

## **R.K.NARAYAN'S FICTIONS IN THE CONTEXT OF CLASS DISCRIMINATION AND GENDER CONSCIOUSNESS**

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### ***Abstract***

*Class discrimination and gender consciousness are two potent subjects which the paper intends to discuss. It is highly challenging to debate on this subject as R.K.Narayan is a detached social observer and his novels are excellent in delineating human relationships. The paper attempts to study the physiological anatomy of his fictions and thereby explore the different facets of his creative genius. Beginning from The Dark Room to The Painter of Signs always his women characters stand both for change and for resistance to change. Class discriminations and caste distinctions are not rampant but in an overt way it is highlighted in his fictions. The critical observations are deciphered in the context of these novels – The Dark Room, The Vendor of Sweets, The Guide, The Man –Eater of Malgudi and The Painter of Signs. The revolting and submissive nature of Savitri, the generational conflict between Jagan and Mali, the revolting nature of Rosie and the new woman concept in Daisy are the key areas that have been analysed and evaluated in the discourse of this paper.*

**Key Words:** *Gender consciousness, class discrimination, caste distinctions, patriarchy, Feminisms*

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Class, Caste, Race and Gender are the social evils that have been affecting our nation for a prolonged period. Considering the nation from the pre- independence or post-independence perspective, all the issues stated earlier, which were very strident and overtly expressed in the pre-independence period have now been reduced and minimised. Dissent was there in existence from the emergence of these social vices and in the post-independence period it took a concrete shape. Although the discussion strategy may foretell that the social traumas are no more in existence, but still they exist in the embedded form. Even in democratic and socialist India we still view articles in newspapers pertaining to these unhealthy practices of the society. The ostracised, traumatised, socially underprivileged classes express their deep sorrows whenever they get an opportunity to face the harsh realities of their life.

India is considered to be an abode of traditional customs and values. Class, caste, race and gender have always been the theme of different literature in vernacular or English Language. Literature reflects our culture and so literature and culture complement each other. To portray the impact of these social vices in literature, the novelist we have taken within the periphery of our discussion is R.K.Narayan. Though Narayan is acclaimed for his simplicity, readability, magnanimity but still we get an insight of some critical observations in his fictions. The background of his novels is always Malgudi, miniature India, space surrounded by tradition, culture, superstition and rigidity. Nowhere in Narayan's literary expositions have we found a vehement and vituperative attack against the social stigmas, but his reformative and rebellious attitude gradually develops in his depictions. Narayan brings in the elements of customs and conventions to captivate the Indianised ambience. A rendering of pristine human relationships, is what we discern in his novels. The artist and the visionary in Narayan obviously has a complex and non-simplistic perception of reality.

To begin with our research let us first consider the background description of his fictions. Narayan's social perception and the representation of Malgudi in his novels depict his attachment with his own community. Class, caste and race are related to social values and through series of novels Narayan clearly presents the social values, norms and mores which have been in existence and still continue to play a major role in shaping the lives of Hindu people. In this context O.P. Mathur rightly observes: 'Narayan does assert the validity of traditional Indian values but the wind from West has changed much of the panorama.' (Mathur 29) Hence the western civilization, its culture, dynamism plays an effective role to bring transfiguration in the Hindu society. This idea is contextualised in *The Vendor of Sweets* (1967)

where the generational conflict between Jagan and Mali forms the theme of the novel. Mali's inclination towards America, neglecting his father's business and ideologies endorses the influx of western attitude to life. A very modern approach to life is virtually exposed by Mali when he brings a lady with him while returning from America and introduces her as his wife. The concept of 'live-in' relationship is very much westernised and dismantles the idea of divine Hindu Marriage. There is also an underlying theme of generational conflict in the emotional bond between Jagan and Mali. Mali believes in capitalism and Jagan, follower of Mahatma Gandhi believes in Sarvodaya, conflict between East and West. Narayan incorporates these issues in the novel but his concentration is to narrate the relationship between Jagan and Mali which draws the inference that he is a detached social observer. In his memoir *My Days*<sup>1</sup> he states the fact – he lays bare his mind in all its true spirit. His attitude to writing can be placed beside some other novelists like Defoe, Richardson and even James Joyce as these novelists keep themselves out of the purview of the action they narrate in his fictions. In this regard Allen Walter advocates:

