying, and self-reliant. The women continued to be submissive, meek, and docile; they accepted the role of dutiful housewives. The women were born only to be beaten by domestic problems, meaningless customs, traditions and conventions. The women's fate was decided by someone else and they were never given an opportunity to shape their own destiny. A woman portrayed in some of the early novels of R. K. Narayan conforms to the traditional role. The plight of a neglected

wife is R. K. Narayan's favorite theme. Marriage denies individuality to women and forces them to adopt attitudes or ideals envisioned for them by males. Marriage enslaves orthodox women in his early novels. She spends aimless, endless days without interrogating its purpose.

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