

R. K. Narayan's The Dark Room: A Study in Feminist Perspective

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Abstract

R. K. Narayan is a popular Indian writer whose literary narratives have brought forward many new ideas and characters that stand as model the contemporary literary world. These literary figures and characters of R. K. Narayan have highlighted many new and liberal thoughts. In this research paper, I have focused on one such character i.e. Savitri of R.K. Narayan's novel The Dark Room. She is an ordinary woman bestowed with the duties of a wife and a mother. She, for many years, undergoes the insults and rebukes of her husband, Ramani but the moment she comes to know that her husband is carrying on an affair with another woman, Savitri decides to leave the house. She couldn't bear an insult to her dedication and sacrifices and so like Nora of Ibsen's A Doll's House, she departs, leaving her husband and kids behind. But like Carla of Munroe's Runaway, Savitri returns, after spending few days outside. But unlike Carla, Savitri, succeeds in bringing about a change in the mental makeup of her husband. Ramani's attitude towards his wife changes and he becomes quite soft in his temperament. He proposes to bring flowers for her and even asks her to eat as much as she can. Here it has been shown as to how Savitri's efforts do not go in vain and she enlightens a hope that in future her husband may transform into an understanding friend. This paper shows that if efforts are made with a true heart then it is possible to melt a stone; what to talk of a man's heart.

Keywords: Literary narratives, new and liberal thought, insults and rebukes, Ibsen's "A Doll's House", "Munroe's Runaway"

R.K. Narayan portrays with sympathy the sufferings of women and shows the readers how important are their roles both in family and social life. Narayan's Savitri of The Dark Room like Ibsen's Nora of A Doll's House, rebels against the forced loyalty and dedication of women. She is portrayed in this novel as a very obedient wife and mother of three school going children. She suffers every insult, every rebuke but the moment she realizes that her husband is carrying on an extra marital relationship, she couldn't tolerate it. Angered and betrayed, Savitri retreats into herself and lies quite still in the private place she has of her own i.e the dark room. Her husband's betrayal makes her realize how dependent she is upon her husband. A meek Savitri turns against the mythical implication of her name, protesting:

"I'm a human being you men will never grant that. For you we are playthings when you feel like hugging and slaves at other times. Don't think that you can fondle us when you like and kick us when you choose" (Narayan 85).

Therefore, she decides to step out of her sasural leaving her husband and kids behind. She even says to her husband that as he had paid to the mid wife for Savitri's delivery, therefore, the kids belong to him and not to her. She refuses to take her ornaments with her as she says that although some of her jewellery is gifted to her by her father, yet "They are also a man's gift." (88) She finds no difference between a husband, a father and a son. She believes that all men are imbued with the idea of suppressing females and subjecting them to an inferior position in society. So, she decides that she would not let herself be treated as a toy and would strive to establish an identity of her own. She decides to live her life as a human. She feels that it is necessary to leave the house without seeking shelter from any male member of her family as she says-

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“If I take the train and go to my parents, I shall feed on my father’s pension; If I go back home, I shall be living on my husband’s earnings, and then on Babu.” (Narayan 93).

Savitri’s revolt resembles Ibsen’s Nora’s as they both stand against the male dominated society that keeps them in servitude. The revolt of Savitri and that of Nora is not against any particular Ramani or Helmer but is against the society where a wife is never treated as a fellow being as Savitri rightly observes,

“What is the difference between a prostitute and a married woman? – the prostitute changes her men, but a married woman doesn’t; that is all, both earn their food and shelter in the same manner” (Narayan 93).

There is a difference between the rebellious temper displayed by Nora and Savitri. In Ibsen’s Doll’s House, Nora before leaving the house slams the door behind her back, never to return but Savitri in The Dark Room leaves the house but she returns. Although she comes back to her house, but she succeeds in changing the mindset of her husband to some extent. He returns home soon and he even displays a sweet temperament towards her as he asks her to eat healthy diet and grow fat as he says- “Have a little more ghee. Eat well, my girl, and grow fat. Don’t fear that you will make me bankrupt by eating” (Narayan 160). He even says, “I came home early entirely for your sake” (Narayan 160). The days when she was absent from her house, her presence was greatly missed by her husband, Ramani as he went to the Market Road to find her.

“He sat in the car, peering across the sands into the darkness as if expecting his wife to rise from the water and come to the car” (Narayan 157).

