

Predicament of Women in Select Novels of R.K. Narayan

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Abstract

The passage of Indian English Novel from 1864 with *Rajmohan's Wife* by Bankim Chandar Chatterji to till to date has witnessed an uphill task in Indian English Novel. One of the very few who are responsible for Indian English Novel to reach the coveted position is undoubtedly R.K.Narayan. He has gained a unique place among the readers of fiction both at home and abroad. His novels are prescribed for university courses in the foreign countries. His novels have been reprinted many times which testifies his relevance as a novelist.

Narayan, like William Shakespeare, is much interested in the creation of wonderful and marvellous women characters full of vigour and vitality. His heroines are conscious about their existence in the orthodox and traditional society which does not permit freedom for them. Narayan presents his women characters as dominating and powerful; sometimes as powerless, frustrated and oppressed women; and women accepting the system of the Indian society of strong masculine dominance.

The paper highlights and stresses the importance of Woman characters and their predicament in his select novels.

The original name of R.K.Narayan is Rasipuram Krishnaswamy Iyer Narayanasawamy which Graham Greene later abbreviated as R.K.Narayan. He is a son of school Head Master born in Madras on 10 October, 1906. Narayan is a humorous writer, interested in the lower-middle-classes of South India, in a world relatively free from the terrible privations and agonies. His novels faithfully reflect contemporary Indian life. He presents more realistic pictures with fantasy. Concentration is his achievement for his subject-matter. K.R. Srinivasa Iyengar writes about his artistic excellence, "He is one of the few writers in India who take their craft seriously, constantly striving to improve the instrument, pursuing with a sense of dedication what may often seem to be the mirage of technical perfection. There is a norm of excellence below which Narayan cannot possibly lower himself." (Iyengar, 359) Regarding the advent of the strange idea of writing in his mind Narayan writes, "On a certain day in September, selected by my grandmother for its auspiciousness, I bought an exercise book and wrote the first line of a novel: as I sat in a room nibbling my pen and wondering what to write, Malgudi with its little railway station swam into view, all ready-made, with a character called Swaminathan running down the platform peering into the faces of passengers, and grimacing at a bearded face."(Narayan, 79-80)

After working in some hand-to-mouth journalism for a few years, Narayan published his first-novel, *Swami and Friends* (1935). His two other novels *The Bachelor of Arts* (1936) and *The Dark room* (1938) appeared in quick succession. Then, *The English Teacher* (1945) was followed by *Mr.Sampath* (1948), *The Financial Expert* (1952) and *Waiting for Mahatma* (1955). An American tour was organised by the Rockefeller Foundation and the fruits of this adventure were *The*

Guide (1958) and *My Dateless Diary* (1960). He has also collected two volumes of his short stories: *An Astrologer's Day* and *lawley Road*. He continued the creative writing with *The Man-Eater of Malgudi* (1961), *The Vendor of Sweets* (1967), *The Painter of Signs* (1977), *A Tiger for Malgudi* (1983), *Talkative Man* (1986) *The World of Nagaraj* (1990), *Grandmother's Tale* (1992). Narayan wrote his novels based on the contemporary Indian social, political and economic conditions. His fiction mirrors the microcosmic India caught in the conventions, tradition and social change.

From the beginning of his writing career R. K. Narayan was of a reformist temperament. His fictional world appears to be transcription of the actual world in which we live. In keeping with the middle class milieu of his novels, Narayan adopts a pedestrian style to portray his women characters. He embodies the pure spirit of Indian culture. He has certain unyielding ideas in his mind which we see fully expressed in his novels. His belief in moral order establishes itself. One takes a fresh look at the myths and legends and finds a new meaning in them.

R. K. Narayan was essentially a story teller whose sensitive well drawn portrayals of Indian women characters were set mostly in the fictional South Indian town of Malgudi. Malgudi is his Casterbridge. But the inhabitants of Malgudi are essentially human and hence have their kinship with all humanity. In this sense Malgudi is everywhere. His women are rendered in a lively and realistic manner. He has created tiny but perfectly credible universe in Malgudi. He had a deep interest in middle class *Life*. He therefore recognised the importance of women, the *Source of life*. He had deep respect, love and sympathy for women in general and Indian women in particular. A critical study of his novels shows that his women are more colourful, more convincing and livelier than men. He believes that man and woman are complementary to each other. One can not exist without the other. He did not start with equality but asked for equal opportunity. In Malgudi, women are not just to be the shadow that follows the substance, but they are their original selves. He favours *Inborn-Equality* of men and women.

