

R.K. Narayan's Heroines as Trail Blazers for Modern Indian Women

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Abstract

The research paper seeks to study R.K. Narayan's fictional women characters as trail blazers for contemporary modern Indian women. The varying feminine perspective and the varied options available to the modern Indian women from traditional motherhood to independent life style, all are given local habitation and colour by Narayan in his novels. Narayan's Malgudi can be said to be India itself. Through the Malgudian men and women Narayan portray the Indian society from the pre-independent era to the post-independent era, from the traditional Indian society to the modern Indian society. Not only this, some of the Malgudian women possess the qualities of the Indian women of today who are influenced by women's empowerment and women's liberation. Narayan's novels give glimpses of Indian women's adjustment to the western culture and civilization, the consequent pains and adjustments resolving the conflict between traditional and modernity.

Key Words: Empowerment, trail blazers, liberation, traditional, modernity

The present study highlights R.K. Narayan's fictional women characters as trail blazers for contemporary modern Indian woman. The varying feminine perspectives and the varied options available to the modern Indian women from traditional motherhood to independent life style, all are given local habitation and colour by Narayan in his novels. R.K. Narayan delineates in his novels the Indian women of today. What Indian women are today Narayan highlighted many years earlier in his novels. Narayan gives a realistic portraiture of the evolutionary trends of Indian women, which raises him above all his contemporaries.

The fictions of R.K. Narayan (1907-2001), especially his novels, can be regarded as more or less a socio-historical chronicle of India of his time - i.e. pre and post-Independent India. Set in the fictional town of Malgudi, these narratives record

the realistic portrayal of life and characters.

Nonetheless, Narayan's women characters can make an interesting study, for some of them present all that is best in Indian thought and character while some others represent the Westernised (not colonized) mindset, and still some exhibit peculiar trends such as moving out of tradition and a homecoming and vice versa. The most interesting point in this concern is the fact that the notion of 'woman' in the novels of R.K. Narayan underlies an evolutionary growth pattern ending in the emancipation of women.

The periscope that Malgudi supplies the novelist allows him to visualize women of all sorts pious and God-fearing women; women of easy virtues; modernistic, happy-go-lucky young women; and 'domesticated' and wily women. That R.K. Narayan was not insensitive to the woes of women is discernible from his

reminiscences on the plight of women in his memoir *My Days*. He came up with a philosophy envisioning, the emancipation of women which he termed as 'Women's Lib movement.' As his memoir reveals, this philosophy was in operation while writing *The Dark Room* :

I was somehow observed 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 cunning that she herself began to lose all notions 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).

The major novels of R.K. Narayan can be discussed to see how the novelist treats women. Among them mention may be made, from a feministic point of view, of major novels like *The Dark Room* (1938) and *The English Teacher* (1945) as works of pre-Independence period. Novels like *Mr. Sampath* (1948), *The Financial Expert* (1952), *Waiting for the Mahatma* (1955), *The Guide* (1958), *The Man-Eater of Malgudi* (1961), *The Vendor of Sweets* (1967), *The Painter of Signs* (1977), *A Tiger for Malgudi* (1983), and *The World of Nagaraj* (1990) fall under the category of post-Independence novels. A select study of some novels will also suffice to trace the evolution of feminism in the works of R.K. Narayan.

The first of these novels, *The Dark Room* offers a feminist view of the contemporary south Indian society. The dark room is used as symbol that entails the frustration

of a tormented, helpless Indian wife. The female protagonist Savitri is shown as a victim of the then existing patriarchal society. This novel reflects in a very subtle way the injustice caused by the male world and the society in general. The central female character of the novel Savitri is a typical Indian middle class submissive housewife married to a tin god, a very insensitive man Ramani, who was working as an insurance employee in an insurance company. Savitri was very much dominated and neglected by her husband. But as a true Hindu wife, she swallows all humiliations but never demands anything in return to keep her marriage afloat. But soon her marriage becomes a living hell when she came to know that her husband has a torrid affair with another woman, a new employee in her husband's office. So Savitri warns him of his miscreants but it seems as if Ramani has taken her entirely for granted. Savitri leaves the house of her husband in a fit of disappointment and anger. She tries to commit suicide. However, she is saved by Poni, wife of Maru, a blacksmith. Savitri's agony is well expressed in the following fiery speeches;

I am a human being "she said, "You men will never grant that. For you we are playthings when you fell like hugging and slaves other times. Don't think that you can fondle us when you like and kick us when you choose." (p-73).

But finally she comes back to her husband's house. Shanti in *Mr. Sampath* seems to carry Savitri's movement a step ahead. Shanti raises her voice against the traditional life of a widow. Like a modern woman she also uses her seductive physical charm as a potent weapon for successful economic gains. Thus she

succeeds in gaining Sampath's proximity. Her return to the real world of her domestic gains. Thus she succeeds in gaining Sampath's proximity. Her return to the real world of her domestic life reveals the fact that she had mistakenly imagined the unreal world, alluring world of film industry as a real one. The following line reiterates this fact: "I had a different idea of a film life."