In fact they betray their opinion on the characters and situations and – in as much as every novel is an extended metaphor of the author's view of life-on the life itself. They do so by the very choice of the characters they write about, the thoughts and feelings they give them, and the behaviour and motives they attribute to them. (Walter 16-17)

Narayan conceives the class discrimination and caste distinctions in *The Guide*, *The Bachelor of Arts* and *The Man-Eater of Malgudi*. *The Guide* (1958) which won for Narayan huge accolades shows the novelists's skill in placing the orient into focus for occidental eyes. Narayan depicts a comprehensive picture of human activities, the comic and the tragic, the silly and the serious, the ridiculous and the sublime. Rosie, despite being an MA in economics and a talented dancer, is abused and evicted from the patriarchal society as she hails from the class of Devdasis.<sup>2</sup> Just for being illegitimate she is looked down upon and categorised as a low caste. Even Marco, who willingly ties wedlock with her in spite of knowing her origin, bestows patriarchal norms on her by putting restrictions on her public performances and expects her spontaneous submissiveness in every conjugal affair. Marco symbolically represents the materialistic society where moral values are compromised for wealth and status. According to Rosie the solemnisation of her marriage is occasioned by Marco's status and position in society. Rosie says:

But all women in my family are impressed, excited that a manlike him was coming to marry one of our class, and it was decided that if it was necessary to give up our traditional art, it was worth the sacrifice. He had a big house, a motor-car, he was a man of high social standing, he had a house outside Madras, he was living in it all alone, no family at all; he lived with his books and papers. (Narayan 85)

In *The Bachelor of Arts* (1937) there is a mélange of western and orthodox Hindu elements. Chandran, the protagonist, in one of his solitary ramblings after passing his BA examinations, espies a girl Malathi and becomes infatuated with her. According to John Thieme: 'He is seen

here as a love struck adolescent, smitten with thoughts of a girl he has barely seen and pleading with his parents to stretch the bonds of Hindu custom to allow him to marry her.' (Thieme 34) His marriage proposal with Malathi is thwarted by his orthodox and superstitious mother's belief in 'custom' and sense of low and high class. Chandran's mother dislikes the marriage proposal for her preconceived notion of class discriminations. She heartlessly refutes his proposal in the mere pretext of incompatible horoscopes. It brings a devastating effect in his life but ultimately he succumbs to the customs of her mother and marries the girl of their choice. The reversal of fortune is because Narayan is reluctant to speak against the social evil, although the context itself is condemning the social evil of class distinctions.

In *The Man Eater of Malgudi* (1961) a minor character Rangi, the temple dancer and the mistress of Vasu sketches the glimpse of class discrimination. Being a temple dancer she is declined social position and abhorred by every community. The traditional customs and rigidity dictates the common folk of Malgudi to segregate temple dancers from their intellectual and polished community. In *The Dark Room* Narayan provides a contrast between Savitri as a higher class woman and Ponni as a lower class woman, further clarifying Savitri's predicament. Ponni being a lower class woman is the only one in the novel who genuinely attempts to help Savitri and find a life of security and self – dependence she wants, at the same time respecting and protecting the privacy she requires. Although Ponni fights for Savitri, her sense of class consciousness initially inhibits her to take their help in life. Even after returning home, one afternoon Savitri happens to hear the tinkling sound of Mari's equipment box as he was passing by her house. Savitri attempts to break her inhibition and call him in her house to express her gratitude but society and the consciousness of high class prevents her to go further. Narayan here overwhelmingly ventilates the emotional pangs of Savitri but dares to challenge the laws imposed on society.

In the cultural topography of Malgudi these social evils play a significant role in laying the foundation of Narayan's literature. In the core of Narayan's vision and art, there lies an awareness in which the illusion and reality, the ordinary and the spiritual, the comic easily alter positions and what matters is only a change in the mode of perception. His characters make a critical survey of his epoch as they seem to give us some inkling into Narayan's political problems and institutions of his time. His 'Malgudi' epitomises the concept of global village –in the sense that our village itself embodies the entire globe.