The traditional men-women relationship was one in which men continued to be the bread winner, assertive, bullying, and self-reliant. The women continued to be submissive, meek, and docile; accepted the role of dutiful housewives. The women were born only to be beaten by domestic problems, meaningless customs, traditions and conventions. The women's fate was decided by someone else and they were never given an opportunity to shape their own destiny. Women portrayed in some of the pre independence novels of R. K. Narayan conform to the traditional role.

The plight of neglected wife is R. K. Narayan's favourite theme. Marriage denies individuality to women and forces them to adopt attitudes or ideals envisioned for them by males. Marriage enslaves orthodox women in his early novels. She spends aimless, endless days without interrogating its purpose. The women who are submissive, adopt community's charted path, are safer though they live in fearful survival strategy by always battling with their psyche. They derive inner satisfaction in having no need of asserting their own views. To the traditional women, matrimony is incomplete without motherhood. Even a delayed motherhood is a cause of anxiety. Barrenness is a curse for orthodox women. His women seldom have their strong opinions. They are often judged in relation to the males around them and compared to them; women appear stunted, not fully formed in some of his pre independence novels. They work within the confines of home. These women perform their domestic duties mutely.

R. K. Narayan glorifies the motherly portrayal of women although he loves to portray grand mother. He shows that women are always a mother whether they have their child or not. The traditional women characters in the novels of R. K. Narayan enjoy their particular status in the family and the society at large from sacrifice and service. It is an ideal forming of the basic Indian ethos in an archetypal pattern. His spirited women simply leave all this man-made, anti-woman institutions. They have enough power to create their own world. Some of his women are absolutely free from male dependence. Rather than being beggars they declare their liberation. In the name of women's liberation movement what has happened is reaction, and reaction never liberates anyone because it is tied to the action. R.K. Narayan prepared the ground for the real revolution in his pre independence novels and in his post independence novels his women are free, not out of hate, not out of anger, but out of understanding true spirit of freedom.

Women characters in the orthodox milieu of Narayan's novels shine out as radical women who raise their head against social exploitation. They have freedom to voice their protest. They are vibrant women and act accordingly. Of course, Narayan has made the thematic and episodic use of social evils like dowry system, craze for the male child as a progeny, the curse of barrenness, and nuclear family as an aspect of social change. But credibly he did not exploit these issues; he remains the detached observer with regard to the plight of women. Nowhere in his novels has he seemed to take sides either for or against women's rights.

R. K. Narayan shows that women are unpredictable and incalculable. He dives deep into the women's heart and declare that man cannot understand some of her actions. His women know the problem of their nation. They are conscious of their rights as well as duties. Some of his heroines are under impact of westernization. They cross the male-made threshold, without running a race with them. They do not underestimate their domestic duties as well. He shows that Indian women do not want freedom to that extent that they would feel emotionally invalid. He is far ahead of his time. His portrayal of educated, active and ambitious women highlights the empowered image of women. She rejects hegemonic structure and re-defines her role. Women step out of their traditional roles and find greater fulfillment. Through his own unique vision he records the progress and change in the status of women. He synthesizes the traditionalism and modernity and bridging the gap; he voices the emergence of self-defined women in the orthodox milieu of the Indian society. All the women characters feel the warmth of change. This new image of the women brings the ray of hope to the women who are groping in the dark. He has opened a new vista by infusing crusading spirit into them.

Some of his women protagonists transcend assigned roles and aspire to carve out an independent economic entity, according to their own taste, talent and inclination, though they belong to socially despised caste. He recognised her undiscovered potentiality for self-reliance. His bold and spirited women carry a furnace of conviction. They burn up all the ambiguities and doubts. The strain of modernity and their interest in women's own identity are assimilated in their personalities. His women are far sighted and posses the capacity to withstand the strains of an unexpected menacing situations. His women possess an astonishing degree of self-control. They realize the pressure of changing forces of the modern world and civilization. They become the powerful promoter of the process of change. They have an unorthodox thinking about pre-marital sex and love marriage. His spirited women dominate over their male counterpart in some of the cases because the

intensity of their work keeps their morale high and emboldens them to confront and overcome whatever handicaps their way.

