

Conceptualizing feminist approaches in R. K. Narayan's fictional world.

Rajani Meena

Research Scholar

Department of English

University Of Technology, Jaipur

Dr. Ram Naresh Singh Tomar

Professor

Department of English

University Of Technology, Jaipur

Abstract: R.K. Narayan is one of the Indian male writers who is known for projecting female heroines with profound sensibility and sensitivity. Though the early novels by him includes women in the role of meek, docile and medicore but in later writings they are presented as strong, fiery, independent and mouthpiece of feminist philosophy in his later writings. There are multiple prominent female person of Narayan, such as Shanti, Grace, Daisy, Savitri, Rosie, Shanta Bai and others as well, who received broad among his heroines. In the atmosphere of gender disparity, the writer shows uneasiness in terms of role and duties of Indian women and their place in society.

Besides, his novels also present the impact of European feminism and Western literary feminist culture on Indian women, putting them in a dilemma about choosing between traditional and modern roles. However, Narayan classified fantastic novelist for his lucid and simplistic narrative writing style and projecting Indian middle class society into a colourful frame. Here, we have discussed some of his select novels through the lens of feminism. The novels like *The Dark Room*, *The Guide* and *The Painter of Signs* and others perfectly depicted female world and explained the feminine scenario of Indian women in different forms.

In his novels, women are presented as the victims of social dogmas and patriarchal modes, while here in such suffocative confinement, some bear all situations silently, but a few of them strongly react against the torture and humiliation and also defy all rules and lead their lives in their own ways. This paper will examine Narayan's selective novels in the light of feminist approaches. Although this paper study highlights Narayan's narrative styles and also focuses on the traditional and modern approaches that transform Indian society too in terms of women's identity.

Keywords: Feminist approaches, Philosophy, Traditional and Modernity, Indian women, R. K. Narayan.

Indian literature is generally noted for its peculiarity and multitudinousness in terms of thematic and subjective patterns. Narayan is widely regarded prominent Indian novelist who constructed fabulous and popular female characters in his novels that reflect vigour and vitality in the fullest forms. His efforts to project women's image into a dimensional form show his intention of setting a humanistic nature in terms of women's identity in the existing ground of the societal structure. The novels of Narayan presented him as a native writer who constantly adhered to the ethos of Indianess in his novels. Though he wrote his works in English language but set in Indian vitality that includes people from Malgudi city. The invention of the fictional town Malgudi by Narayan is a great contribution by Narayan in Indian literary world.

The beautiful description of the town and its people and its geographical settings are noteworthy and could be seen in his whole writings, and for this extraordinary setting, he was also compared with Thomas Hardy, who is also known for the creation of a fictional town, Wessex. Narayan's efforts of analysing the women's identity and how it's changed from traditional roles to modern in the changing societal scenario in India as well. In comparison to traditional women characters, the modern ones appear as stronger in relationships with men in his novels, and these kinds of relationships often seem inquisitive and diversified.

Although these female heroines of Narayan are later characterised as the product of modernity, which often puts them into problematic situations because of their actions. Moreover, their intense desire and electrifying spirits reflect explicitly the hypnotic notion of Western culture and modernism, which is full of enthusiastic nature and life independence as well. The women of Narayan in his initial stage of novels, titled as *The Dark Room* and *The English Teachers*, are projected as submissive, loving, kind, traditional, socially bound, housewives and dogmatic who followed their husbands and other males of their house silently without any

resistance. While the female protagonists in his post-independent novels are defined as logical and fiery, who broke the chains of domestic spheres and shows defiance attitudes towards the existing dogmatic laws that subdue their identities. Furthermore, we saw many of his novels that presents more strong, open-minded and striking female characters. In terms of choosing women characters, he shows sensitivity, strong viability, and extensively highlights their myriad forms of issues, as he also stated his opinions about women's identity, that:

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 Women's Liberation movement. Man assigned her a secondary place and kept her there with such subtlety and cunning that she herself began to lose all notions of her independence, her individuality, stature and strength. A wife in an orthodox milieu of Indian society was an ideal victim of such circumstances. (Days 119)

However Narayan was born in a traditional Hindu family, but like his contemporary Mulk Raj Anand, who exposed Hindu society for caste disparity, he never hesitated to portray the pitiful status of Indian middle-class women or the women who were strong in nature and professionally minded. The society and the conditions of women that he described in his novels belong to the pre- or post-independence period. Although in a way, the literary analysis of his novels in the context of feminist philosophy provides a variegated scenario of the status and progressive form of Indian women. Among his novels, *The Dark Room* presents classical feminist ideas in the contemporary Indian society. The novel's title significantly proposes multiple meanings, in the novel, such as humiliation, frustration, torment and the traumatic world of a woman. The heroine of the novel appears here as a victim of Indian patriarchal society and the confrontation of ill treatment and injustice caused because of male chauvinism and male societal structure in general forms. The novel deals with the story of a typical Indian housewife who gets married to a hypercentric man and both are in contrast in nature. The husband of Savitri worked in an insurance company while she lived at home and followed her husband as a submissive wife. From the outset, she was ignored and dominated by Ramani because of his male chauvinistic nature. Because of her husband's callous nature, she was deeply disturbed and decided to leave his house and pushed herself into a dark room reluctantly.

