

Vol. 2, No.2, July - December 2013

ISSN 2277 - 1786

DJ

THE DAWN JOURNAL

Reforming Beliefs

R. K. NARAYAN'S *THE DARK ROOM* - A FEMINIST READING**K. R. Rakhi****ABSTRACT**

Feminist movement in India, which drew its inspiration from the western ideals, aimed at defining and establishing equal social, economic and political rights and opportunities for women in India. It also fought against the specific issues related to the tradition and culture of the country. Indian feminists strived to make the women aware of the oppression and exploitation they have been undergoing in the male dominated society, and sought for a conscious action from the part of men and women to change the situation. They tried to challenge the discrimination of genders by deconstructing the existing concept of femininity and masculinity, and attempted to break away from gender stereotypes. Many Indian writers joined hands to support this new trend by writing about the evils of patriarchal system. R.K Narayan's *The Dark Room* can be considered a reflection of this particular scenario in the literary realm. It is one of the earliest novels by an Indian writer which deals with the theme of gender equality and women's rights. This paper entitled 'R K Narayan's *The Dark Room* – A Feminist Reading' analyses women's issues stated in the novel by the author with the aid of psychological treatment of characters and sharp social criticism, and concludes by pointing out the timelessness of the predicament of women in Indian society.

Introduction

R K Narayan is regarded as one of India's greatest first generation Indian English writers along with Mulk Raj Anand and Raja Rao. He has played a significant role in bringing Indian literature in English to the rest of the world. Narayan's stories are grounded in humanistic values, and they celebrate the humour and energy of ordinary life. Encompassing a world of different characters and human emotions, they appeal both individually and universally. R K Narayan has won numerous awards and accolades including Sahitya Akademi Award in 1958, A C Benson Medal from the Royal Society of Literature in 1980 and the Padma Bhusan, India's second-

highest civilian award, in 1964.

The Dark Room, which was published in 1938, is a remarkable work of R K Narayan. Set against the backdrop of South India, this novel brings up the pressures of married life and raises many disturbing questions regarding the institution of marriage. The novel can be considered one of the earliest works of any Indian novelist which deals with the theme of gender equality and women's rights. The fact that the story has been written much before the feministic issues catches the attention of literary realm, stands itself as a testimony to the foresightedness and social vision of its author.

The Dark Room chiefly deals with the predicament of a middle class South Indian woman Savitri who is married to Ramani, an employee in the Engladia Insurance Company. Ramani is a typical representative of the dominating husband in a patriarchal society, and he treats Savitri with rudeness and negligence. Whenever she attempts to suggest 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) Though everything in the married life of Savitri and Ramani seems to be completely fair enough from outside, it is the effort of Savitri which helps to maintain it that way. When Ramani denies her the right to take even the least important decisions at home, Savitri consciously chooses to take no offence from it. Yet it leaves her reflecting on herself how dependent, impotent and powerless she is, even after fifteen years of her married life.

The vanity and pride of Ramani are revealed on several occasions in the story. They become obvious when Ramani taunts Savitri for 'acting' like a dutiful wife.

(Ramani) "Hope you have finished your dinner."

"Not yet"

"What a dutiful wife! Would rather starve than precede her husband. You are really like some of the women in our ancient books."

"And you?"...

"I? I'm like—you'd have to write a new epic if you wanted anyone like me in an epic." (TDR 11)

They become apparent on another occasion when Ramani takes Savitri for a movie at Palace Talkies. R K Narayan has drawn the attention of the readers to this particular incident by giving a psychological analysis of the character of Ramani.

He (Ramani) surveyed her (Savitri) slyly, with a sense of satisfaction at possessing her... He spoke to her because he was in a position to do it, and it made him feel important. He enjoyed his role of a husband so much that he showed her a lot of courtesies, constantly inquiring if her chair was comfortable, if she could see the screen properly, and if she would like to have a sweet drink. (TDR 22)

From this incident it is evident that Ramani has never been concerned about Savitri unless it is for his own advantage.

Savitri feels inconvenience not just around her husband; each and every member in the house contributes in their own way to make her feel miserable. Though she does her best to make everyone pleased, no one really cares to appreciate her. May be that is what she needs most, some kind of admiration or acceptance. To add her misery, her younger son Babu grows exactly into 'another Ramani' following the footsteps of his father. Savitri finds solace only in the company of her two close friends, Gangu and Janamma. Gangu is the representative of the type of women who heeds nobody but to her own will. Janamma is just the opposite of Gangu. She has been conditioned by the society around her which restrains her from moving freely among people.

The story takes a worse turn when Savitri comes to know about her husband's affair with a newly appointed employee called Shanta Bai. This shatters Savitri, and she tries all the possible ways to win him back. When everything fails the mental torture that she has been undergoing draws out her inner-strength, and it prepares her to confront Ramani and demand an explanation for his irrational behaviour. Ramani understands "the terrific force that a woman about to be hysterical could muster" (TDR 85), and he tries to calm her down with candy words. At this stage, Savitri speaks violently out of control.

