

# R. K. Narayan's The Dark Room -A Study

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## Abstract

R. K. Narayan, the most widely read novelist, projects the complexities of a middle-class family which arise due to marital disharmony and the male chauvinistic attitude of the husband who does not take care of his virtuous wife. By delineating Savitri's life, Narayan describes the status of the woman in the society. The woman is helpless and powerless in the family and outside the family. The novel sheds light on the patriarchal society of India and puts forth the injustices that the society does to the woman.

Keywords: Indian woman, Male Chauvinism, Traditional, Society

R. K. Narayan, Mulk Raj Anand and Raja Rao are regarded as the leading novelists of early Indian writing in English. Mulk Raj Anand, the oldest in the trio is known for his social realism whereas Raja Rao is acclaimed for dealing with philosophical aspects. R. K. Narayan occupies a special place in this group because of delineating the everyday life of his characters from middle class. He is renowned for creating a fictional South Indian Town, Malgudi.

R. K. Narayan, born on 10<sup>th</sup> October, 1906 in the then Madras now Chennai, has been the recipient of Benson Medal, Padma Vibhushan and Sahitya Academy Fellowship. Graham Greene, the mentor and friend of Narayan played an instrumental role in getting his first four novels published. He is compared with William Faulkner, as like Faulkner he has created a fictional town Malgudi, a place far from the madding crowd of cities, and has explored the lives of ordinary people. In short stories like Maupassant, he compresses the narrative. M.K. Naik comments about Narayan's contribution to Indian English Fiction-

“R. K. Narayan's contribution to Indian fiction is two fold: first he has created a tiny but perfectly credible universe in Malgudi: which is the same class as Hardy's Wessex and Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha; and he has filled it with men and women who are real to us as the people actually around us. Secondly. An eagle-eyed observer of life and human nature, he has illuminated the basic ironies, deep seated ambiguities and existential dilemmas of human conditions.” (22)

The Dark Room which was written in 1938 presents the picture of the woman in 1930s in India. R. K. Narayan himself admitted in an interview: “In The Dark Room I was concerned with showing the utter dependence of women on men in society. I suppose, I have moved along with the times.” The story of the

novel is the depiction of Ramani's family, consisting of his wife, Savitri and three children – Kamala, Sumati and Babu. The dispute at the very outset of the novel sets the tone of the entire narrative. He is a man of his whims and fancies. He does not care for his wife, Savitri who is a meek, submissive and typical Hindu housewife who does not answer back, rather she retires to the dark room of the house where she sulks. She endures all the tantrums of her husband. About the endurance of Indian housewife, Mahatma Gandhi at one place has mentioned –

“Perhaps only a Hindu wife would tolerate these hardships and that is why I have regarded woman as an incarnation of tolerance.” Savitri is a helpless person but she is a loving mother. When Babu, her son complains of his ill health and stays at home, she supports her son. At this Ramani gets infuriated and rebuffs his wife: “Mind your business,.....Go and do any work in the kitchen, but leave the training of a grown up boy to me. It is none of woman's business.” (The Dark Room 1)

Ramani does not bother about his wife. When he comes back from his office, she, like a dutiful wife tries to provide all comforts to him. She dines only after serving food to her husband but Ramani, instead of respecting her feelings and appreciating her gestures of love, makes ironical comments on her dutiful and caring attitude.

Ramani came very quickly towards the dining hall and said to Savitri, “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 book.” (The Dark Room -14)

Not only Savitri but his children are also the target of his short temper and rudeness. Once there is power-cut due to Babu, he shouts at Babu- “You Blackguards, who asked you to temper with electric lights?” (The Dark Room 47)

Shanta Bai's entry in Englandia Insurance Company brings a catastrophic turn in Savitri's life. All her world is shattered as Ramani gets allured towards this fair complexioned and educated woman. Shanta Bai is not a simpleton. She is expert in manipulating people and situations. She makes a candid confession of her past life.

