

ASCENDING GRAPH OF THE IMAGE OF WOMAN FROM TRADITIONAL TO MODERN IN THE NOVELS OF R. K. NARAYAN

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ABSTRACT

R. K. Narayan is preferably the writer of Indian characters in different conflicting situations. He presents contrasting characters in the same situations behaving differently. He presents his characters with artistic as well as with realistic view. Although in his novels he presents male characters as protagonists, he portrays female characters with moral and noble outlook. His social sense and holistic view reflects through his presentation of women characters. His keen observation of social and national upheavals and of domestic atmosphere helps him to produce realistically appealing women of real flesh and blood. They are not from fancy nor eccentric characters but away from humour or ridicule. The graph of the image of woman in his novels ascends from traditional to ideal modern form of Indian woman. The attempt is made here through this paper to provide free discourse with comparative study of women characters in R. K. Narayan's novels.

Key Words:

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R. K. Narayan is preferably the writer of Indian characters in different conflicting situations seeks resolution, marks the unavoidable reality in social context. Characters in his novels, therefore matter much. Although the protagonists in his novels are male characters with exception of just two/three novels – *'The Dark Room, Grandmother's Tale, The Painter of Signs,* the latest provides equal share to the male character as well, his portrayal of women characters is worth considering with feminist perspective and modernist view point. The image of woman reflected in his novel is true image of Indian woman before and after the air of feminism passed from western countries to India.

These female characters are categorized in two major types – traditional and modern, submissive-mild and aggressive bold, married (wife) and unmarried (careerist girl), old and young. Narayan's keen observation of Indian cultural, social and national upheavals in his prolonged life span and constantly active literary career provide him enough scope to present women characters in both contrasting categories existed under the same roof showing signs of change in their approaches.

This journey of woman character from tradition to modernity from nowhere personality to self searched identity from nothing to something special is significantly pointed out through the portrayal of women characters in his novels. Although they are few in number, they can be remembered for their being representatives of Indian women in the form of both traditional and modern woman, passing through changing scenario. The woman in R. K. Narayan's novel is real woman of flesh and blood and not an idealized or emotionally glorified imaginary image.

The attempt is made here to examine R. K. Narayan's treatment and approach towards his women characters with reference of his major women characters portrayed in the novels namely *Swami and Friend, The Bachelor of Arts, The Dark Room, The English*

**ASCENDING GRAPH OF THE IMAGE OF WOMAN FROM TRADITIONAL TO MODERN IN THE NOVELS
OF R. K. NARAYAN – DR. SMITA MUJUMDAR**

Teacher, The Guide, The Painter of Signs, Waiting for the Mahatma and Grandmother's Tale.

The novels are selected on the basis of two contrasting categories of women character in them - traditional and modern. The first four novels of early phase (period) present traditional women and the later phase novels portray modern women.

The image of woman in the role of obedient housewife and of mother in earlier novels represent typical traditional Indian woman in pre-independence India whereas the woman in the role of careerist, independent, young, women represents changed modern educated woman in post-a independence India.

Narayan's early novels *Swami and Friends*, *The Bachelor of Arts*, *The English Teacher* have male protagonist projecting Narayan's autobiographical sketch. The women in these novels also are not less important as they are in the role of mother. In Indian context the role of mother or identity as mother for a woman plays very significant part in woman's life. She is worshipped, honoured and gets prestige in family and in the society as a mother. She holds higher post in the family when she becomes mother. She can rule over her children and even control her family and husband through her devoted motherhood and subsequently following the role of housewife, sacrificing herself for the sake of family and particularly for the children. This is marked truth in Indian families but it is half truth and not always woman receives and is rewarded as such rather she is ignored or slighted at times having no room at all. This pitiable condition is described here in Narayan's early novel, *'The Dark Room'*.

On the contrary, as though reaction to this cornered approach is presented also in his novels. R. K. Narayan writes in oblique method taking no direct stance he presents both sides both pictures and leaves to his readers to think implying much.