Gender is also a crucial factor in the fictions of Narayan. It has a huge dimension and has a direct association with the feminist theory. Theoretical perceptions and analogies are not very prominent in Narayan but he definitely tries to reform the position of women in Indian society. The episode begins with his pre-independence creations and culminates in the concept of new woman in his post- independence fictions. The word feminism refers to the advocacy of woman's right seeking to remove restrictions that discriminate against women. It relates to the belief that woman should have the same social, economic and political rights as men. Feminism has often focused upon what is absent rather than what is present, reflecting concern with marginalisation of women in patriarchal culture, a cultural organisation in the favour of men.

Representation of the world like the world itself is the work of men; they describe it from their own point of view, which they confuse with absolute truth. Simon de Beauvoir<sup>3</sup> -Sex and gender are not, however, the only sites of women's oppressions; one can be oppressed because one is poor; one is coloured, undereducated, addicted or imprisoned. Kate Millet takes gender differences to have – 'essentially cultural, rather than biological bases.' (Millet 28-29) For her gender is 'sum total of the parents', and peers', and the culture's notions of what is appropriate to each gender by way of temperament, character, interests, status, worth, gesture, and expression.'(Millet 31) Feminine and masculine gender-norms, however, are problematic in that gendered behaviour conveniently fits with and reinforces women's subordination so that women are socialised into subordinate social roles: they learn to be passive, ignorant, docile, emotional helpmeets for men. Robbins puts feminism as - political discourses, which uncover the symptoms of oppression, whatever their grounds, diagnose the problem, and offer alternative versions of live able realities. Feminisms can also be interpreted from Indian perspective also. As the novelist under consideration is R.K.Narayan, feminism in Indian context needs to be deciphered thoroughly before delving deep into the man-woman relationships portrayed in his fiction.

From the ancient days, India was a male dominated nation with the prevalence of patriarchal<sup>4</sup> culture. Indian women were covered with many thick, slack layers of prejudice, convention, ignorance and reticence in literature as well as in life. Women were treated as inanimate objects, who followed five paces behind their men; they had to be gentle, docile, patient, gracious and for generations share collective responsibility in family. The term feminism in India refers to a set of movements intending to define, establish, and defend equal political, economic and social rights and equal opportunities for Indian women. Like other feminist counterparts in the world, feminists in India seek gender equality. Literary feminisms in India throw a challenge on the age long tradition of gender differentiation. It attempts to explore and find a new social order, to find pertinent resolves to the real life problems in the light of traditionally- gendered –role plays.

Narayan's novels are divided into three categories- early, middle and later novels. In his early novels –*The DarkRoom* (1938) and *The English Teacher* (1945), published in the pre-independence period, the women characters are represented as orthodox and god believing entities engaged in household chores, deeply rooted to traditional beliefs, his middle novels create women who dare to pursue their own happiness escaping the noose of tradition or social portrayal of stronger and firmer female protagonist, influenced by the western philosophy and culture, and they express their resistance to male dominance, cruelty against fair sex, denial of identity and freedom of expression.

R.K.Narayan was not insensitive to female troubles and agony. It is discernible from his reminiscences on the plight of Indian women in his memoir *My Days*. He evolves 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 some how obsessed 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 motions of her independence, her individuality, stature and strength. A wife in an orthodox milieu of Indian society was an ideal victim of such circumstances. (Narayan 119)

The first of his novels which offers a feminist view of the contemporary South Indian society is *The Dark Room*. The dark room is actually a symbol that narrates the frustration of a perturbed, unhappy Indian wife. Savitri is portrayed with a reasonably complete picture of women 'in an orthodox milieu of Indian society', - upper caste, middle - class Malgudi, in the later 1930s. She is at first presented against her two friends Gangu and Janamma who are at the two extremes of traditional Indian society. Janamma conforms to the rule of the society: 'As for me, I have never opposed my husband or argued with him at any time in my life. I might have occasionally suggested an alternative, but nothing more. What he does is right. It is a wife's duty to feel so.' (Narayan 46) Gangu on the contrary is an eccentric, whose trendy and sophisticated husband claims to be a champion of women's rights. Savitri is positioned in between them. She is represented as a victim of the patriarchal society. Though she is dominated and neglected by her husband, like a typical Indian wife she is submissive and accepts all humiliations of her husband Ramani. When Ramani develops an illicit relationship with Shanbtai, Savitri revolts against him. She vigorously exclaims: 'Don't touch me,... you are dirty, you are impure. Even if I burn my skin I can't cleanse myself of the impurity of your touch' (Narayan 87) Savitri moves out of her house, leaves her children and attempts to commit suicide. Although she is saved by a poor man but she struggles for independence and for her own identity. She struggles to get a job and earn her own livelihood. Savitri is always projected by her husband as a second and inferior category woman but her eventual revolt against Ramani brings new dimension in the novel. When she exclaims in a furious way she changes the pronoun to 'we' instead of 'I'. Savitri retorts -