“I have passed my B.A three years ago. Since then, I have been drifting away. I have had odd teaching jobs and I have also been companion to a few rich children. On the whole, it has been a great struggle. It is also nonsense to say that women's salvation lies in education. It does not improve their lot a bit; it leaves them as badly unemployed as the men.” (The Dark Room 66)

The candid admission steals the heart of Ramani and disturbs his family. As a matter of fact, Shanta bai is a shrewd woman and after the separation from her husband knows how to gain sympathy and how to seduce a man. Ramani gets so occupied with her that he forgets all his duties and commitment towards his family. One day Savitri's friend Gangu who is a perfect blend of traditional and modern values, comes to see her and during the conversation Gangu discloses the truth about Ramani's relation with Shanta Bai. Savitri comes to know about her husband's clandestine affair with Shanta Bai through Gangu

“I won't hide anything from you. They did not stay very long in the theatre. She said something and both of them went out at ten o' clock.” (The Dark Room 101)

In Indian context marital fidelity is highly valued. Savitri who tolerates all insults at the hand of her husband fails to bear this shameful act of her husband. The disclosure about Ramani's infidelity comes to her like a bolt from the blue. She who used to be true to her legendary namesake rebels. When Ramani comes back home, she reacts bitterly and shouts.

"He should not touch her. He is impure and even if she burns her skin, she will not be able to cleanse herself of impurity of his touch." (The Dark Room 112)

Her anger grows but at the same time, she starts self-pitying. Her anguish is now heart rending.

"I don't possess anything in the world. What possession can a woman call her own except her body. Everything else that she has is her father's, her husband's or son's." (113)

But there is no change in Ramani's attitude. He is, in the words of Naik, "an utterly self-centred and self-indulgent man." (Naik 21)

It is this attitude that leads Savitri to raise a revolt, by leaving the home. In utter frustration, she tries to put an end to her life by drowning herself into the river. She is so religious that even at this moment she repents for uttering harsh words to her husband and thinks that she will be punished by Yama.

"Sarayu was flowing in the dark with subdued ramble..... The last sensation that she felt was a sharp sting as the water shot up her nostrils, and something took hold of her feet and toppled her over." (The Dark Room 115-121)

But she is rescued by Mari, a blacksmith burglar. Ponni, the wife of Mari is moved to hear her sad story. She helps her search some work so that Savitri can lead a respectable life. With Ponni's help, Savitri gets work in the temple of the village but Savitri fails to adjust with querulous priest in the temple. Her homesickness also grows. She realizes that she has made a futile attempt by escaping from home and returns home with a changed attitude. In this respect she is in contrast to Gaurie, a central character in 'The Old Woman and The Cow' by Mulk Raj Anand. Savitri does not have courage and a strong will power for being independent whereas Gaurie has courage and a spirit for independence. Gaurie takes up the profession of a nurse after leaving her husband's house and never returns. Ramani can be contrasted with Krishana, the hero in The English Teacher who is ready to sacrifice things for the happiness of his wife.

The characters and themes that occur in the novels of Narayan are usually drawn from the day-to-day incidents and experiences. The Dark Room is also not an exception. It paints the picture of a middle-class family having its joys and sorrows. Savitri, a traditional Hindu wife in a middle-class family suffers silently and surrenders to the traditions of the society. She suffers due to the patriarchal set up of the society which allows her husband to have relations with Shanta Bai. Even her revolt is restricted due to her gendered helplessness. According to Ramteke- "Savitri's predicament is primarily because of the fact that she lacks moral courage to assert herself owing to the religious taboos which have far reaching effect on the women folk in the Hindu society." (12)

By delineating Savitri's life Narayan describes the position of the woman in Indian society. She is helpless inside the family and outside the family. Savitri is tortured emotionally by her husband as well as by the priest of the temple where she takes refuge. She articulates the pain of a woman.

“What is the difference between a prostitute and a married woman? The prostitute changes her men but a married woman does not; that is all, but both earn their food and shelter in the same manner.” (The Dark Room 120)

It seems that Narayan has purposely given the names, The Dark Room and Savitri to the novel and to the female protagonist respectively. A dark room is a room in the house where the junk is stored. The protagonist relates herself to the junk that has lost its utility. Savitri, the legendary figure and paragon of virtues, brings back her husband from the clutches of Yama, the lord of Death. Savitri in the novel is true to her namesake. She is a traditional Indian house wife who endures her husband's ill temperament. At times she isolates herself from the family and the world and retires to the dark room where she releases her anger and frustration.

In nutshell, The Dark Room that falls in the category of Narayan's domestic novels, is a portrayal of domestic disharmony that arises due to the male chauvinistic attitude of Ramani. He is a typical Indian husband who is happy to exercise his power over his wife. Savitri in the end returns to her husband's house. At this point, she is, if not dead, not alive either. She resumes her domestic duties and keeps herself busy in managing the household works. “The story entails the tale of a tormented wife. The Dark Room is a super examination of a patriarchal society and also reflects the injustices that this type of society causes to women and children. This is regarded as an impressive as well as controlled novel which eventually moves and hits the society.”

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