

EXISTENTIAL PREDICAMENT OF WOMEN IN R.K NARAYAN'S *THE DARK ROOM*

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The struggle of Indian women for existence and for honour and freedom has been remained a nucleus of Narayan's novels. With the awareness of women's suppressed condition in family and in society, Narayan writes and presents the existential dilemmas of his women characters who are victims of oppressive system, victims in the darkness, kept and lived in the dark room, sometimes have no room to move on and no existence in family. Savitri is the protagonist of the novel who is a very obedient wife bound strictly to the four walls of the house and children, more a mother than a self made woman. She is at the mercy of her egoistical and tyrannical husband. She is entangled in her dull domestic life where she feels alien to her husband and children.

Savitri is compared with number of minor portraits of women, in various ways. She is contrasted, first, with her two friends, Gangu and Janamma. Gangu is a free and independent woman. Janamma is another traditional Indian wife, subservient to her husband. Shanta Bai is bold woman who brings out the male hypocrisy to the forefront. Ponni is a rustic woman who is childless but has dominance over her husband. These women question their existence in playing their roles, as they have a herculean task of reconciling tradition with modernity and balancing a career with domesticity. They also experience many types of bodily changes since their adolescence which symbolizes their problems and threaten their existence.

Key Words- Existence, women, tradition, existential dilemma, wife and mother.

The Dark Room written early in 1938, before the independence of India, is a study of domestic disharmony. It is a novel about the family life of Ramani, his wife Savitri and three children Babu, Kamala and Sumati. In this story Narayan reflects the uselessness of life and helplessness of his protagonist Savitri. She is projected as a traditional Hindu wife who is loyal and devoted to her family in spite of constant insult at her husband's hand. In the role of a wife, Savitri is depicted as a victim of tyrannical and egoistic husband. This means that she is entirely at the mercy of Ramani, utterly dependent on him for food, clothing and shelter. Ramani rules his house as a dictator.

The opening of the novel clearly shows servile role of Savitri. Ramani is an autocratic husband and father. He forces Babu to go to school despite his fever. When Savitri opposes him, he rebukes her and says, "...Go and do your 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." (Narayan, *The Dark Room* 1)

Ramani is very peculiar in his taste and is always critical about the food items served. When he finds that salted cucumber is regularly served, he blames Savitri for being too

economical. Again when there is a bit delay in serving the food, he exclaims that he has to apply for a leave from his job. Savitri, being a tolerant wife doesn't speak even a word and lets her husband say whatever he likes. She never tries to stop his running commentary and only listens. Even her silence sometimes infuriates him: "Saving up your energy by being silent!" (*The Dark Room* 3) and if she gives explanations (occasionally) she is told to "shut up." For not finding the things properly, Ramani sometimes rebukes her for not keeping her eyes on Ranga, the domestic servant.

Savitri is unhappy as she has no power to do anything in the house even after fifteen years of her married life: "She felt she ought to have asserted herself a little more in the beginning of her married life and then all would have been well." (*DR* 5) Being a submissive wife, she thinks herself to be responsible for the behavior of her husband: "I don't know; master is never satisfied. I do my best, and what more can a human being do?" (*DR* 4) She is always apprehensive of her husband's uncertain mood. Whenever he returns from the office and enters the house without any adverse comments, she feels a bit relieved.

Whenever Ramani is in a good mood, Savitri talks to him freely, and when any action of her husband makes her mood off, she enters into a dark room and remains there for long. Doing so, she alienates herself from the family and outside world. Ramani does not bother about her sulking mood instead he indulges in his daily routine loudly, to demonstrate his wife that he does not care for her. He knows that she will come out of her dark room herself when her mood gets okay.

One evening Ramani takes his wife to the cinema:

Ramani sat in first-class seat with his wife by his side, very erect, he was very proud of his wife. She had a fair complexion and well-proportioned features, and her sky-blue saree gave her a distinguished appearance. He surveyed her slyly, with a sense of satisfaction at possessing her. When people at the theatre threw looks at her, it increased his satisfaction all the more, and he leant over and said, "They are showing 'Kuchela' (*DR* 22)

He constantly enquires, if she is comfortable in the chair or not. Savitri feels grateful to her husband for taking her to a film. As soon as she returns home, she asks number of questions for the well being of her children.