This room provides her seclusion and tranquillity from her loneliness. In the store room, sometimes she compared herself with the junk and other worthless tools of the house. Although this room metaphorically suggested the pathetic conditions of a married woman and also the subjugation and suppression imposed upon her by her husband. In her gloomy world, another setback occurred when she came to know about her husband's affairs in office with another woman named Shanta Bai. By knowing this, she shuddered and found herself destroyed and left Ramani's house with notions of detachment and fury. The following lines of the novel by Savitri shows his inner anger and frustration in her life.

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 to die in the open under the sky, a roof for which we need not be obliged to no man. (Room 112)

In the end, we find in this study that Savitri left her husband's house but ultimately returned because of getting a similar response from society as well. Moreover, the novel also speaks about other women who catch readers' attention in terms of a feminist frame. The woman, like Shanta Bai and Pony, is the wife of a blacksmith. Though they were described as part of the lower class of society, their resilient attitude keeps them strong and high. Both of the female symbolises independence, defiant nature, strong will and others. The novelist himself speaks about the thematic elements of this novel that:

This must have been the early testament of the women's lib movement. Man assigned her (i.e. woman) a secondary place and kept her there with such subtlety and cunning that she herself began to lose all notions of her independence, her individuality, stature and strength. A wife in an orthodox milieu of Indian society was an ideal victim of such circumstances. My novel deals with this philosophy in the background. (My Days 119)

The novel *The Guide* by Narayan is also a classic example of feminism, as it speaks about a modern woman who rejects all the societal dogmas to follow her dreams. This novel appeared in 1956 in post-independent India that already had modern winds. The protagonist of the novel strong and striking response to the patriarchal set up is the focal point of the novel. The heroine is a married woman, Rosie, who left a sticky and dominating husband and fell in love with another man, Raju, a tourist guide who encourages her to follow her dreams.

However, she didn't find complete freedom here as well in the company of Raju, as he began to exploit her differently by pushing her into money-making failed schemes. The disillusionment with Raju caused her so much suffering and pain, and she decides to desert him, just as she had deserted her earlier husband. Unlike Savitri, she never returned to her husband's house nor went to Raju again, instead of this she took everything as a challenge and overcome hurdles of her life. This shows that through her strong nature, she positioned herself as a modern woman who broke the rules and dogmas of patriarchal Indian society and also the image of the Indian submissive female who surrendered and accepts everything as part of destiny. The writer presents the

changing attitude of women in Indian society in post independent India, which is the result of Western influence and feminist movements through the persona of Rosie in the novel. Narayan's other piece of writing that deals with the theme of feminist philosophy is *The Painter of Signs*, in which the heroine is portrayed as ultra-modern and professionally minded, who doesn't believe in the concept of marriage and motherhood and calls them a worthless part of life. Instead of that, she wants to live an independent life that is full of peace, tranquillity, and happiness on her own terms.

She was contrary to her previous heroines, who are projected as subservient, docile and weak. The heroine in the novel Daisy keeps herself aloof from the institution of marriage and is described as a strong, educated modern woman. She doesn't believe in societal dogmas and patriarchal structure which dehumanise women. The instance of her defiant nature reflects in the age of thirteen when she rejected a marriage offer and opposed it strongly; "I'd not allow anyone to inspect me as a bride, and that I'd rather inspect the groom!", (*Signs 03*)." During the scene, she didn't allow the boy's side to inspect her, but she inspected them and asked the questions from the boy to fulfil the conditions of marriage.

Hence, this resolution and defiant nature at the age of thirteen show her liberal and independent nature. She wanted to lead a life which makes her before the public as a modern and skilled woman, not merely a sexual object in the hands of any man. She was carrying out an objective in her life to educate people about family management and domestic spheres. To discuss these things with the people, she never felt shy and afraid and explained everything to them in detail.

The study of these novels in this chapter proposes the idea of two generations of women of Indian middle class society, in which the first generation includes traditional mothers and grandmothers who remain bound with the social rituals and customs and follow these things silently without making any resistance. The second generation that belongs to modern Indian society imbues new women who are educated and creative in nature. The second-generation women assert their voices and power whenever needed. Therefore, the studies of Narayan's novels elucidate his motive of exploring women's identity. He extensively highlights the hidden realities or dark truth of Indian women. Though he wants to give them a free and happy life but never approved western culture and style of women in India. It means even though he favours a new woman image which presents them as learned, educated, independent and creative being and this kind of intention of the writer put him into the category of feminism in many ways.

Work Citation

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