



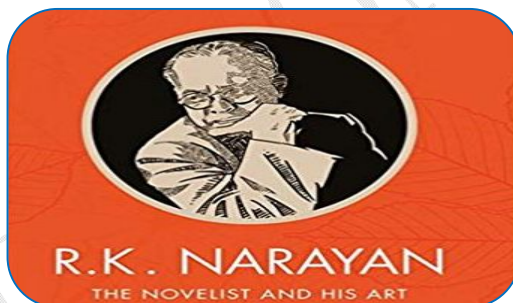
THE PREDICAMENT OF WOMEN IN THE SELECT NOVELS OF R.K. NARAYAN- A REVIEW

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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.



KEYWORDS : Indian English Novel , foreign countries , novelist.

INTRODUCTION

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. Since his father was frequently transferred from one place to another, he grew in his maternal grandmother's house. His grandmother was Parvati but he has never used this name in any novel except in *Mr.Sampath*, *The Printer of Malgudi*. Yet this character is the mythical Parvati whose role Shanti performs in this novel. His grandmother used to call him 'Kunjappa' which became his name at home.

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.

Narayan is a realist and gives detail in depicting life in his novels. He does not comprehend the whole of the reality but the realism creeps up as the selective tendency in the descriptive part of his fictional world. In all his novels, Narayan projects the true image of Indian life, landscape and characters-He writes for the most part about the smaller professional middle class with a gentle irony and a haunting sadness that has gained him the reputation of 'Indian Chekhov'. To Graham Greene, Narayan is India, and in his work he (Greene) sees 'the sense of the Indian population and the Indian way of life come alive'. He always appeals to the reader as one in whose writing is found something distinctly Indian.

In all his novels, the real theme is human relationship. As William Walsh has pointed out, The family is the immediate context in which his sensibility operates, and his novels are remarkable for the subtlety and conviction with which family relationships are treated- that of son and parents and brother in *The Bachelor of Arts*, of husband and wife and father and daughter in *The English Teacher*, of father and son in *The financial Expert*, and *The Vendor of sweets*, and of grandmother and grandson in *Waiting For Mahatma*.

In all his novels, the end is always seclusion which is due to dissatisfaction either with oneself or with the world around him. Narayan explores the Indian scene in all his novels. He takes life for whatever it is worth and presents familiar scenes which amuse or delight him. He never touches deeper and darker aspects of life. Thus, he tries to project the true image of India through his meticulous portrayal of Indian life, landscape and characters. His creation is artistic and mysterious.

Character is action, and action is plot and it is by means of the action of his character that Narayan sums up the world in which he lives. His characters consist of school and college boys, teachers, school masters, merchants, municipal members, tourist-guides, taxi-drivers as well as those people who form middle and poor classes of Malgudi.

The heroes of Narayan are not heroic. They do not belong to the conventional types and do not control events but, events control them. They are helpless creatures torn by desire and tossed this way and that by the caprice of fortune. The heroes of Narayan depend upon chance or luck for their happiness. If things go contrary, they run away from the reality. Largely, they accept defeat and find happiness in submission to the traditional forces of society. Chandran, the bachelor of arts, who is intensely in love with Malathi, at last, runs away from home. Mr. Sampath, the cunning shark, is also impelled by luck and at last leaves Malgudi forever, the English Teacher, after the death of his wife, finds solace in the world of spirits and the Guide dies a ruined man not because he wants to die but circumstances so conspired that the only alternative before him was to become a willing martyr. Therefore, the heroes of Narayan depend upon chance or luck for their happiness or unhappiness. Narayan's heroes are naive and they always involve in crises. Most of these characters believe that everything on earth is pre-ordained and that no amount of human effort can ease the situation. Narayan is also a traditional writer. Concepts like Maya, Karma, Dharma and Moksha are meaningful to his characters. The grim vitality of Narayan lies in his fusion of the immemorial tradition and the great socio-political issues of today. To Narayan the aspect of Hindu sensibility is related to the complex fate of individual Indian view of life and not to an Indian affirmation of life.

Narayan handles social and economic problems as catastrophe. In his novels there appears a clash of the people of the older generation with the people of new generation who are awakened to their rights and liberties in order to rise above the so-called pre-ordained roles they have been playing for generations together.

Narayan is a man of moral conscience. In his novels he shows that immorality does not pay in life. He is a philanthrope. He socialises human emotions. As an artist he has dissected the social motives successfully with the help of realistic characterisation. The balance between his characters and society is well maintained. They are more the pictures of a society than simple characters in which an individual does not feel himself in opposition hypocrisy of ideals, ambitions and pride and not to guide the society in any direction but simply to realise.

Narayan presents in his novels a society free from all kinds of partiality. His novels are quite successful in presenting various kinds of social implications which are generally noticed in the society. He does not and all things are left for the readers to pay the required attention. He presents the struggle of the individual for survival in the society which is highly dominated by evils. He presents the various kinds of characters both fair and foul aspiring for something better in their life.