It is noted that modern writers portray women in different roles caught internally or outwardly in conflicting situation always struggling for space and identify. The image of woman has undergone a change during the recent decades. Shobha De, Arunadhathi Rai, Kiran Desai, Anita Desai, Manju Kapoor, Bharati Mukharjee like modern women writers present woman in new form revealing her inner world. Even the mother image is turned into 'mummy' image in the novels of modern women writers.

R. K. Narayan is not far away from modern approach. He has also presented his modern woman Daisy in the '*Painter of Signs*' denying to get married and even if married she denies motherhood. Rosie in '*The Guide*' defies marriage bondage for her passion of career while Bharati prefers her devoted career of national service to marriage and romance.

These women characters in R. K. Narayan's novels are seen taking independent decision without any botheration and pressure. Compared to the modern female characters in modern writers, R. K. Narayan's female characters go a step forward than the time or period they live in.

The question arises then why they do so? Why these modern generation women deny motherhood and defy marriage sanctity?

Savitri in Narayan's '*The Dark Room*' was an obedient housewife and devoted mother but Daisy accepts marriage proposal on condition of not being mother.

The image of woman in the form of mother or in the role of mother comes in different novels as traditional woman. Mother image in Narayan's woman is not glorified or idealized though she is portrayed as a traditional woman.

In fact, it is understood that in India motherhood is very honourable status for a woman. "In the Indian context, with its traditional roots as the informing force in social practice, motherhood has long been a category which is emphasized a role which the girl child is conditioned to accept as the end she has been created for. Moreover, in India motherhood is merged with a multi-layered pattern of societal relationships to which a woman is expected to conform" (Nabar 178).

For an Indian woman it is her motherhood that conforms her status as renewer of the race extends to her respect and consideration which were not accorded to her as a wife. It is only with her motherhood that she comes into her own as a woman and can make a place for herself in the family, in the community and in the life cycle.

**ASCENDING GRAPH OF THE IMAGE OF WOMAN FROM TRADITIONAL TO MODERN IN THE NOVELS
OF R. K. NARAYAN – DR. SMITA MUJUMDAR**

A universal mother is epitome of love and care, is duty minded and a protector, preserver of home and culture, religion, tradition etc. In Indian patriarchal family, mother is subordinate or conformist to the norms of patriarchy with mute obedience to her husband and with no regrets about her role.

The heroines of R. K. Narayan's early novels are fixed in such role. Swami's mother in '*Swami and Friends*', his grandmother even are under the dominance of his father as chief of house. They are obedient meek housewives. Their being mother has not brought any power or force to their position. They play very insignificant part in the story of '*Swami and Friends*'. They are traditional housewives caring for children and nothing more is asked or demanded for.

The woman characters in '*The Bachelor of Arts*' and '*The English Teacher*' are also obedient ideal women in the role of wives and mother. They are honoured and loved by family members, their husband, Chandran's mother in '*The Bachelor of Arts*' proves to be in the typical traditional position of Indian mother-in-law. She opposes and warns her son to marry by going against traditional, religious, social norms. She insists and demands for dowry, horoscope matching like things and fails to convince her husband for the happiness of her son. She is strictly bound to traditional and social norms.

Susila in '*The English Teacher*' is ideal, lovely wife, dies early death in an accident but rules over her husband's mind even after her death. The novel here depicts in an unusual way the spiritual and moral power of a woman and her honour by her husband. This lovely picture of lovely innocent woman now not belonging to this material-patriarchal world is quite different from Narayan's and of others' portrayals of women characters. It seems that Narayan suggests that woman is safe and happy and at peace only in the other world even though she is away from motherhood and from family. A woman never goes far away from her family. Her soul is in her family. This typical Indian thought is reflected in this novel.

'*The Dark Room*' is Narayan's early novel, but differs in the portrayal of woman. Savitri as symbol of loyalty and devoted wife -Indian ancient tradition turns into a rebellious, bold woman, wakes to her status, identity, space in family and society. From the character of Savitri in this novel, Narayan shows his feminine concern openly. He admits it and mentions his debt to the air of feminism blown to India.