There is a striking similarity between the character of Shanta Bai of Dark Room and Shanti of Mr. Sampath. Both of them are modern, ambitious unorthodox and daring women who leave their home and hearth in order to acquire economic independence. Both of them develop amorous relationship with their male colleagues.

Narayan's next novel *The Guide* (1956), was written after India's independence, when the wind of modernization had already started blowing. It drew attention for the heroine's strong resistance against the deeply-rooted patriarchic culture of India. Rosie demonstrates the courage to get out of unhappy marriage and marry a person (Raju) whom she loves. However, she is disillusioned soon. Raju, the tourist guide, starts exploiting her, just as a money-making machine. She starts bewailing her lost freedom and deserts Raju in a fury, brokenhearted. But unlike Savitri of *The Dark Room*, Rosie does not return to Marco, her first husband. Instead she breaks the image of the Indian woman seen as a cowardly, dependent and never complaining wife, who is very eager to die for the 'cause' of the family.

Rosie, the central protagonist goes a little further. Starting from her name to her marriage, everything is unconventional keeping in mind the long established

orthodox tradition of Malgudi. Rosie portrays herself as a very modern educated woman who belongs to a 'devdasi' family and has undying love for dance.

Unlike Savitri of *Dark Room*, Rosie definitely stands champion because after she came to know about Raju's deception, she did not go back either to Raju or Marco. Rather she decided to lead her life alone. By doing so, Rosie strongly comes out of the well defined confinement of women in Malgudi. she decided not to be a puppet in the hands of men, be it Marco or Raju. Raju's following statement uttered by Raju really stands true for Rosie :

Neither Marco nor I had had any place in her life, which had its own sustaining vitality and which she herself had underestimated." (p-223).

Through the character of Rosie Narayan makes us think that has position of women really changed in our society ? Thought Rosie was an M.A. in Economics but does it uplift her status in the society ?

In his portrayal of the self, Narayan goes the farthest in "*The Painter of Signs*". Unlike Rosie, who has a westernized name but she is still a tradition abiding woman deep inside of her heart, Dasie of "*The Painter of Signs*", is a modern unwomanly woman who even dares to choose a very unconventional profession of family planning worker. She revolts against the long established girl review system which is very much prevalent in Hindu marital system of the society, when her prospective bridegroom visits her. Her strong sense of individuality peeps out in her following speech : :And then they seated me like a doll and I had to wait for

the arrival of the eminent personage with his parents." (p-131).

So, she offends the bridegroom on his face and thus offends the entire orthodox system of the then prevailing, system in the society. Since that day she gives up the idea of having a family. Dasie's independent nature becomes more evident, when she was given proposal of marriage by Raman, she agreed to marry him under certain conditions, including the one that they would produce no child. But when it comes to the bare essentials of marriage and she is asked to move to Raman's house, she realizes that she has travelled on the forbidden path. Though she faces two horns of dilemma, she cleverly avoids the situation by leaving for a very long tour, giving a message to Raman that their temporary elation is over now.

Unlike Rosie who discovers herself gradually, Dasie on the other hand does so with finality after a short deviation from her mission. Dasie is entirely different from other prominent female characters of Narayan's earlier novels. While other female characters are tradition bound milieu of the Indian middle class society in which they are engaged in a struggle to get over the taboos and restrictions imposed by social institutions such as parenthood and marriage which symbolise family bondage. But Dasie does not confront such dilemma. The author has presented Dasie in a newly emerging, regenerated and conscious woman of India who lives and thinks of a life beyond her home and hearth.

A critical reading of all novels of Narayan shows that he has started a movement toward the liberation of women that he has gradually developed in the novels written

in succession from *The Bachelor of Arts* to *The Painter of Signs*. In all of these novels there is one or more than one female character who is out either half way or full way of this orthodox, conservative society to assert the right to live with dignity and freedom. It can be concluded that R.K. Narayan is not prejudiced against women.

As we see, R.K. Narayan tries to promote the status of women very consciously. His 'Women's Lib' movement, which actually begins in *The Dark Room*, comes to an apparent fulfillment in *The Painter of Signs*, encompassing a long journey from *Savitri* to *Daisy* via *Shanti*, *Bharati* and *Rosie*. The novelist laments the pitiable condition of women and this has perhaps led him to formulate the 'Women's Lib' movement.

Narayan's *Malgudi* can be said to be India itself. Through the *Malgudian* men and women Narayan portrays the Indian society from the pre-independent era to the post-independent era, from the traditional Indian society to the modern Indian society. Not only this, some of the *Malgudian* women possess the qualities of the Indian women of today who are influenced by women's empowerment and women's liberation.

Narayan's novels give glimpses of Indian women's adjustment to the western culture and civilization, the consequent pains and adjustments resolving the conflict between traditional and modernity. Evaluating the multifaceted dimensions of R.K. Narayan's female characters, Shrinath aptly remarks:

"Rereading these novels from much more women centered perspective, I am stuck by the extent to which some of the women characters are

symbols of a particular kind of social change, struggling to redefine themselves as women' unique and lonely figures. At the same time,

they are presented from outside often through the perspective of not entirely reliable characters."

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