



DEPICTATION OF WOMEN IN R.K. NARAYAN'S NOVELS

Dr. G.S. Mhangore

Associate Professor,
Karmveer Hire Arts, Science,
Commerce and Education College, Gargoti (M.S.)

R. K. Narayan is India's foremost and internationally renowned English novelist. His novels are deeply rooted in the rich Indian cultural heritage. There is the widespread and universal appeal of R.K. Narayan due to the predominant middle class milieu in all his novels. These novels occasionally incorporate characters from other classes and the stories stray into surrounding rural areas on distant metropolitan cities like Madars and Delhi.

Most of the action in all his novels is cantered around the small town of Malgudi in Mysore. Like Hardy's Wessex and Austen's two inches of ivory, Malgudi has a life of its own. In his works, Narayan concentrates on orthodox families and incorporates their numerous features. Man-woman relationship occupies an important place in Narayan's fiction where women are helpless creatures, always to be guarded by male members of the family.

Narayan is well acquainted with the powerful hold of traditional values, rituals and attitudes. The progress of a country is often judged by the status of its women since they constitute an integral part of the progress and existence itself. Jawaharlal Nehru has aptly remarked: "to awaken the people it is the woman who must be awakened. Once she is on move, the family moves, the village moves and the nation moves." A woman is treated as a goddess: the deities presiding over learning (Saraswati), wealth (Lakshmi), harvests (Annapurna), power (Durga), are all women. In order to maintain ecological balance and uproot all evils as destroyer, the Goddess Kali is also a woman. The position of woman in every civilization marks the stage of evolution which it has reached and furnishes the truest test of its civilization and culture.

R.K. Narayan is a representative of the middle-class. His depiction of Malgudi is his greatest strength. There is no overt eastern message on western influence. The small town Malgudi is a mixture of both the east

and west. There are aspects of Malgudi which are similar to many other small towns.

In Narayan's early novels, women have a significant role to play. In *Swami and Friends*, the world is seen through the eyes of a young boy. In this novel, the members of the family, including the grandmother and the mother, have fixed roles to play—they provide a background.

The Bachelor of Arts depicts the central character from the studenthood to the stage of householder—the two stages being bridged by romantic love and courtship. Narayan's early novels are set in the Malgudi of 1930s where choice of a partner is determined by fate and astrology. Moreover, Narayan regards impossible free communication between an orthodox boy and an orthodox girl before marriage. Thus there is much fantasy in the way the boy sees the girl. Both Malathi, the girl with whom Chandran first falls in love, and Sushila whom he later courts and marries, appear quite casually in the novel and maintain distance. Although Malathi and Chandran never meet or talk, yet the latter gives the former an imaginary name which endows her with an imaginary life and virtues. The entire fantasy is attached to and grows out of carefully observed facts—the colour of her sari, the day and time when she comes to the sea-side and so on. The theme of courtship properly begins with the first formal visit of a would-be bridegroom to the bride's house. Such a scene is described three times in his novels: *The Bachelor of Arts*, *The English Teacher* and *The Vendor of Sweets*.

In *The English Teacher*, Narayan has portrayed the extraordinary personality of Sushila by several means: he endows her with a separateness and distance, pins down the relationship between Krishna and Sushila, and uses first person in the narrative. When the romantic love culminates in marriage, it ends in sorrow and disillusionment. The nearness reduces the warmth of romantic feeling. When Sushila dies, Krishna bursts in philosophic utterance: "We came together only to go apart again. The law of life can't be avoided. It comes into operation the moment we are detached from our mother's womb. All struggle and misery in life is due to our attempt to arrest this law or get away from it or in allowing ourselves to be hurt by it."

In *The Vendor of Sweets*, the sense of disillusionment following romantic love is strong. Jagan feels that the obsessive fondness of the first few years for his wife has lost its warmth and has gradually evaporated: "He felt fatigued by all the apparatus of sex, its promises and its futility,

the sadness and the sweet at the end of it all, and he assumed, that his wife also shared his outlook."² Thus we find that in Narayan's world, romantic love is somehow self-destructive and ends in fiasco.

Savitri of *The Dark Room* is one of the few women in Narayan's novels who offers a fairly complete picture of woman in an orthodox milieu of Indian society. She stands in contrast with her two friends, Gangu and Janamma. Janamma behaves as a typical traditional domestic wife. She says, "I have never opposed my husband or argued with him at any time. . . . What he does is right. It is a wife's duty to feel so."³ Gangu, on the other hand, is an eccentric whose husband claims to be a champion of women's rights, yet she is well within the demanding standards of the community. Savitri can be placed somewhere between the two. On the one hand, she is fascinated by Gangu, while on the other, she obeys Janamma. Unlike Gangu, Savitri's life is ordered and arranged around her family, but unlike Janamma she has her own forms of protest against her husband, Ramani. All these three women, however, stand in contrast with Shanta Bai, a newcomer to Malgudi, who was married young to her cousin, a gambler and drunkard whom she at the age of eighteen left because he would not change. She, then obtained a B.A. degree and kept drifting from one job to another. Her precarious financial position depends on the extent of Ramani's attachment to her. Savitri links herself to Shanta Bai in the following way: "The prostitute changes her man, but a married woman doesn't, that's all, but both earn their food; and shelter in the same manner." (117) Here, Narayan provides a contrast between the higher caste women of Lawley Extension, Savitri in particular, and the lower caste women. When Ramani beats Babu for tampering with the lights, Savitri intervenes but her main form of protest against her husband's violence is withdrawal. Ponni, a lower caste woman, genuinely attempts to help Savitri in finding the life of independence she longs for, at the same time respecting and guarding the privacy she needs.