**ASCENDING GRAPH OF THE IMAGE OF WOMAN FROM TRADITIONAL TO MODERN IN THE NOVELS
OF R. K. NARAYAN – DR. SMITA MUJUMDAR**

"I was somehow obsessed with a philosophy of woman as opposed to man, her constant oppressor. This must have been 'an early testament of the 'Woman's lib' movement Man assigned her a secondary place and kept her there with subtlety and cunning that she herself began to lose all notions of her independence; her individuality, status and strength. A wife in an orthodox milieu of Indian society was an ideal victim of such circumstances. I dealt with her with this philosophy broadly in the background" (Narayan 119).

The character of Savitri in this novel is the outcome of the author's quest for psychological insight and awareness of the plight of the unfortunate Indian woman who has neither the strength of will nor the economic or educational opportunities to withstand unfair male aggression. She is portrayed as the result of insecurity isolation, fear and vulnerability. She is quite different from character of Susila in *'The English Teacher'* though she has mythically symbolic name 'Savitri'.

In the Indian mythical context of Savitri's spiritual ideal relationship with her husband, Susila is close to it but not Savitri in *'The Dark Room'*, rather Savitri tries to go close to revolting modern woman. She is imposed to be a Savitri like traditional ideal obedient wife, she revolts but fails being bound to home and children. Being economically dependent and due to lack of education she fails in her struggles.

In *Waiting for the Mahatma* Narayan has presented a modern young girl independently devoted her life to the service of nation through freedom struggle. The movement of freedom struggle for the nation is the background to indicate the oncoming dawn of woman's freedom. The character of Bharti, a disciple of Mahatma Gandhiji is symbolic of the ideal new woman of independent identity who takes her own decision regarding marriage and love like Daisy in *The painter of Signs*. This journey of woman from traditional to modernity is marked out in this novel.

Narayan has presented women of modern outlook and free conduct regardless of character chastity or family bondages and morality. The character of Shanti, the actress in *Mr. Sampath* and Shantabai in *The Dark Room* who has started affair with her boss and Savitri's husband. She caused mental agonies to Savitri, out of which Savitri becomes aware of 'no place status' in her family and society. Shanti causes mental agonies to Ravi the young boy also to Mr. Sampath by deceiving him at last.

**ASCENDING GRAPH OF THE IMAGE OF WOMAN FROM TRADITIONAL TO MODERN IN THE NOVELS
OF R. K. NARAYAN – DR. SMITA MUJUMDAR**

Such characters are very few in number in R. K. Narayan's novels. But they mark the change in the attitude and image of woman.

New woman is not one who revolts against the patriarchal system through her protest but one who tries to establish her identity in this world. R. K. Narayan dealt with such a new woman who establishes herself in the society but fails to establish herself in marital society.

His women characters in '*Waiting for the Mahatma*', '*The Dark Room*', '*Mr. Sampath*', '*The Guide*' and '*The Painter of Signs*' can be seen going through a process of evolution.

The woman characters in '*The Dark Room*' (1934), '*The Guide*' (1955) and '*The Painter of Signs*' (1976) are in different situation but face the same traditional patriarchal dominance and show their protest to establish self-identify. Savitri in '*The Dark Room*' is traditionally suppressed housewife, Shanti in '*Mr. Sampath*' and Rosie in '*The Guide*' reflect the true blending of the traditional and the Western culture. In the '*The Painter of Signs*' the transformation gets complete where Daisy with her bold frank approaches and individual firm stubborn identity surprises us by her western feminine views. Rosie represents the middle phase of the female evolution sharing the change under western impact, indicates the clash between male and female class and yet she never leaves the traditional norms and never does she break free of it. She discards both traditional conventions of Religious Dancer's and of marital relations. But inspite of her fully gained independence, she often regrets for her failed marriage. "She seems to be at the same time conservative and self-assertive-challenging the orthodox Hindu conception of what women should be and yet a part of her is intensely orthodox" (Kundu 56).