NEED AND IMPORTANCE OF STUDY

The importance of this study is the predicament of women in R.K.Narayan's select novels. It is a general view that in the conception and portrayal of women characters, Narayan shows a typical Indianness. Many critics have branded R.K. Narayan's women characters as 'insignificant beings'. As R.K.Narayan does not encourage any open talk about his works, it is quite risky to arrive at any definite conclusions about his characters. But in an interview, in the 'Indian literary review' he speaks openly of the relationship between the author and his community, "The author is the spokesman of the community in which he lives and of himself. He has to free himself even from his own previous standards in order to be creative. At the same time he is also a product of the society in which he lives and has to maintain the balance between the two".(Narayan, 5-8)

SCOPE OF THE STUDY

R.K. Narayan's career as a novelist spans almost eight decades. His perception and recognition of the women in the Indian society focus the past and present through his own unique vision over a period of time. He emerges as one of the greatest humanists in the twentieth century. All the knowledge, all her conditioning, the whole process of her upbringing, her society, her education, and civilization- they constitute a *shell* which keeps her and her understanding imprisoned. R. K. Narayan breaks off this *shell*, which contains her whole painful past. Therefore his portrayal of women becomes fascinating. His women watch anything that is natural with serenity and revolts against all sufferings that are imposed by anybody. Their jealousies, their anger, and their frustration- they all bring pain. Their ambitions bring pain with a tint of satisfaction because they are self chosen. He shows some of his women characters having some weaknesses, which are unacceptable but, he believes that society is responsible to some extent, for whatever unacceptable in women. He never approves women's slavish status. They serve man, because it is ingrained in their nature. Caring and sharing is the essence of womanhood. But service cannot be compulsion to them.

The issue of woman, the woman torn between her career and her home, between her 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.

OBJECTIVES:

The research is planned to highlight mainly the following objectives:

1. Typical indianness in the portrayal of women characters.
2. Exploration of agony and suffering of women in the traditional family system.
3. New values of criticism and aesthetics in portraying individuals.
4. Repetition in the presentation of human experiences in women in different forms.
5. Uniqueness of womanhood as outpouring of inner struggle.
6. Narrative techniques in portrayal of women characters.

METHODOLOGY:

The research has been methodically classified into five chapters.

Chapter 1: Introduction:

This chapter is planned to focus on the passage of Indian English novel form its origin to the present and focuses on the life and works of R.K. Narayan.

Chapter 2:

This chapter elucidates the art of characterization of R.K. Narayan and the predicament of women characters in the select novels.

Chapter 3: The Pre-independence Novels

This chapter is confined to the pre-independence novels of R.K. Narayan; *Swami and Friends* (1935), *The Bachelor of Arts* (1936), *The Dark room* (1938) and *The English Teacher*(1945). The chapter provides and ample study of the women characters in these novels.

Chapter –4: The Post-independence Novels

This chapter consists of post-independence novels of R.K. Narayan written in the period from 1950-1980, *The Financial Expert* (1952) and *The Guide* (1958). *The Man-Eater of Malgudi* (1961), *The Vendor of Sweets* (1967), *The Painter of Signs* (1977). This chapter provides an objective analysis of the women characters in these novels.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

This chapter summarizes all the four chapters and tries to understand the complex and rich personality of the women characters and focuses on the enigmatic portrayal of women characters by R.K. Narayan.

R. K. Narayan reigns supreme in presenting the music of life of the people around him in a lucid language. His women continued to be an enigmatic personality. Yet, he is aware of women's issues and problems. If he offers us no solutions, and propounds no doctrines, it doesn't mean that he had nothing to offer. At least he has the courage to focus on the plight of women and pleads for welfare reforms. He represents reality of women's lives and he succeeds in his attempt to portray it in his novels. His novels are universal in appeal and have a place of pride in their own right in the field of Indian novels in English. It is not accident that his works have been translated into many languages. This recognition has been brought to him by his works, which portray women and fundamental reality of Indian society in a sensitive and authentic manner.

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