Do you think I am going to stay here? We are responsible for our position: we accept food, shelter, and comforts that you give, and are what we are. Do you think that I will stay in your house, breathe the air of your property, drink the water here, and eat food you buy with your money? No, I'll starve and die in the open, under the sky, a roof for which we need to be obliged tomorrow. (Narayan 88)

The shift between 'I' and 'we' evokes the collective voice of all women who are subjected to this atrocious male domination. She fails to create her own identity as she is too powerless to subvert. Though she could not compete with her husband but it was her self- realisation and a jolt to Ramani. She returns for her emotional attachment with her children and it is not her subjugation rather she is spiritually triumphant. Two other women in the novel are also presented as socially, politically and economically independent. One is Shanta Bai who succeeds to get a job to create her own identity and the other is Pony who grabs our attention for her rebellious nature. Pony alone fights for Savitri and tries to get her job in the temple. Her

spontaneous and straight forward reply to her husband and the old man of the temple reflects upon her attitude towards male fraternity. Being a low class woman she bargains ferociously with the priest when arranging an appropriate job for Savitri. Ponni can neither be intimidated by the male world nor cannot be oppressed by anyone. In this novel 'the women characters stand for a change, and for resistance to change' in the words of Lakshmi Holmstrom (Srinath 7) The denouement of the novel is pessimistic as Savitri accepts defeat. It is quite evident that the liaison between Ramani and Shantabai will continue, and Savitri is too powerless to intervene again. The exploration of women's roles within marriage and their negotiation for their spaces within a patriarchal society, of course, become profoundly feminist concerns from 1930 onwards.

The next novel in our discussion is *The Guide* (1958). The novel is published in 1956, post-independence period when industrialisation and modernisation had already started blowing. Rosie belonging to an ostracized class is married to Marco. Marco disregards the desire of her instinctual self and accepts her as a commodity with no passion and emotion. He being a typical patriarch prefers his wife's confinement in the closet. He keeps himself engaged in his own career and hardly thinks about the physical demand of his wife. Rosie struggles to adjust with her destiny initially but later demonstrates the courage to move out of her unhappy conjugal life. She marries Raju, who understands her and loves her utmost. The self – realisation and rejection of gender biases of the society where a male sex is endowed with immense freedom and female sex with no freedom at all, enunciates Rosie's position in Indian society. Unfortunately Rosie is disillusioned later. Raju, the tourist guide, starts exploiting her, just as a money-making machine. She ponders on lost freedom and deserts Raju in fury and in a disrupted condition. Unlike Savitri of *The Dark Room* She does not go back to Marco, her first husband, instead she breaks the image of a fragile, timid Indian woman. She remains unconventional. Narayan in one of his short stories entitled 'Selvi' from the collection *An Astrologer's Day*<sup>4</sup>, presents a similar character like Rosie. Here the story is named after the protagonist Selvi because all the events in the story, various nature of human behaviour are centered round her. Here Mohan can be compared to Raju for his monetary pursuits. Like Rosie Selvi is also considered a source of money. Mohan controls her financial matters and tries to accumulate more wealth by exploiting her talent. Selvi is benign, simple and her ignoramus appeal gives Mohan more opportunity to exploit her. Selvi is kept away from the society and almost confined in a room. He considers Selvi as his own possession. The catastrophe in his life comes when he restricts her to meet her mother as there is a hiatus of social status between Selvi and her mother. Eventually she gets the news of her demise and it brings a complete change in her life. For the first time she becomes voluble and says: 'Please leave me out of all this, leave me alone, I want to be alone hereafter. I can't bear the sight of anyone...' (Narayan 164). Thus Selvi revolts against her ruthless husband and her stoic resignation shows her self – determination and mental strength. Her struggle for self – dependence is very much a feminist approach to life.