Gayatri Chakroborty Spivak has charged Narayan for making Rosie the heroine of a sentimental tragi-comedy rather than exposing through her the evils of Devdasi-system. She sites this "as an example of Narayan's patriarchal hypocrisy" (Spivak 8).

But we see that Narayan has not to write novel on Devadasi tradition's evil effects, he is more specific in portraying the social aspect of the times through pitiable condition of women and exceptional example of the protest of it by a 'new woman'. Thus the concept of new woman evolves through Rosie. In this novel Narayan has shown a new

**ASCENDING GRAPH OF THE IMAGE OF WOMAN FROM TRADITIONAL TO MODERN IN THE NOVELS
OF R. K. NARAYAN – DR. SMITA MUJUMDAR**

woman and her ability to come out of the clutches of both tradition and purposeful commercial exploitation (through Raju). She is new, modern in this sense but the motherly care and kindness in her makes her to respect her indifferent cruel husband Marco because he is her husband and she protects Raju by paying his loans and leaving him at last to his own decision. Her kind womanhood and mother's nature is purely Indian and traditional. She is a complex character in this context.

The character of Daisy in *The Painter of Signs* also represents the modern woman of more forward thoughts and conduct.

Her refusal to her marriage imposed upon her by her parents in early age and her conditions put to her lover Raman who proposes her to marry indicate her ultra-modern outlook. Her zeal towards social welfare and national work also is fit to the image of new woman of self made identity. She is not a victim of self-imposed penance like Savitri in '*The Dark Room*'.

The two female characters in the novel '*Swami and friends*', Swami's mother and his grandmother both play mother's typical role in the story. The mother's image is typically in Indian context. They are limited to the traditional subservient role in their respective positions in a patriarchal Hindu middle class urban family. They do not directly influence the course of the protagonist's (Swami) development. They have no special role or special identity in the story. Swami's mother is uneducated housewife appears for few minutes in the novel. But her such appearance and having no importance in active educational development of Swami her child shows how in Indian family the mother's work is neglected as individuals and they were living happily because they were 'mothers'. Being mother was their qualification and necessity to be in the family. Though she shows with all motherly care and concern for Swami, it is portrayal of her subordinate position in the family. Her subordination in the family is sign of Patriarchal system that is amply clear in Swami's mind and so he too behaves impertinently with her. This is what happens in Indian families. The mother image is honoured outside but not in families by themselves. A child can insult his mother.

But mother is mother at all. In the next novel '*The Dark Room*' this mother in Savitri makes her to return and accept all tyranny and injustice of her household for her

children's sake. She revolts against her husband tyranny, leaves home but returns home for her children. Mother in her overcomes rise of new woman in her.

In '*The Bachelor of Arts*' Chandran's mother is second important female character in the form of typically tradition bound, orthodox, conservative, homely woman. As a mother she abounds in love for her son. But she is adherent to principles and norms of society in case of marriage of her son. She insists upon observing rituals and social norms. Narayan shows her how in middle class tradition ridden ambience, the role of woman remains confined to the fulfillment of interests of the family and they act in the subservient position. In the vertex of family relationships i. e. between father and son, son and mother, wife and husband, boy and girl, women stand for maintenance of standards of conventional propriety and observance of time-tested customs.

What William Walsh says about the role of women in Narayan's novels applies fully to Chandran's mother, He says, "It was as Narayan shows the duty of the women to translate and repine the principles of orthodoxy and correction into codes and etiquettes covering the basic drive for food, shelter, sex and company" (Walsh 11).