Narayan presents his experience of Gandhian consciousness in his novels as a moral analyst and with a powerful ironic vision. Gandhi certainly reflects morality in politics, and wages the war of independence against the British rule not as an enemy but as a non-violent soldier. The immeasurable personality of political vision of Gandhi inspired patriotism and anti-colonialism which spread like legends that multiplied and permeated through the Indian consciousness. Gandhi's political movements raised many issues that attacked the British colonial educational system which distorted and suppressed the real face of India. Skill in characterization is the measure of a novelist's greatness, and in this respect R.K. Narayan is the greatest of the Indo-Anglian novelists. He achieves greatness in the field of characterization by recognizing his range and working within it. He presents middle class characters excellently. He himself belonged to a middle class family of South India. He was closely acquainted with its ways, habits and desires and, therefore, he rightly limits himself to this particular class. His canvas is a limited one, and it is never overcrowded. His preoccupation is with the middle class, a relatively small part of an agriculture civilization and the most conscious and anxious part of the population. Its members are neither too well-off nor in known financial worry nor too poor to be degraded by want and hunger. They may take their religion more easily than the passionately credulous poor, but even in those with a tendency towards modernity one is always aware, under the educated speech, of the profound murmur of older voices of Lakshmi, the Goddess of wealth, the spouse of God Vishnu. Narayan basically holds traditional views about women, especially in his earlier novels. His women characters stand both for change and for resistance to change. The struggles by society to accept new modes of living are presented very subtly and delicately, through a series of counterpoints and contrasts between older and younger women, between different classes of people and between outsiders or newcomers and local Malgudi people.

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.

Narayan has also portrayed a variety of women characters: grannies, middle-aged wives, unmarried girls, widows, deserted wives and working women. There is a march of Indian women ranging from Sita-Savitri tradition to a state of transition besides emphasizing that women's liberation is at last becoming a part of national progressive consciousness. There are some women characters who clearly show difference of one another in their respective general demeanour. On the other hand, there are those for whom adherence to valued traditions is a matter of daily course. Their submission to accept values and principles of domesticity is unquestioned. They were guided by high ideals and acquired lore of past ages. These women, whether treated as grandmother or mother or wives, aunts, etc. evince extreme exploitation done to them by their erring male counterparts. Their commitment to faith and fidelity in the sphere of family relationship is their badge.

NEED AND IMPORTANCE OF STUDY

The importance of this study is the image of women in R.K.Narayan's 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)

R.K. Narayan, being a reputed social novelist, many may wonder why an analysis on 'Feminine' rather than the human experience. It is true that this study could have been made simpler and easier if it had focused only on 'human experiences', which in turn no doubt would have led to an analysis of 'masculine experiences' alone. For centuries human experiences have been synonymous with 'masculine experiences'. The collective image of humanness has been one sided and incomplete. Women's experiences have interested man only as it has involved himself and he has defined her experiences on the basis of his encounter with the women in both his real life and fantasy life.

In a male-chauvinistic society like India, it may be argued that the choice of the women as the subject tends to be restrictive and lopsided. Patriarchy which is the ruling system almost all over the world ordains that women's place is the home, her role as a wife and mother is quite often synonymous with her total human existence. So, one may wonder what use is it to study a creature who as a child is sold off to strangers for a bridal price or when she grows up serves as a supplier of dowry to her husband's family? The very term 'family' as is now well-known derives from the Latin word 'famulus' which means 'a house hold slave' and 'familia' signifies the totality of slaves belonging to one individual, who is the male head. One therefore expects the presentation of women in literature, created and dominated by man to be mere role-fulfillments.

The exploitation of the so called 'Weaker Sex' is the burning problem, which the world faces today. 'Feminism' has become the sacred mantra of even a highly male-dominated society like India, where as in the words of Meenakshi Mukherjee, "The woman in life and in literature had no existence save that of a shadowy, suffering, pathetic creature." (Mukherjee, 31)

SCOPE OF THE STUDY

In the seven long decades of a widely acclaimed career as a novelist, Narayan has dealt with a panoply of themes and motifs. "... the place of the woman in Indian society, the disruptive influences of modernity, the status of the wife and the mother in a society influx, the femina fatale, the crumbling of the joint family and similar olden institutions, the limitation of the newer materialistic way of life, the consequences of flouting time - honoured codes of behaviour, the impact of Western cultural concepts, the Indian woman's passive or assertive adjustment to Western and readjustment to traditional values, the validity and relevance of Hindu cultural and religious concepts such as Karma, Mayic philosophy, life after death, renunciation and acceptance; and finally a lively, sardonic discussion of new theories free love, women's liberation birth control and their implication on characters both male and female the varied options available to modern Indian woman from traditional mother to manless life style." (Harrex, 41) are the feminine themes dealt by Narayan, with local habitation and colour in his novels.

Woman in his fiction is the powerful vehicle for the exposition of the author's perception and she cannot be ignored or dumped together with other minor characters Narayan's women play an important role sometimes passively and at times aggressively in a believable net work of family, religion and society: "The woman, whether she is the active feminine or the passive, has her own place, her own corner of acceptance in the Malgudian setting with its sense of place, social interaction and interior consciousness." (Coole 113-133)

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 elucidate the art of characterization of R.K. Narayan and the predicament of women characters in the select novels.

Chapter 2: The Pre-independence Novels

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

Chapter 3: The 50's Novels

This chapter consists of two novels of R.K. Narayan written in the period from 1950-1960, *The Financial Expert* (1952) and *The Guide* (1958). This chapter provides an objective analysis of the women characters in these two novels.

Chapter -4: The 60's and 70's Novels

This chapter consists of two novels of R.K. Narayan written in the period from 1960-1980, *The Man-Eater of Malgudi* (1961), *The Vendor of Sweets* (1967), *The Painter of Signs* (1977). This chapter tries to understand the complex and rich personality of the women characters in these three novels.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

This chapter summarizes all the four chapters and focuses on the enigmatic portrayal of women characters by R.K. Narayan.

Indeed, to understand their complex and rich personality is as enigmatic and difficult as to portray climatic factors (like wind). This study attempts to analyze all the women characters both major and minor in the novels of R. K. Narayan. The focus will be on traditional female characters and how they move out confinement in search of a better independent life. Exploring the various aspects of women's psyche an attempt is made to understand her self-realization, her struggle to survive in the male dominated society, how she strengthen herself and at last her progress to self definition and fulfillment.

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