The autocratic behavior of Ramani is again displayed on the occasion of Navratri. It happens so that the lights of the house go off due to some defect in the electric arrangements made by Babu in the doll's pavilion. When Ramani returns home, he shouts at everybody and curses Babu. He beats him badly. Savitri could not stand such thing and comes forward to protect Babu. All that she could say to her husband was, "Why do you beat him?" (*DR* 38) She finds herself helpless before him and has no alternative but to retire mutely into the dark room. This is the first mention of the dark room in the novel. This dark room has been a part of women's life since ages. It is a room without light where the lady of the house resorts when she is fed-up with her life. Walsh comments upon it:

The wife reacts in the spirit of that Indian impulse to immolate oneself in the presence of one's enemy or oppressor which is at the root of Gandhian non-violence. She takes to her bed and lies silent and remote in the dark room with her face to the wall. Her husband disdains to notice what he takes to her sulky unconventional behavior...a symptom of the imminent collapse of the psychic system which has sustained Savitri in her life as wife and another. (45)

Janamma is Savitri's reliable friend who believes in age old customs of society. She is a middle aged lady and a wife of an advocate. She is a self-complacent woman without any ambitions. She "never moved freely among people" (DR 16) and stayed at home when her husband was expected. She believes that wives have to be patient before their husbands and explains some functions of wife to Savitri:

You should either let your words out or feel that everything your husband does is right. As for me, I have never opposed my husband or argued with him at any time in my life. I might have occasionally suggested an alternative, but nothing more. What he does is right. It is a wife's duty to feel so. (DR 46)

Here Janamma is also depicted in a traditional role of a good wife in total subjection to her husband and master.

Gangu, on the other hand is of different sort. She is a wife of school master and a mother of four children. She is a free woman who "left home when she pleased and went where she liked" (DR 16) Her husband never interferes and supports her. She is an ambitious lady who wants to represent Malgudi as a delegate to the Women's Conference. Janamma is jealous of her freedom. Despite Gangu's independent movements, she is not an immoral lady. She is loyal to her husband.

The matter becomes worse when Ramani develops an affair with Shanta Bai, his office secretary. Narayan has projected her as 'other woman' who is socially liberated. She was married at an early age to her cousin, whom she left because he ill-treated her. She also went through the existential agony when she left her husband's home. She had nowhere to go because she could not be accepted by her parents too after her marriage. Unlike Savitri, she takes a different stand and moves from one place to another in search of a career, and finally joins the Englandia Insurance Company.

Shanta Bai is a clever lady who knows how to win over her boss. She stresses her helplessness and gets Ramani's sympathy. He makes all arrangements for her and soon enjoys her night escapades with her. She has forgotten her past. She presents a contrast to Savitri who is emotionally attached to her family.

When Savitri comes to know about disloyalty of her husband, she is shaken. She thinks that other women may be more beautiful than her and holds herself responsible for it: "She can't be old. Perhaps I am old and ugly. How can I help it? I have borne children and slaved for the house." (DR 78) She, instead of lodging complaint about her husband, decides to make herself more attractive. It is pathetic to watch Savitri going insane in trying her best to win over her husband.

When Ramani returns home the next night, Savitri gets very angry. She strongly reacts, "You want me to sit up and wait for you, do you?" (DR 85) Ramani is in shock to see her in such a mood but says nothing. Savitri further tells him "to stop this kind of thing." When he tells her to go to bed, she asks him to come to senses and says violently, "I am 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 you can fondle us when you like and kick us when you choose." (DR 85) The repressed emotions in her pours out to such an extent that she protests against her husband, for the first time.

Savitri reacts sharply when her husband tries to touch her, "You are dirty, you are impure. Even if I burn my skin I can't cleanse myself of the impurity of your touch." (DR 85) She asks him to leave that woman (Shanta Bai) to which he bluntly remarks that she can leave

the house. This statement infuriates her and she decides to leave the house saying, “Do you think 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’ll starve and die in the open, under the sky, a roof for which we need be obliged to no man.” (DR 87-88) This shows her helplessness and her dependence on her husband in a male-dominated patriarchal society.

While leaving Ramani’s house, Savitri removes all her ornaments and throws them at the feet of Ramani and bursts out: “... I don’t possess anything in this world. What possession can a woman call her own except her body? Everything else that she has is her father’s, her husband’s, or her son’s.” (DR 88) For the first time she is out at such an unusual hour. Her insanity and paramount rage drive her to fantasize about death and walk out of the house leaving everything behind her including her children.

On reaching the bank of river Sarayu, she sits there before committing suicide. She recalls all events of her life one by one. On one hand, the indifferent attitude and disloyalty of her husband compels her to jump into the water; on the other hand her affection for her children and her well-being of her husband prevents her from doing so. She faces existential dilemma, not knowing what to do. It becomes very difficult for her to choose between life and death.