I'm a human being... You men will never grant that. For you we are playthings when you feel like hugging, and slaves at other times. Don't think that you can fondle us when you like and kick us when you choose. (TDR 85)

For this, Ramani replies in a very casual manner, "Very well, my dear. I grant here and now that you are a human being who can feel and think. All right." (TDR 85) This attitude of Ramani further infuriates Savitri, and it ends up in her walking out of the house leaving her children staring perplexingly at her.

The life of Savitri changes utterly after this incident. But Ramani's life goes on as smoothly as it was before. He continues visiting Shanta Bhai at her place and takes a great deal of effort to convince his children that their mother is not an indispensable woman. He never bothers to find out Savitri who left the house during untimely hours of night. The only thing he is worried about is the chance of his reputation getting stained if Savitri decides to end up her life.

After her attempt to commit suicide, Savitri ends up living with a burglar named Mari and his wife Ponni, and struggles ever before to find a job to earn the 'right to exist.' Savitri's troubled mind reasons that "No one who couldn't live by herself had a right to exist" (TDR 94) and she denies any charity given by Mari and Ponni. Even there she cannot be successful because the society has a different eye to look at a married woman who has left her husband's shelter. On most occasions, the response of the society, especially the men folk, will be "She is an eye-ful. Won't somebody marry her? Or I will give her money." (TDR 124) Although she manages to find a job in a temple as a caretaker, it does not last long. The 'woman' in her enjoys a life without charity, but the 'mother' in her starts longing for the presence of her children. The rebel dies and fear returns, with a nostalgia for children and home which makes her find the way to the deplorable status at her husband's home. Yet, the experiences she gathered living alone in an unknown place prepares her to live with 'a part of her dead.'

The title of the novel *The Dark Room* has got a great significance in the story. In the novel, the dark room is a place where the family store the junk of the house. Whenever Savitri's self gets intensely wounded she retires to the dark room for a while and identifies herself with the junk – something which has outlived its utility and waiting for the exact time to be thrown away. It is this dark room which prepares her to fight for her 'self' and, 'the dark room' in the temple where

she works as a caretaker helps her to realise the lot of women in the manmade world and prepares her to cop up with that with a dead conscious.

Conclusion

The novel starts with the echoing reverberation of male domination in a patriarchal society and ends with the silent realization of it. Though R. K. Narayan attempts for a diagnostic treatment of the novel without making any grand feministic statement, the psychological treatment of the characters and the sharp social criticism establish him as an excellent feminist writer. It is this feministic or rather humanistic attitude which makes him question certain frozen inhuman concepts in the collective unconscious of Indian society. Towards the end of the novel, when Savitri reflects herself "A part of me is dead," (TDR 160) R K Narayan makes a profound declaration of the futility of matrimony. Through this novel, Narayan not only brings the traces of Women's Movement in India in the 1930's but also echoes the timelessness of the predicament of women in Indian society.

REFERENCES

- Hubel, Teresa. "Charting the Anger of Indian Women Through Narayan's Savitri." *MFS Modern Fiction Studies*. 39.1(1993): 113-130. Print.
- Iyer, Sandhya. "R K Narayan's The Dark Room and The World Of Nagaraj." *Sandyi.blogspot*, 04 Oct. 2011. Web. 01 Jan. 2012
- Narayan, R. K. *The Dark Room*. Chennai: Indian Thought Publications, 2011. Print.
- Trivedi, Rajesh. "R.K Narayan's The Dark Room." *Englishliteraturereviewsreviews.blogspot*. English Literature: Views & Reviews, 08 July 2010. Web. 01 Jan 2012.
- Vani. "The Dark Room by R.K Narayan." *Vaniquest.wordpress.com*. My Quest, 28 Dec 2008. Web. 01 Jan 2012.
- "The Dark Room, R. K Narayan." *Indianetzone.com*. India Netzone, 06 Jan 2009. Web. 01 Jan 2012.
- "Feminism in India." *en.wikipedia.org*. Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia, 04 Apr. 2013. Web. 05 Apr. 2013.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



K. R. Rakhi is currently pursuing her Ph.D. degree under the guidance of Dr. Jayanthasri Balakrishnan in PSG College of Arts and Science, Coimbatore. She is specialized in the area of fiction. Her research interests include Indian Literature, Epics, Feminism, Narratology and Literary Criticism. Rakhi has presented 9 papers so far in various national and international seminars and conferences, and has published essays and poems in magazines. Literature is her passion, and she is equally interested in Philosophy, Psychology and Anthropology. She loves to work for humanistic causes.