And when she returns, he regrets for not having brought jasmine flowers for her. No doubt, Savitri does not remain firm on her decision but the very idea of inculcating a sense of identity for herself and a sense of being missed by her husband differentiates her from the subservient wives.

The expectations leveled from a wife are too great and bulky for any woman to bear. It is out of fear from the societal expectations that women now-a-days prefer to stay single; so that, they can at least live their lives on their own terms. Although, Savitri has been able to change her husband’s attitude towards her to some extent, yet she feels that “A part of me (her) is dead” (Narayan 160). It is owing to her this realization that she fails to welcome Mari to her house at the end of the novel. She wanted to meet him, give him food and water because Mari was the person who helped her in her difficult time. But she feels, “Why should I call him here? What have I?” (Narayan 162) which shows that somewhere she undergoes a feeling that she doesn’t have the authority to call a guest of her own as it is her husband who is the real owner and decision maker. She knows that an overall change in the temperament of male dominated society is difficult to bring as for males, women are just dutiful wives, mothers and daughters as Savitri says to her husband, “We are reasonable for our position; we accept food, shelter and comfort that you give, and are what we are “ (Narayan 87). Malathi has quoted Hari Mohan Prasad (1981)

Savitri does not submit to Ramani: She submits to her obligations. It May be a failure on the material plane, but spiritually she comes triumphant ... It is in keeping with both her Character and her cultural heritage.

Though Savitri’s home coming seems to be a defeat but in reality she has made Raman realize that her presence at home is a big necessity for his comfortable living thus, her protest is not a total waste as she says

“Do you think I am going to stay here? We are reasonable for our position. We accept food, shelter and comforts that you give and 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 will starve and die in the open, under the sky, a roof for which we need to be obliged to no man. (Narayan 113)

In this novel, Narayan has brought to the fore two other female characters who act as foil to Savitri's character. Shanta Bai is presented as a woman blessed with a romantic temperament as she says that she always carries a copy of Khayyam's *The Rubaiyat* under her pillow. Shanta Bai is a well educated woman and her this trait draws Ramani closer to her and away from Savitri whom he sees sulking in the dark room. Shanta Bai too didn't have an easy past as she says-

"I was married when I was twelve to a cousin of mine, who was a gambler and a drunkard. When I was 18, I found he wouldn't change, and so I left him. My parents would not tolerate it and I had to leave home" (Narayan 51).

Shanta Bai, here appears to be completely opposite to Savitri. Like Savitri, Shanta Bai has questioned the ideals of society, judged her husband and found him wanting and left him. But unlike Savitri, Shanta Bai does not return to her house. She was unable to limit himself to her house where her husband and children live as Shanta Bai says

I love unconventional Things. Otherwise I should not be here, but nursing Children and cooking for a husband (Narayan 59).

For Shanta Bai, her existence and her economic independence matters more than her marital relationship. Another strong and determined female character in this novel is Poni whose outrageous thinking comes to the fore through her attitude towards male dominated society as she says-

"Keep the men under the rod, and they will be all right. Show them that you care for them and they will tie you up and treat you like a dog" (Narayan 105).

When towards the end of the novel, Savitri decides to return to her house, Poni advises her- "Remember; men are good creatures, but you must never give way to them. Be firm and they will behave" (Narayan148). Savitri agrees to what Poni says but somewhere deep inside her heart, she knows that she would not be able to execute Poni's advice into action. Here the character of Savitri resembles that of Carla's character in Alice Munroe's short story "Runway". In this story, Carla like Savitri leaves her husband's house due to her mental and psychological oppression and like Savitri, she returns. But the difference between the plots of the two literary pieces lies in their endings. While Savitri manages to transform the psyche of her husband to some extent, Carla fails to do so. Carla, rather, makes her husband, Clark, undergoes a feeling of superiority.

In the socio-cultural context, it was difficult to pursue life outside the family fold. But the unfortunate element is that even after eighty years and 60 years of India's independence the place of women has not changed to any remarkable extent. Centuries have passed but the condition of women has not improved. The roles of women in society are constantly questioned and women have struggled to find their places in a male dominated world. The society needs to recognize the worth of women as Beauvoir has rightly said," She is the soul of the house, of the family, of the home. And she is the soul of such larger groups, also, as the city, state and nation." (Gill 187).

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