In her mood of desperation, Savitri hardly sees any difference between a married woman and a prostitute. She represents thousands of other Indian housewives who are depressed and helpless creatures at the hands of their husband’s. She also laments for not being educated, “If I had gone to college and studied, I might have become a teacher or something. It was very foolish of me to not to have gone on with my education.” (DR 93). These lines clearly reveal Narayan’s outlook about women’s education. Savitri does not want her daughters to miss what she missed in her life.

She decides to commit suicide but fearing the force of water currents, Savitri cries out for help. Mari, the village blacksmith, on his way back home hears her and saves her. He brings his wife Ponni to see her condition. Both of them persuade her to come to their village. Savitri resolves to not take any help, in any form. Prasad tells about the self-reliance of Savitri:

She is in revolt against the traditional concept that a woman depends on father in girlhood, on husband in womanhood and on her son in old age.

She emerge a new woman. This transformation is brought about by a newly awakened consciousness in her for an economically self-reliant status in society. (189)

This awareness leads to the arousal of distressing conflicts between external and internal responsibilities as a daughter and mother accompanied with confounding existential experiences.

Ponni is a frank, forthright and strong willed woman. She is a poor but rebellious and independent woman as opposed to Savitri. She is bold and plays a dominant role in her life. She genuinely helps Savitri in finding her a job and at the same time respects and cares for her. Ponni even goes to the extent of arguing furiously, with the temple priest over Savitri’s job in the temple.

After cleaning the temple and gardening, Savitri cooks rice for herself which she has earned for herself. She feels self-reliant: “This is my own rice, my very own; and I am not obliged to anyone for this. This is nobody’s charity to me.” (DR 142) She does not adhere to the social codes and domestic obligations rather she transforms herself as a revolutionary personality with a different thinking and attitude towards life. She does not take a compromising stance and surrender to the family or society bound with rigid norms. Instead, she exercises her free will and chooses a life of her own.

On the other hand Savitri grows home-sick and remembers her children. As a mother she could not stand any separation from her children and decides to go back home for their sake. The poignant part of the situation is that she cannot live a life of her own. Although she goes back to her home at the end of the novel, it is obvious that her return is not self-willed. Rao in her article, "The Women Question in R. K. Narayan's Novel" states, "It is such a small thing as the sudden memory of the dis-shelved hair of Kamala, her small daughter, that pulls her mother's heart-strings and brings her back." (11) She is a changed Savitri as she herself reflects at the end of the novel, "A part of me is dead." (DR 160) It is a profound statement. Narayan touches the futility of marriage.

Things are not the same with Savitri now. She does not wish to open the garage door for Ramani, when he is back home neither does she care for his wish to sit and talk for a while after the dinner. Savitri "represents a departure from the Malgudian woman whose badge has been to live a home-bound life of non-entity, subservience and uncomplaining submissiveness." (Gaur 197) She is now more experienced, mature and balanced than before. Self-realization or the awareness of her existential conditions do not liberate her from her sorrows. Savitri has grown tired of the dull life. She feels no genuine happiness in her marital context. Her hopelessness rises and makes her insensitive and alien to her family.

Savitri's realization confirms the cyclical reversal of the situation where she is same as she was in the beginning of the novel. She is a different Savitri who is on the outlook for her independent human identity. She is a modern woman but cannot free herself totally from the traditions because she is economically depended on Ramani. At least her new awareness enables her to envisage a bright future for her daughters.

Thus, these women have to fight a lot to come out of their existential predicaments where they have to face a senseless multiplicity of things that do not allow organizing themselves in any way that ensures solutions to all their problems. They believe that they are entangled to the domestic drama of absurdity permanently and there is no hope for them to get liberated. Suicide is not the ultimate decision. Camus opines that suicide cannot be the solution for man's suffering and it is action alone that helps one to survive in an absurd world. To commit suicide is to surrender to the absurd. It is only when they will make correct choices in their situations and take their stand, they will emerge as victorious. This reflects Camus' insight of Sisyphus where he indulges in his absurd job of rolling a stone up the mountain only to roll it down back. Still he emerges as victorious hero, changing his situation.

Savitri is tortured by her own meaninglessness and hollow existence but she accepts her position and willingly derives pleasure in any work that she does. Thus she learns to compromise with her absurdity. She further learns that silence is the universal remedy for all the existential sufferings women undergo in their married life. Hence, Narayan's women characters face the problems of their life and their experiences are in no way simple. Their actual experiences are often tumultuous and conflicted, leading them to make choices in attempt to mend their nearly impossible situations.

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