In '*The English Teacher*' Susila is the major woman character. Her influence pervades all the major events of the novel both while she is alive and even after her death. She is depicted in various roles of an ideal Hindu woman in middle class family. She is queer mixture of 'Mundane' and 'spiritual'. Susila's portrayal as a character is a distinct one. She is a concretized woman character who possesses individually of her own. She acts and lives as a normal woman while she is living but even after death she is as human to her husband as when alive. She is ideally and spiritually bound to him. She is living social entity who performs various roles. Through the portrayal of Susila Narayan has shown ideal sweet positive relationship of wife and husband. It is a source of moral and spiritual strength to both. Narayan implies this should be in marital relationship. Moreover, Susila-krishnan association has strong autobiographical overtones which Narayan admits explicitly. "More than any other book, '*The English Teacher*' is autobiographical in context..... Krishnan is a fictional character in the fictional city of Malgudi, but he goes through the same experience I had gone through and he calls his wife Susila and the child Leela instead of Hema" (Narayan 119).

**ASCENDING GRAPH OF THE IMAGE OF WOMAN FROM TRADITIONAL TO MODERN IN THE NOVELS
OF R. K. NARAYAN – DR. SMITA MUJUMDAR**

Here one more female character in mother's role is Krishnan's mother, a typical traditional housewife superstitious, religious minded but loving mother and mother-in-law. But Susila stands the most lovable character. She presents the model of a pleasing charming married woman, good mother and wife. She represents a harmonious embodiment of modernity and tradition at peace with each other.

Thus R. K. Narayan has presented an ascending graph of the image of woman from traditional mother image to modern free woman having confidence, boldness and certain aim of her own life being aware of her own separate identity.

His women characters right from the early novels to later novels have been presented remarkably. Even in the last phase of his novel writing he has presented again a realistic woman character with his feminist concern based on his own grandmother. His last 'novella' *'Grandmother's Tale'* also presents a successful hard struggle of a tradition bound married woman to regain her lost (runaway) husband and to reestablish her social status that her society had denied her. Bala in this story is forsaken by her husband in early age of the marriage. She is humiliated and denied social respect and honour as forsaken by the husband. She resolves to search for her runaway husband and succeeds in her lonely journey and struggle to bring back her husband. He has married twice and is living with another wife. But bold and resolved Bala brings him back to her town Malgudi from Pune like City and lives with him until her death. The story of this unusual fight of old traditional woman is told by the grandmother herself to R. K. Narayan. Again Narayan turns to portray the bold spirit and courage of woman even living in olden times.

Also in his later novel *'Talkative Man'* we find such a woman in search of her runaway husband. She is not a traditional lady of old times like Bala in *Grandmother's Tale* but behaves with the same courage and confidence, succeeds in taking her husband back to home. However, her husband is not obediently lives with her returning back to her. He is a gallant and liar, leaves her again, but the character of Sarah is in the rising graph of woman's modern image of fighting woman.

R. K. Narayan not openly but obliquely and indirectly implies the need of courage for a woman with modern bold approach towards woman's existence, status and their struggle. R. K. Narayan has observed all the social upheavals in India in his longest

**ASCENDING GRAPH OF THE IMAGE OF WOMAN FROM TRADITIONAL TO MODERN IN THE NOVELS
OF R. K. NARAYAN – DR. SMITA MUJUMDAR**

writing career with a visionary insight. His artistic presentation and style of writing suggest much what he means. Also as a skillful craftsman he presents graphical word pictures through realistic incidents from the surroundings of society also from his biography and family. The graph of the image of woman raises high from the traditional, weak, modest yet dependent, free yet gentle woman with moral artistic, social and national sense.

R. K. Narayan is a visionary writer with all his moral sensibility and social awareness. His irony and humour are the tools he used to present male characters and their eccentric odd behaviour. His women characters are noble, real and travelling towards perfection and ideal identity. Mother, grandmothers, lovers, humble housewives, devoted wives, artists, dancers, actresses, freedom fighters, social workers such are the different forms of women characters depicted in his novels. They are all in positive roles except just two characters. Narayan's Indian moral view reflects through this presentation. These women in his novels are not creations of fancy or of fantasy world. They are real flesh and blood characters, most appealing and interesting. R. K. Narayan's noble mind and culture with sociality induced him to present Indian woman in her real form. This gives combined effect of art and reality.

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