In his portrayal of self, Narayan goes the farthest in *The Painter of Signs*. Unlike Rosie who has a traditional approach to life, Daisy of *The Painter of Signs* (1977) is very much westernised. She is represented as a modern woman, who courageously chooses an unconventional profession – family planning worker. Her strong sense of individuality peeps out in all her speeches. Besides the influence of Western World due to industrialisation, there is also an East-West conflict in the characterisations of the novel. There is a tension among the three main characters- Raman, his aunt and Daisy. The tension is created by gradual disintegration of traditional values. A different type of womanhood is presented in the character of Daisy. In the words of Syed Harrex:

She employs Raman to paint propaganda signs for her de-population campaign and to accompany her to the areas where she lectures on sex education, contraception, family planning and the like while she paints slogans and signs on walls. Raman falls in love with Daisy, and then wants to marry her; she becomes ambivalently or ambiguously attracted to him, then agrees to live with him in a relationship revoking the Hindu condition of marriage but accommodating Daisy's principles of liberation and professional priorities. The essence of this situation, then, is that the old myths of arranged marriage, wifehood, and love symbolised by Sita and Radha are opposed by the new ways of modern marriage and the independent woman. (Srinath 75)

In such a situation, it is quite obvious that Raman would find himself stuck between Malgudi's conventional and outsider's iconoclasm<sup>5</sup>, between the philosophies of the conventional woman (the aunt) and the New Woman (Daisy). In the novel Daisy is highlighted as an outsider as she does not follow conventions of the traditional Indian society and appears as an archetypal figure, a social worker and feminist to introduce Birth-Control programme to the district.

Though Narayan's women have not brought any massive change in the society or in the household, but we cannot ignore the fact that they have definitely brought changes in their surrounding and in their society in general. A critical reading of all novels of R.K.Narayan will reveal the fact that he has started a movement towards the liberation of women starting from *The Dark Room* to *The Painter of Signs*. In all the novels there is one or more than one woman character who is either half way or full way of this orthodox conservative society to proclaim the right to live with self-esteem and freedom.

R.K.Narayan contextualises all the social evils in the thematic construction of his novels. He is more a worshiper of human relationships and simplicity and less a social reformer. Reformation is not vociferously instrumental in his story telling method but he incorporates society at large in a very mild tone in almost all of his literary creations. To end with the words of M.K.Bhatnagar:

Narayan is not as inclusive a chronicler of the socio-political scene as one would perhaps have in some other writers of his generation, says Bhabani Bhattacharya or Manohar Malgonkar, but it would be unfair to indict Narayan for confining himself in his novels to people whom he



knows intimately- the lower middle class people, going about their lives in a well defined and graphically outlined routine. Whether one deems it a glaring weakness or an intrinsic strength of Narayan, the inescapable fact is that Narayan's world is woven round the immemorial Hindu values of patience, faith and acceptance of the morality of the individual as well as the endeavours on the part of the individual. (Bhatnagar 5)

**Endnotes :**

1. In *My Days* R.K.Narayan in simple lucid style speaks of his life. The book is described in three different sections – in the first, he describes his life as a lonely child growing up in his grandmother's house in Madras; the second section deals with the obstacles he encountered as a young writer; in the last section, he gives a detailed account of his overcoming the writer's block, and the writing of *The English Teacher*.
2. 'Devdasi' is a girl dedicated to worship and service of a deity or a temple for the rest of her life. These women learned and practiced Sadi, Odissi and other forms of Classical Indian artistic tradition.
3. Simone de Beauvoir was a French writer, intellectual, existentialist philosopher, feminist and social theorist. She wrote novels, essays, biographies, an autobiography and monographs on philosophy, politics and social issues. She is best known for her novels, including *She came to Stay* and *The Mandarins*, as well as the 1949 treatise *The Second Sex*, a detailed analysis of women's oppression and a foundational tract of contemporary feminism.
4. Narayan R.K. *An Astrologer's Day and Other Stories*. Mysore: Indian Thought Publication, 1981.
5. Iconoclasm is the deliberate destruction within a culture of the culture's own religious icons and other symbols or monuments, usually for religious or political motives. It is a frequent component of major political or religious changes. The term does not generally encompass the specific destruction of images of a ruler after his death or overthrow. People who engage in or support iconoclasm are called "iconoclasts", a term that has come to be applied figuratively to any individual who challenges established dogma or conventions.

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