In *The Guide*, Narayan creates his most complex woman character—Rosie. The complexity lies in the roles she assumes. She does not hesitate in telling about her family background, "I belong to a family traditionally dedicated to the temple as dancers: my mother, my grandmother . . . even as a young girl, I danced in our village temple ... we are viewed as public women." Macro, her husband, neither understands her dance nor her needs for the pleasures of living. So he finally abandons her because of her affair with Raju. He says: "You are not my wife. You are a woman who will

go to bed with anyone who flatters your antics." (134) When Rosie comes to live with Raju in Mal-gudi, she chooses a new name, Nalini for herself. There is a shift in her own scale of values. Now, her passion for physical love was falling and she only wanted to dance professionally. Throughout the novel, there is a continuous conflict between Rosie and Nalini.

In *Waiting for the Mahatma*, Bharati is a true disciple of Gandhi. She is a 'protege of the Master' and indeed in temperament almost a projection of the saint himself. Bharati means 'daughter of India' and it was a name selected for her by Gandhi himself. She was an orphan whom Gandhi brought up. On the one hand, she represents the nascent India—self-confident, having a positive ideology and hopes for a bright future, while on the other she represents the younger generation of women in India—knowing one's own mind and with 'what a brave new world!' outlook. She had disappeared into the market like a bird gliding on wings. Sriram's falling in love at first sight and her being attracted by him (though she has complete control of herself) give a tone of warmth and romance to the novel, but the romance never becomes a dominant element.

In *The Painter of Signs*, Narayan portrays a social worker in the form of Daisy. She is a young lady who has just started a family planning centre in Malgudi. Raman, the hero of the novel, tries his best to get familiar with her, but he is always discouraged by a calculated coldness in her look. She strongly detests marriage and does not respond to Raman's idea of married life. Moreover, her dedication to her work is her solemn and profound commitment to life. She moves away to carry on her social service and leaves Raman to suffer the bitter sweet pangs of separation and unfulfilled love. In a way, she is similar to Bharati of *Waiting for the Mahatma*. Both of them are devoted to their duties.

Sita of *The World of Nagaraj* presents a true picture of Indian wife. She is very much conscious of her duties as a wife. Whenever her husband, Nagaraj, calls her, she immediately responds to his call. She is very particular about his honour. She also advises him on important matters. When she finds that her husband is feeling disturbed in writing in that particular room due to vermins and rats, she asks him to come to another room and to continue his writing work there. She is always worried about his welfare. She is very close to Savitri of *The Dark Room*.

His novel *Grandmother's Tale* is somewhat autobiographical. It is the story of his great grandmother who lived in the later period of the East India Company. Bala, the central character, was married at the early age

of seven to Viswa, a boy of ten. Her boldness is evident when she goes in search of her husband. She, being a traditional wife, does not participate in household discussion. But she is very much conscious of her domestic duty. Before her husband gets up in the morning, she lits the kitchen fire and prepares his breakfast. Like a true Indian wife, she does not tolerate Surma as her co-wife. She is all dominating, devious and aggressive. But the moment she is united with her husband, she is docile and all polite. Her tone becomes gentle and subdued.

He believes in domestic harmony and peaceful relations, the woman is either a wedded partner or a seductive creature. Ramani's keep Shanta Bai, Sampath's vision of beauty Shanti and Raju's beloved, Rosie—all three women are married but unhappy in their family life. Therefore, they move out of their family orbit and take help of those interested men who can help them rise. But in each case, the woman is left to herself, their lovers having proved either selfish or misfit. Besides, the public woman like Rangi of *The Man Eater of Malgudi* and Grace of *The Vendor of Sweets* do not receive sympathy for living sex life without marriage. The two other women—Savitri and Sushila—are loyal, loving and simple but their experiences are different in life. Sushila is worshipped by Krishnan, the English teacher, whereas Savitri is tortured, neglected and humiliated by her husband. All his female characters echo the Indian attitude in one way or the other.

Narayan's women are typically Indian. Sushila in *The English Teacher* and Savitri in *The Dark Room* are perfect models of Indian wife. Rosie in *The Guide* is neither meek nor submissive like the earlier women characters. She is more modern than the others. She belongs to a class of temple dancers but marries out of her caste and class. She gets no sympathy from her husband and at the height of her revolt against him, she finds in Raju an instrument for the fulfilment of her ambition of becoming a dancer. But even she shows her essential Indianness in the attitude of resignation she adopts when Raju is arrested for forgery. She tells him that she felt all along he was not doing right things. This is Karma. What can they do? Indeed, even at the height of her success, she does forget her husband. And when his book is published, she, like a true Indian wife, is proud of him. Her attachment to and dependence on Raju do not reduce her to sex crazy or morally loose woman. She remains mentally chaste and fully devoted to her husband.

We find that his stress on domesticity and attitude towards women is characteristic and different from any other writer. Women in R.K. Narayan's novels are bound by the domestic idea. In the attitude towards women he is characteristically Indian as he upholds the values of women's fidelity to health and husband.

REFERENCES:

1. R.K. Narayan, *The Dark Room* (Mysore: Indian Thought Publication, 1956), p. 112.
2. R.K. Narayan, *The Vendor of Sweets* (Bodley Head, 1967), p. 172.
3. R.K. Narayan, *Waiting for the Mahatma* (Mysore: Indian Thought Publications, 1969), p. 13.
4. R.K. Narayan, *The Guide* (Mysore: Indian Thought Publications, 1985), p. 75.
5. R.K. Narayan, *The English Teacher* (Mysore: ITP, 1995), p. 202.
6. Graham Greene, preface to R. K. Narayan's *Swami & Friends*, London, 1935