

A Study of Existential quest and identical crisis of women characters in R.K.Narayan's Dark Room

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Abstract

In the Indian society women are portrayed as a guardian of exceptional moral virtues combined with devotion and sacrifice. Simultaneously they are seen as lustful characters, naturally instinct driven and incapable of lucid views. Further they are asked to make up all sorts of suppressions in the name of family principle and decorum. R.K. Narayan (1906-2001) one of the finest Indian authors known for his fictional town Malgudi. His writing style was marked by coherence and tenuous humour. He told the stories of conventional people trying to live their simple lives in a changing world. The Dark Room is another stunning novel written by R.K. Narayan where unbending traditional values are upheld and held steadfastly. It presents the picture of gender inequalities of traditional Indian society. In this novel Savitri is portrayed as a submissive wife who listens to all harsh abuses sent to her by her husband Ramani. Ramani works for the elite Insurance Company and will do whatsoever to please his bosses. This research paper aims to explore Existential quest and identical crisis of women characters in R.K. Narayan's dark Room.

KEYWORDS: Identity, traditional, family, portrayed, natural.

Introduction

R.K. Narayan, is one of the most distinguished Indian writers writing in English, born on 10th October 1906 in Chennai. He moved to Mysore with his parents after finishing his early educations at his grandma's residence. He accomplished his bachelor's Degree at University of Mysore and later went to United States. Most of his stories were set in the imaginary South Indian town of Malgudi. His work apprehended the core of conventional life. In 1935, he published his first novel 'Swami and Friends'. Apart from novels, he wrote travelogues, short stories, compressed descriptions of Indian epics in English and his profile. In a career that covered sixty years Narayan presented with several awards and honours comprising the Padma Bhushan, the Padma Vibhushan, and the AC Benson Medal from the Royal Society of Literature. Among the best-received of Narayan's 34 novels are The Man-Eater of Malgudi (1961), Waiting for the Mahatma (1955), The Vendor of Sweets (1967), The Guide (1958), and A Tiger for Malgudi (1983), The English Teacher (1945). Narayan also penned a number of short stories; collections include A Horse and Two Goats and Other stories (1970), Lawley Road (1956), The Grandmother's Tale (1993), Under the Banyan Tree and Other Stories (1985). He also published condensed contemporary prose versions of two Indian epics, The Ramayana (1972) and The Mahabharata (1978).

The quest for meaning in life is an eminent principle of the ideology of existentialism. According to the existentialists, meaning in life can be found only in the perpetual tussle with one's inner self, a challenge to be true to oneself. As stated by Golomb,

“When people are confused as to their self-identity, a serious quest for genuine self can begin. When one is painfully conscious of the danger of abandoning one's self, a cry for authenticity is heard” (*In search of authenticity* 34)

The pursuit for meaning in life many begin with an unkind instance in one's life or by a sense of worthlessness or by the modest desire to attain happiness and gratification in life. In India, since ages, a woman's role in life was strictly classified; she was a mother, wife or daughter. Our culture is a mien of patriarchal morals. Most of the oppression that are done to women are accepted underneath the title of culture, tradition, values, norms, morality and customs. These patriarchal canons that are often too unfair towards women leave the women with no clear self-will, individuality or identity.

Novels in India, is a consequence of Western dominion. It takes its readers into the chasm of poverty and patriarchy. After the post modernism era, most of the Indian Novels are filled with characters such as stereotyped women, suppression, identity crisis and existentialism. For a women, from her childhood, she is told both verbally and nonverbally, that she is not worthy of the same respect, and importance that a man gets. Additionally she has to be committed to the, often unfair, demands of the male members in the family and in turn of the society. As a result, their identity and existence comes under threat.

Discussion

The Dark Room is a stunning novel by R. K. Narayan where unbending traditional principles are maintained and held steadfastly. There is humour and irony through the emotional sufferings of the prominent female character Savitri. Malgudi, a fictional town, somewhere in South India, is where the plot progresses and nurtures. Savitri is a docile wife who listens to all the cruel abuses sent out to her by her husband Ramani. He works for the elite Engladia Insurance Company and will do whatever to please his superiors.

