

## Thematic study of R K Narayan's novels

Suksham Ahluwalia

*Associate Professor  
Department of English,  
Arya College Ludhiana*

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### Abstract:

The basic themes that Narayan mainly focuses in his novels are : the study of feminist sensibility, myth and reality, family and various family relationships, the renunciation, and the conflict between tradition and modernity etc. Narayan's method is to treat his themes, not in abstract or didactic terms but in terms of individuals in flesh and blood and their experience. The themes of Narayan are all inter-related and interdependent. The present paper will deal with the thematic study in R.K. Narayan's works and to show how the essence of Narayan's fiction is to present the traditional Indian value & the social consciousness in its totality.

**Keywords:** Feminist sensibility, Tradition and modernity, Indian Values and Social consciousness

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Narayan gives expression to Indian life with its entire vicissitudes. Sometimes humorous, sometimes ironic, but he always writes within the four walls of his culture. His novels are considered to have brought forth the changing images of women in the Indian scene in all their fascinating varieties. He seems to be a champion of women's cause. A close preview of female characters reveal the real intentions and motives of R.K. Narayan in portraying his female characters. His early novels are centered on male protagonists and their female counterparts work as adjuncts that embody the traditional Indian psyche with all its accompanying hopes and anxieties, born out of a deep-rooted belief in fatalism. This is certainly true in the context of his early novels like *Swami and Friends*, *The Bachelor of Arts*, *The Dark Room*, *The English Teacher*, *Mr. Sampath* and *The Financial Expert*.

In these novels R.K. Narayan's orthodox intellectual and social background confines him to characterize women to certain established discourse roles — grandmothers, mothers and wives, and discourse positions - marginal, passive and dependent. His woman remains more a symbol of relationships than a creature off flesh and blood. Very often many of his female characters have no names. They are addressed like, Swami's mother, Swami's Granny, Chandran's mother, Krishna's mother, Srinivasa's wife, Sampath's wife and Margayya's wife. They are also called by their pet names given to them by their husbands that objectify them. Ramani calls his wife Savitri a pet and Shanta Bai fresh rose. Krishna calls his wife jasmine. These female characters of Narayan in his early novels are all examples of denial of individual identity to women. They all exist in traditional Indian domestic settings. They are simple, suffering, selfless and sincere women. In Gilbert and Gubar's words they are more like 'Angel in the House'. Gilbert and Gubar argue that : To be selfless is not only to be noble, it is to be dead. A life that has not story, like the life of Goethe's Makarie, is really a life of death, a death in life.<sup>1</sup>

In *The Financial Expert*, Margayya's wife and daughter-in-law also do their household duties with great responsibility. The fabulous thing about these women is that they themselves know that they do not have better work to do than doing this drudgery. They accept it with a sort of contentment and never try to inquire about their lot. Wollstonecraft rightly remarks: I wish to persuade women to endeavor to acquire strength, both of mind and body, and to convince them that the soft phrase, susceptibility of heart, delicacy of sentiment, and refinement of taste, are almost synonymous with the epithets of weakness, and that those beings who are always objects of pity and that kind of love, which has been termed its sister, will soon become objects of contempt.<sup>2</sup> Narayan's women are all alike having exactly the same job to do. They serve food to their husbands' in the same manner. A faint aroma comes from everyone's saris and disheveled look is the common look of all of them. Their husbands eat first and they are the last to eat in the family. Even when they are hungry, they wait. No matter if their husbands come at midnight or the next day. They cannot even think of having meal before their husbands do. Narayan has fears that Westernization of Indian culture would bring curse on the society and suggests that women should refrain from aping the Western culture. Ramani decides that he will not be worried about Savitri because she dares to cross the four walls of the house and so must be punished.

