



The Female Characters of R. K. Narayan: The Conflict Between Tradition and Modernity

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Abstract

The conflict between Tradition and Modernity is one of the major themes in post-Independence Indian English fiction. R. K. Narayan has also taken up this theme in his novels, especially in the portrayal of his female characters. The women in his novels play an important role, sometimes passively and at other times aggressively, within the network of family, religion and society. Regarding the issue of tradition and modernity with reference to his female characters, he presents both sides of the issue in a refined and impartial manner. Narayan seems to advocate that in a world beset by the pulls of modernity, the acceptance of traditional norms for the sake of spiritual tranquillity is a preferable proposition. This paper attempts to highlight the theme of conflict between tradition and modernity with reference to Narayan's prominent female characters in his fictive world.

Keywords: Tradition, modernity, conflict, domesticity, spiritual tranquillity.

The conflict between Tradition and Modernity is one of the major themes in post-Independence Indian English fiction, in view of the rapid changes in the socio-cultural ethos. The novels of Mulk Raj Anand, Raja Rao, Kamala Markandaya and many other prominent novelists bear testimony to this fact.

Like these novelists, R. K. Narayan has also taken up this theme in his novels, especially in the portrayal of his female characters. The women in his fiction are powerful vehicles for the exposition of his perception of Indian social reality. The women in his novels play important roles sometimes passively and at times aggressively, within the network of family, religion and society. Regarding the issue of tradition and modernity with reference to his female characters, he presents both sides of the issue in a refined and impartial manner. Santha Krishnaswamy has rightly remarked that "the issue of the woman, the woman torn between her career and her home, between the needs of nurturance and autonomy, between her pull towards modernity and her bias in favour of tradition and superstition-all these are present in Narayan's fiction."¹

The women in Narayan's novels are from middle class families, either completely adhering to the norms and values of traditional family and social setups or trying to adjust their traditional beliefs to the demands of modern life. This present paper attempts to highlight the theme of conflict between tradition and modernity with reference to Narayan's prominent female characters in his fictive world.

In the male-dominated Indian society, women have been seen as inferior to men except in the Vedic period when they enjoyed equal rights in every sphere of life. Assigned a subordinate and secondary role, they have been subject to all kinds of oppression and exploitation. However, in the wake of changing socio-economic

and socio-political conditions in post-Independence Indian society, they are gradually becoming aware of their social and political rights. R. K. Narayan has faithfully depicted all this through his novels.

Savitri, the heroine of *The Dark Room*, is a simple, tolerant and submissive traditional Hindu wife who reaches middle-age, looking after her three children and her domineering, outwardly modern, and immoral husband Ramani. She suffers silently, compromises with her subservient position and gets used to the occasional tyrannies, tortures, and rebuffs of her indifferent husband. To a harsh and inconsiderate Ramani, his wife is nothing but a plaything, deserving even less consideration than the household servants who, at the worst, can at least give up their job and feel free.

When Ramani's clandestine affair with Shanta Bai reaches Savitri, she ignores it as long as possible, but when it becomes a test of her patience and endurance, she says to him through her heavy breathing: "I am a human being... you men will never grant that ...Don't think that you can fondle us when you like and kick us when you choose."²

She leaves the house in the dark night and tries to commit suicide by drowning herself in the Sarayu but is saved by a night prowler and blacksmith, Mari. Ponni tries to help Savitri become independent. She accepts a job in a temple. But she is seized with 'a nostalgia for children' and returns home. The scene at home does not improve, it remains more or less the same. Savitri is left to curse her marriage and the day of her marriage with Ramani.

According to Indian tradition, it is unimaginable for any woman to cross the boundaries of her husband's home. In Savitri's decision to desert her husband and her home, we see her revolting against tradition. But since Savitri is the heroine of a novelist who never loses an opportunity to show the triumph of tradition over modernity, her attempts to revolt against tradition are warded off by her spirit of motherhood, and she returns to her tradition and her home.

In *Mr Sampath*, Shanti, the screen goddess Parvathi, who dazzles Malgudi with her beauty and seductive charms, is also under the sway of dazzling glammers of modernity. Despite being a widow and the mother of a small child, she comes in Malgudi, leaving behind her son, to become an actress. She has an affair with Mr Sampath. However, she ultimately comes to realise the futility of all this and finds her salvation in her return to her family and her home to look after her fatherless son. This indicates her realization that only tradition could provide her real solace.