Savitri has three children Kamala, Babu and Sumati. Savitri would flee to her dark room when she could not endure the pains of chauvinism and ill-treatment meted out to her unethically. She finds out that her husband is having a liaison with another woman. Ramani even takes Savitri's favorite bench so that he can use it to beautify the other lady's household. He seems more involved in pleasing and flattering the other woman. Submissive Savitri has nowhere to go, she attempts to sink herself but fatefully she gets saved. She took a job as a temple custodian. She can look after for herself but she has to take care of her past life too. She finds difficult to forget the miserable look on her children face when she abandoned them. The Dark Room provides the empathetic portrayals of the characters and it highlights the harsh realities of life of a woman who was entirely reliant on her husband.

The Dark Room portrays a life of an upper middle class woman. It centers Savitri, wife of an affluent company executive Ramani. The story nurtures with the combination of

tradition, custom and social opinion. These three modules generally induce characters to perform their expected role of life. The novel highlights the ineffective effort of a traditional middle class Hindu housewife to come out of the role she is supposed to play.

There are two major female characters in the novel, a devoted wife Savitri and rebellious ShantaBai, reluctantly living in a categorized social structure. Savitri is considered as a legal wife to Ramani while ShantaBai is depicted as other woman involving in his life. Be the fact is, neither of them is permitted to wander out self-reliantly in the general public, without a male personality tag before their names, that is Savitri is seen as Mrs. Ramani, while ShantaBai comes under Mistress of Ramani. Furthermore, this happens in light of the fact that the general public, in spite of numerous changes, will never allow a lady to venture out without anyone else.

But both are impartially defenseless when it concerns their positions in the male dominated society. ShantaBai is disliked not by the whole public but merely by Savitri, whose interests are at stake. The rest of the society takes her generously as the other woman in Ramani's life. And regardless of her thirsts for existence, she looks rather happy with the gratitude. On the other hand, Savitri senses threatened firstly and rebels, but eventually fit in for the welfare of her children. She has no individual capitals to bring them up solitary. But not either of these two women characters can eventually manifest an individual identity because the male dominant society will not permit them to do so; both women are sufferers of environments with diverse connotations. Hence, none of them exhibits a supremacy to succeed the patriarchal attacks. According to Lakshmi Holmstrom:

'In Narayan's own formulation, a middle class woman from an orthodox society is a victim of her circumstances: either, she must live within society by accepting its norms, or she must leave it altogether, in which case, she can be supported only by her own resources. ShantaBai and Savitri in fact are seen to balance each other, each losing out in one way or another; both are victims' (*Critical Essays* 170)

Savitri's existential quest and identical crisis starts in the dark room of her husband's house which is a way of protest against her husband's authoritarian behaviour. The opening of the novel clearly indicates, that in her first conflict with her husband over the interrogation whether their young son who utters he is sick, must go to school or not, she is completely disgraced, having had to docilely put up with responses like,

"Mind your own business, do you hear go and do any work you like in the kitchen, but leave the training of a grown-up boy to me. It is none of a woman's business" (*Dark Room* 7)

She appears to be only a timid, weak, whispering, and spiritless person. She is also filled with her own ability. She is a capable housewife, who knows how to tackle unexpected guests. After the occurrence of these incidents, Savitri dejectedly discovers by way of self-assessment.

In Ramani's house everything revolves around him, he is considered as the head of the house and the atmosphere is entirely different when he is at home. The relationship between him and his wife is like 'master' and 'slave'. He is unhappy if the parking lot is not opened when he comes, in spite the fact that he arrives home at random hours. Being a man Ramani got a lot of power which he should not, he is inconsistent, cruel most of the times and never hesitated to impose his views on others. Savitri never felt any pleasure in running the household. She was annoyed with her daily routine, whenever she prepare herself to cook, her mind revolts around:

“Was there nothing else for one to do than attend too this miserable business of the stomach from morning till night?” (10)

Ramani has been very dominant and pessimistic in his ways and is very commanding. He is also very authoritarian with his children. He has ample control over his family and this conduct is sufficient for Savitri to go through the psychological distress. Now, additionally he also has an affair with ShantaBai, who has deserted her husband and has joined as an insurance canvasser. Savitri antagonizes him and warns him of the consequences.

“If I had gone to college and studied, I might have become a teacher or something. It was very foolish of me not to have gone on with my education....what is the difference between a prostitute and a married woman? - the prostitute changes her men, but a woman doesn't; that's all, but both earn their food and shelter in the same manner” (63)

Savitri, self-assess that if she should have studied to have a degree, to have a chance to get a job and make her own income. Thinking about her daughter's future, she spends almost half of her life dependent on her husband's shadow. She feels that in Indian society, there is no difference between prostitute and married woman both are dependent on men to earn food and shelter.