The subjugation of women is rooted in the socio-economic structure of the society, which is further made sacrosanct by religious ordinances. Women carry these ideologies smoothly to other generations. Ghulam Murshid remarks: It is well said ...of all the subjects that women might learn, housework is the most important...whatever knowledge she may acquire, she cannot claim any reputation unless she is proficient in housework.<sup>3</sup> Therefore, it is none other than women who mould and curb the behavior and character structure of other women, and teach them to submit to the established authority. The women of Malgudi are not financially independent. Unpaid work by them in the home brings no money. Therefore, they have to ask money from their husbands. They wait for their

husbands' approval for anything that has financial implication. Husbands give them money as if they give alms to beggars. Swami's mother does not have money to give to the tailor who has been asking money for four days. Her husband gives her money but with a comment, "I don't know how I am going to manage things for the rest of the month, he said, peering into the purse. He locked the bureau, and adjusted his turban before the mirror". During crisis women of Malgudi either cry or sulk in the dark room. If they do not cry and sulk they prate and shout to get over the crisis. Margayya says, "Women can't hold their tongue". They do not know any other way to enjoy life, release their anger and anxieties. They hardly know how to please themselves. Ramani observes that his wife, "never made an effort to conquer her moods; that was why, he felt, women must be educated; it made all the difference... If Savitri had little more education, she might have been even better". Meenakshi becomes sad when she discovers that her husband has brought a book instead of a sari. The book is on the sexual relationship between a man and a woman. She refuses to read it and when Margayya insists upon it, she listens to it both horrified and fascinated. When Balu flees away from the house Meenakshi becomes hysterical while Margayya thinks that he is now a rich man and it is the time for celebration. He loathes Meenakshi for spoiling the atmosphere of the house by crying and sulking in the dark room.

Socially, after her marriage, woman has no independent social or economic status of her own. Her social status is directly determined by and is dependent on her husband's status, though it is subject to and is strongly qualified by her husband's wish to give her that status. He can, if he wishes, deny her that status though she is his lawfully wedded wife. Srinivasa leaves his wife in the village and neglects his son and wife keeping himself busy with his job. After a long time when he sees his wife and son in rags he realizes how he has neglected them. Ramani scolds Savitri for wearing rags at home. He says, "Why can't they put on some decent clothes and look presentable at home instead of starting their make-up just when you are in hurry to be off? Stacks of costly saris all folded and kept inside, to be worn only when going out. Only silly-looking rags to gladden our sight at home. Our business stops with paying the bill. It is only the outsider who has the privilege of seeing a pretty dress". In Narayan's early novels women are expected to behave and lead life in a very restricted manner. A woman should be gentle, soft-spoken, shy, tolerant, submissive, compassionate and pure even to those who may doubt her motives and be harsh and unjust to her. A woman is expected to be perfect in all aspects rather than a simple human being with virtues and vices or precisely, she should be an Angel or Devi. Women fear to transgress the limit of the decency level. They suffer and tolerate every heap of insult with patience and fortitude for the fear of getting socially isolated; they do not expect help from - their partners in bringing up the children or managing the household for the fear that if they do so, they will be branded as selfish or bad mother. Chandran blames Malathi for not responding to his love and curses her, "little sign did her show of caring for a fellow; she couldn't say that she had no chance. She had plenty of opportunities to show that she noticed him. Where there was a will there was a way. She had only been playing with him, the devil. Women are like that, they enjoyed torturing people". He loves Malathi and tries to marry her but never asks her directly. Her father rejects the proposal on the ground of mismatching of horoscope. She is ignorant and completely at the receiving end. For all her innocence, ignorance and powerlessness she is charged of being a devil. Therefore, justly it is said by Rajendra Lal Mitra remarks :.....in Hindu marriage there is no selection, no self-choice, and no consent on the part of the bride. She is an article of gift, she is given away even as a cow or any other chattel.<sup>4</sup> Savitri dare not ask her husband about his love affair and prefers to suffer in silence. She even conceals her husband's affair for she fears that this would bring disgrace to her family. Ramani continues his shameful act without any fear because he knows well that his wife will never confide it to anyone. Margayya's daughter-in-law, Brinda, does not dare to tell her husband's vices to her father-in-law. She hides it till Margayya comes to know about this from others. Srinivasa's wife tells him, "When you have a house, why should you go out for coffee? What will people say if they find master of the house going out for coffee". She also does not raise her voice for the fear of the neighbor who will think of her as a bad-tempered woman. While her husband Srinivasa thinks just contrary to what she thinks, "...he felt, with an extravagant seriousness, that the whole civilization has come to an abrupt stalemate because its men had no better basis of living than public opinion. He raced against their upbringing.....A child's life was reduced to a mere approved behavior in the midst of father, mother, grandmothers and uncles; and later in life parents-in-law, husband, and so on and on endlessly till one had no opportunity to think of one's own view on any matter".