The Guide is the story of a dancer, craving for meaning in her life in a male-dominated society. Rosie belongs to the tradition of *devadasi*. For the sake of a stable family life, she even sacrifices her traditional art. But her court marriage with Marco is a failure. Marco's unconscionable apathy to his conjugal responsibility, his total neglect of Rosie and his unkind and unsympathetic attitude made her life miserable. She felt suffocated and was trying to find an outlet. The outlet was opened by the arrival of Raju in her life. He encouraged her to dance. She forgot the world around her and was fully wedded to her art. But her disillusionment began when she found Raju exploiting her art for his material prosperity. She hardly found any difference between Marco and Raju. Raju appeared as selfish as Marco. For both of them, a woman is a commodity to be used; if you dislike it, ignore it or throw it away. When Raju was imprisoned for committing forgery, she said to Raju, "If I have to pawn my last possession, I'll do it to save you from jail. But, once it is over, leave me alone once and for all; that's all I ask. Forget me. Leave me to live or die as I choose; that's all"³

Rosie was a lonely woman hunting for meaning in her existence. Male-dominated society failed to hold meaning for her existence; it betrayed her. She at last returned to her art. Her love for Raju is anti-traditional. It even poses a challenge to the social institution of marriage. Though Rosie's illicit affair with Raju and her betrayal of the faith of her husband put her in the line of modernised women, a deep probing into her character reveals that she is not totally anti-traditional. Despite her relations with Raju, she is also a Hindu wife torn between the magnetic pulls of tradition and modernity.

In spite of her separation from her husband and indulgence in an affair with Raju, disregarding the traditional norms associated with marriage, Rosie essentially remains a traditional Hindu wife. She does her best to atone for her unfaithfulness and is humble and repentant like any traditional Hindu wife.

The refrain 'after all he is my husband' runs through her mind during all the years of her separation from him. This pull of middle-class morality and traditional subservience of a Hindu wife to her husband makes her remark- "It is far better to end one's life on his (her husband's) doorstep". This remark not only reveals Rosie's genuine regard for Marco but also sums up the centuries-old tradition of Indian womanhood. Thus, there is a clash between tradition and modernity. The novelist himself, being an upholder of tradition, seems to suggest that any deviation from traditional norms in the case of a woman results in disorder, and order and normalcy could be restored only when there is a return to tradition.

The heroine of *The Painter of Signs*, Daisy, is a working woman with a strong mind of her own. She is a committed social missionary, and marriage is hardly the mission of her life. She runs a Family Planning clinic in Malgudi and has made it her to spread the new gospel of birth control. She is passionately in love with Raman but abhors the idea that a man is an integral part of a woman's life. This leads to the final phase of their love when Daisy suddenly declines to marry. The novel ends with Daisy leaving on a long professional tour.

She rejects the marriage arranged by her parents because she strongly feels that she is not cut out for marital life. When she tells her family that she would not allow them to inspect her as a bride and that she would rather do the inspect the grooms, they are shocked. When her father said, 'Don't be mad; don't you know that it's not done?' she replied, 'If it is not done, it's better that someone starts doing it now.'⁴

She agrees to marry Raman on two conditions: one, that they should have no children, and two, if by mischance one is born, she would give the child away and keep herself free to pursue her social work.

Narayan gives a new dimension to the woman character. He perhaps wants to remind us that an Indian wife still lives and dies with her husband. Thus, he upholds modernity without sacrificing the sanctity of tradition.

From the foregoing discussion of Narayan's female characters in his fictive world, it is evident that the novelist, despite his artistic detachment and his inner equanimity, portrays the double pulls that the Indian woman is subject to; she is torn between tradition and modernity, between Indian and Western values and ways of living, between her dignity as a human being and her duty as a wife and mother, between marrying for love and marrying for the family, between her desire for autonomy and her need for nurturance. In each case, she tries to settle finally for a compromise.

Though an upholder of tradition, Narayan depicts through his fictional heroines the changes in society. Through them, he shows us that the old stereotypes of women's roles are certainly crumbling around the edges, and that the modern Indian woman attempts the Herculean task of connecting tradition with modernity, education and career with domesticity. However, Narayan seems to advocate that in a world beset by the pulls of modernity, the acceptance of traditional norms for the sake of spiritual tranquillity is a preferable proposition. Though the reality of the emerging forces of modernity cannot be overlooked, the value of tradition cannot be slighted. Narayan believes in the enduring value of heritage and tradition. His Malgudi remains changeless beneath a veneer of change.

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