

MAN'S SUBJUGATION AND WOMAN'S EMANCIPATION IN R.K.NARAYAN'S THE DARK ROOM

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Abstract: Indian novelist in English occupies a prominent place. Apart from female writers, male writers seem to an echo of the Indian women. Although R.K.Narayan may not be described as a feminist writer, his sympathetic portrayal of the suffering of women from all social classes in India is well depicted by him. He indirectly contributed to the awakening of the consciousness of both men and women in relation to the oppressed and suppressed conditions of women were and are placed in. *The Dark Room* is the only novel of Narayan which has a touch of social consciousness for its background. Savitri, a traditional Hindu wife, married to the dashing executive, Ramani, puts up with many tantrums of her husband. Savitri is expected to be always at his beck and call and behave according to his whims and caprices. The deplorable condition of Savitri is a burning example of her outburst from the cruel and beastly treatment at the hands of her husband. She is no better than a puppet in his hands which clearly shows the man's subjugation.

Keywords: oppressed, suppressed, women, tyrannical husband

Introduction: *The Dark Room* (1938) is Narayan's third novel in which women are presented as a victim and men her constant and relentless oppressor. In *My Days* Narayan writes: I was somehow obsessed with a philosophy of Woman as opposed to Man, her constant oppressor. This must have an early testament of the "Women's Lib" movement Man assigned her a secondary place and kept her there with such subtlety and cunning that she herself began to lose all notion of her independence, individuality, stature and strength. A wife in an orthodox milieu of Indian society was an ideal victim of such circumstances. My novel dealt with this philosophy broadly in the background. (M.D.119)

The Dark Room stands out from R.K.Narayan's other novels in the treatment of subject in the sense that Narayan has portrayed in his novels two sets of female characters clearly distinct from each other. On the one side we encounter those female characters who are not ambitious and are whole heartedly committed to domesticity. They strongly believe and follow the traditions as a way of life. The ancient myths and folk tales constitute an intrinsic part of their mental make-up and they are governed and guided in their day-to-day observances by high ideals and the acquired lure of the yore. These women, whether treated as grandmothers or mothers or wives (for there are a few aunts and no sisters and nieces in his fiction) evince extreme patience, endurance and self-effacement even in the face of excesses done to them by their erring male-counterparts. Their commitment to faith and fidelity in the sphere of family relationships is their lone way to fulfillment. Suffering is their badge. Only Savitri in *The Dark Room* practices open defiance but she is too weak a soul to cherish such tantrum or rebellion for any length of time. The theme is a shockingly pathetic story of the plight of an uneducated, middle class

house wife Savitri who, though not discontent with her life is an object of her husband Ramani's tyrannical and unsympathetic behaviour. Savitri is a simple, ordinary middle class but not highly educated woman. According to William Walsh: "She [Savitri] is an ordinary, amiable housewife, not deeply dissatisfied with her allotted part, given on occasion to boredom with its pointlessness, but increasingly oppressed by the loud, assertive and exigent husband."(43)

Ramani, secretary in the Englandia Insurance Company lives in the fashionable South Extension in Malgudi with his wife Savitri and three children, Sumati, Kamala and Babu. Ramani is very domineering and cynical in his ways and hence governs his house according to his own sweet will. The happiness or unhappiness, the quiet or disquiet of the house depends purely on his mood. As he is always irritable, the atmosphere of the house is generally tense and Savitri, children and servants always remain in a state of terror. Savitri is truly a symbol of traditional Indian womanhood. She is very beautiful and deeply devoted to her husband. The husband, however, does not respond to her sentiments even with ordinary warmth. He is always at loggerheads with her, blowing hot and cold in the same breath. Though they have been married for fifteen years, his wife has received nothing from Ramani except his temper. But Savitri, though disturbed by Ramani's sudden temperamental outbursts and crude mannerisms has moulded herself to get attuned to the arrogant and unaccommodative demeanors of Ramani, thoroughly devoted as she is to her husband. Because of her submissiveness life has a set pattern and is routine bound with everyone. Savitri, children, servants - fitted into their respective slots and everyone accommodated to the whims, fancies and temperament of the head of the house -