Every woman is scared of something or the other. This scary temperament weakens them from taking any bold decision and forces them to sacrifice even their own selves. Even when calamity falls on them they seek help from others rather than doing anything positive to get the things solved. They only pray and make several promises to God. When Swami disappears his mother cries and prays to God. When Chandran's mother comes to know that flower-thief is a Sanyasi she allows him to go because she dare not punish a Sanyasi, "Ah, leave him alone, let him go. She was seized with fear now. The curse of the holy man might fall on the family. 'You can go sir,' she said respectfully". Narayan in his novels seems to convey that a woman has to live within the boundaries of patriarchal framework, that there is no escape for her. If she tries to break the social norms she would herself disintegrate and that is the only stark reality of life. In *The Dark Room* Shanta Bai, a divorcee at the age of eighteen is a master of her own will. She is a graduate and can say no when she feels so. She is a woman who thinks that

being a housewife and bearing all the atrocities inflicted by husband is sheer foolishness. She dismisses films like *The Ramayana* as sheer mythological nonsense.

She flirts with Ramani to promote her own personal interests. She combines her feminine independence with a shrewd opportunism that characteristically belongs to the new civilization. She believes in having a life of adventure and looks down upon the traditional housewives. She herself admits, "Oh, I love unconventional things ... otherwise I shouldn't be here, but nursing children and cooking for husband". But she forgets that she lives in a society which has stored epithets for her - slut, slattern, concubine, hooker, harlot, keep, prostitute, whore etc.

In order to lead a free life she loses respect from the society, which every single human being craves for. She pretends that she is least bothered about the social norms but she could not make herself entirely free from the shackles of social tradition. She sometimes becomes restless and seeks permanent peace that is lost in the course of becoming an emancipated woman. She asks Ramani to move from one place to another hysterically at midnight but she does not get peace. She admits to Ramani that she is rather mad tonight as she says, "I can't sleep tonight". Juliet Mitchell posits: Hysteria is the woman's simultaneous acceptance and refusal of the organization of sexuality under patriarchal capitalism. It is simultaneously what a woman can do both to be feminine and to refuse femininity, within patriarchal discourse.<sup>5</sup> In *The Bachelor of Arts* Chandran's idea about marriage, "people married because their sexual appetite had to be satisfied and there must be somebody to manage the house. There was nothing deeper than that in any man and woman relationship". This statement is somewhat true in the early representation of Narayan's female and male characters. Most of the marriages are not based on mutual trust and companionship. The wives cannot discuss their problems freely and confidently. A wife throughout her life shows obedience and submission while husband shows dominance and supremacy. There is no intimacy between Swami's mother and father. Chandran's parents indulge in bickering and seem to be always apprehensive about their sons' future. For Savitri marriage has become a source from where she can fulfill hers as well as her children's needs. The only exception in this relation is Krishna and Susila. Though they are placed in the patriarchal set-up of the society, the bond between the two is subtle and strong. They love and share their happiness and grief. Krishna sets an example. When his wife falls ill he serves his wife and child and manages household with great pleasure, "...but I liked it immensely. It kept me so close to my wife that it produced an immense satisfaction in my mind. Throughout I acted as a nurse. This sickness seemed to bind us together more strongly than ever". Krishna contacts his wife after her death spiritually and talks to his wife Susila for hours and feels happy and contented. He feels happy more than any other couple whose wife is alive. He says, "The boundaries of our personalities suddenly dissolved. It was a moment of rare, immutable joy - a moment for which one feels grateful to Life and Death".

**Conclusion:** The average and the middle- class milieu of Malgudi and the family provide Narayan to study at close quarters human individuals and human relationships in all variety and intricacy. His vision is characterized by a unique Indian sensibility.

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