Human life could be a journey from childhood to senility and the duration is punctuated by joys and sufferings. When Savitri is confused with her new personality, she recognizes her condition is poorer than her pervious life at home. Her aloneness at the temple, tranquility in the atmosphere makes her feel awful. Her mental agony makes her feel disappointment for woman, who do not support or live without any support. The innermost self of her becomes aware and rebellious of the conventional values of wifehood. Although she is not educated glamorous or passionate in her attitude, she has the nerve to rebel her husband for self- respect and search for identity and individuality, because she discovers herself and wants to protect herself from her husband's authority. She believes no more in traditions. She decides not to take food or shelter which she has not earned herself.

ShantaBai was married to her cousin who was an alcoholic and swindler. She tried changing him but her effort did not meet success, she determined to leave him. She lost support from her parents and hence had to leave home. She decided to be on her own during this difficult part of her life's journey. Narayan has thrown light on the existential

issues faced by ShantaBai. She was a brave woman who decided to face her struggle with endurance and coped to complete her graduation with the help of an aunt.

Narayan portrays two women, whose existential and identity anxieties differ. The traditional woman Savitri trauma, when she comes to know about the stifling affair between her husband and his office associate and the modern woman ShantaBai's distress, who has a troubled past and at work place not able to accomplish her responsibilities. Though, Savitri is not educated, glamorous and romantic in her outlook, she has the nerve to rebel against her husband for self-respect, self-identity and individuality. ShantaBai is not strong enough to swallow any more failures. She was given an assignment and she was not able to complete it. She was given two months' time and if she does not achieve the demands, she would be fired. That had upset her. She went through her mental collapse act and want Ramani a male member to comfort her.

Savitri is devastated with the constant reprimands, and now disloyalty from her husband of fifteen years, leaves the family to commit suicide. She chooses to go empty-handed leaving all her ornaments. Savitri is on her way to commit suicide in the Sarayu River. Narayan reveals her state of mind where she herself is astonished at her uprising. She feels that she has transformed. She envisions whether she is the old Savitri or someone else.

By presenting both the kinds of women-the traditional and non-conformist side by side in this novel, R.K.Narayan brings the harshness of the societies. ShantaBai has examined the traditions and conventions of the general public. She challenges them in leaving her husband and ending her marriage. The essential to be free from ties of wedding and commitment is great but in her effort to be free, she drifts anchorless for want of an ultimate substitute to traditional values. In modern woman's quest for self-satisfaction, apart from facing private and public conflicts, she also has to endure the agonizing experience of separating the family bonds and re-establishing herself. ShantaBai is the proverbial butterfly, the kind of woman who mimics her western counterpart. She is an educative, calculating seductress who knows how to apply woman's charm to win the man. She is sly and makes the right move to trap her prey.

R.K.Narayan has shaped ShantaBai not just to disclose or represent the other type of woman but also to point out incidentally the hypocrisy implicit in middle class value systems. ShantaBai signifies the pseudo-emancipated woman who in her external behaviour appears to know accurately what she wants and how she gets it.

Savitri's failure in her rebellion against discriminating custom of Malgudi instead of preventing the movement here comes as a source of motivation for the future women. She comes back with an understanding about what makes them subservient to men and she explains why the efforts failed. She is not the timid and fearful Savitri anymore. Her new consciousness would empower her to see that her daughters at least do not fall in the same trap when they grow. She overpowers all the existential storms through tolerance and courage and the belongingness towards Malgudi.

Conclusion

Thus, in this novel, *Dark Room*, R.K.Narayan displays that several obedient Indian Hindu wives suffer mutely without having freedom, choice and strength to abandon their role as housewives. Savitri serves as an agent of psychological intuition and consciousness of the plight of the ill-fated Indian woman who has neither the strength of will nor the financial and educational opportunities to withstand the unfair male aggression.

ShantaBai seems to depict the liberated woman who lives according to her standings without bothering about the public. But for Savitri being a conventional housewife makes it impossible for her attain this freedom, after her failed attempt at suicide. She settles down to a new life, but has to go back to her former reality since very solid bonds exist between her and her married life, particularly in the form of her children. An utterly opposite end for savitri who eventually admits defeats by associating herself to a bamboo which cannot stand without a wall to support it.

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