Ramani. For Savitri, Ramani's habit of finding faults with one thing or the other, the hoarse hooting of the Chevrolet horn at 8.30 in the evening, his habit of bringing guests without information, treating everyone aggressively have become a matter of routine. Savitri, too, has regular routine chores to follow everyday. For example, she offers prayers everyday after Ramani leaves for office, serves food to the children when they come home from school in recess, takes a regular afternoon nap on the same wooden bench everyday, visits her two close friends Janamma and Gangu in the evening, constantly nags the servants etc. The children - Sumati, Kamala and Babu display the natural and normal characteristics that the children of their age group generally have. They argue and quarrel with each other and soon become friends again. The three share a common world with one another of joy and zest, though all of them get cowed down as soon as their father enters home in the evening. But Savitri is 18 not an absolute mute. She has one way of showing her anger - sulking in a dark room. The dark room is used to interpret metaphorically the only refuge where Savitri turns when she is rendered utterly helpless by the circumstances created by Ramani which she finds unbearable. Her first retreat to the dark room of their house is caused by Ramani's brutal beating of their son Babu on the Navaratri festival. She sits there, facing the wall of the room and turning her back to everyone. She refuses to take food or to talk to anyone. The episode shows that she is susceptible to violence. However, she is recalled to her duties by an older woman Janamma, who is also a close friend of Savitri. But it is Ramani's involvement with a woman employee Shanta Bai who joined Englandia Insurance Company as an insurance canvasser, which ruins the domestic peace and shatters Savitri's innermost psyche. It is this act of Ramani which compels her to revolt and thus becomes instrumental in her leaving the house. In a state of utter despair she attempts committing suicide by drowning herself in river Sarayu. This may be interpreted to mean her second plunge into the dark room in a symbolic way. She is, however, saved by the timely arrival of Mari, the blacksmith cum-burglar who was crossing the river, on his way to village. Persuaded by Mari's wife Ponni, she goes to their village and embarks upon an independent living of her own by working in a temple in Sukkur village. The priest of the temple gives her a dark room to sleep at night. Unable to bear the dark room and tormented by the anxiety for her children, Savitri returns home. As the novel opens, we see a tyrant, harsh, dominating, egoistic and to a large extent inhuman husband in Ramani and a docile, compromising, patient and tormented yet beautiful and devoted wife in Savitri. Their relationship has a streak of the oppressor and the oppressed. Though

Savitri has been married to Ramani for fifteen years yet she exercises little power or claim in the house. It is the husband who decides everything for everyone. Savitri's role is restricted to accepting and even respecting those decisions. As hinted earlier, Ramani is habitual of criticising one thing or the other in the house, abusing someone or finding fault sometimes with food, at other times with clothes or with children. "Brinjals, cucumber, radish and greens, all the twelve months in the year and all the thirty days in the month. I don't know when I shall have a little decent food to eat. I slave all day in the office for this mouthful" (DR 8). He would unleash all his anger on his wife and would remark sarcastically "Ah, ah! I suppose I'll have to apply to my office for leave and wait for this salted cucumber! A fine thing. Never knew people could be so niggardly with cucumber, the cheapest trash in the market. Why not have cut up a few more, instead of trying to feed the whole household on a quarter of it? Fine economy. Wish you'd show the same economy in other matters" (DR 3). Savitri generally did not answered back and kept silent. This irked Ramani all the more: "Saving up your energy by being silent!" (DR 3). And sometimes, if she offered an explanation, she would be told, "Shut up. Words won't mend a piece of foul cooking" (DR 3). An egoistic person as he is, he wants everything in the house to be precisely as per his wishes. After finishing breakfast it was the turn of Ranga who would be called to give an explanation for not polishing the shoes well, or for not folding the trousers properly, or for leaving the coat on the frame with all the pockets bulging out. Ramani, therefore would never let the others remain in peace as long as he is at home. This ever-dissatisfied and ever-critical master disturbed the cook immensely who was very sensitive to criticism. Ramani is best summed up in the cook's comment about the former: "I don't know; master is never satisfied. I do my best and what more can a human being do?" (DR 5).

The novel is not so much about a woman's futile search for emancipation as about her quest for identity which is seen in terms of deep-rooted tradition. Savitri seeks self-realization right from the beginning of the novel. But as far as her role of wife and mother is concerned, she finds herself plagued with an inability to do anything actively. The opening episode, though small proves this. *The Dark Room* in fact highlights Narayan's method of imparting implications of great significance through small incidents. It happens so that Babu, the eldest son was slightly ill and a concerned Savitri decided not to send him to school that day. But Ramani decided the other way round and in any condition his decision was the ultimate and not to be dared contradicted either by Savitri or by Babu, who, whether felt like going to school or not had to go as per his father's

instructions. Savitri did feel hurt and a desire to assert her will arose in her. She thought: ...how impotent she was, she thought; she had not the slightest power to do anything at home, and that after fifteen years of married life. Babu did look very ill and she was powerless to keep him in bed; she felt she ought to have asserted herself a little more at the beginning of her married life and then all would have been well (*DR* 6). The gravity of the situation is undoubtedly touching where far from being an equal, Savitri's voice is not even heard. She is not allowed to have her say. It is firstly an affectionate mother who has returned to her children and secondly a helpless woman who returns to Ramani's home for shelter. The relationship between them as husband and wife has already lost its meaning. Ramani may feel triumphant at Savitri's return but he loses her love

and conviction as a wife towards him. As a part of her being death indicates this clearly. *The Dark Room* presents what happens in so many societies. Hundreds of Savitris can be found in hundreds of houses who are the living epitomes of sacrifice and endurance, submitting their wills to the wills of their husbands, supporting them whether they are right or wrong, accepting their fates and limping what they do not like. One or two out of hundreds dare become unique, acquiring enough confidence to assert her (their) will, refusing to be taken for granted, paving for themselves a way towards self-dependence and awareness, shedding the fear of worn-out and meaningless traditions, the fear of social taboos which mar one's freedom and individuality by being misinterpreted, rather than making it.

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