

## R.K. NARAYAN'S *THE DARK ROOM*; A THEMATIC STUDY

**Dr. Rajesh Trivedi**

Associate Professor  
Department of Humanities  
Gyan Ganga College of Technology  
Jabalpur

**Ms. Namrata Soni**

Assistant Professor,  
Department of Humanities  
Gyan Ganga Institute of Technology and Sciences  
Jabalpur

R. K. Narayan is the novelist of an individual set in the milieu which is characteristic of an Indian middle class families. There is wide range of individuals with distinct mindset, interacting with one another in the fictional world of Narayan and these interaction widespread along a well defined range of time and space (generally Malgudi), provide essential fictional values to the narrative. M.K. Naik rightly points out that Narayan is “the novelist of the individual man, just as Mulk Raj Anand is the novelist of social man and Raja Rao that of metaphysical man”. He further analyses the essentials of Narayan's fictional domain and says:

“The total fictional campus of R.K. Narayan, therefore, presents a panorama of men and women in different life roles, ranging from school boy indulging in his characteristic pranks in Swami and Friends to the old man about to renounce the world in The Vendor of Sweets. The protagonist of Narayan's novel is made to play his life role during the course which he or she either natures in the process, or rebels, or simply drifts or again is chastised or even destroyed by a characteristic inner weakness .

The observation of Naik holds perfect relevance in connection with the theme and characters of almost all the novels of Narayan. It is another important observation that the characters and events which constitute the fabric of the novel, owe their origin to day to day experiences and occurrences of the middle class of the locale. *The Dark Room* is a great example of the recreation of middle–class milieu with its agony and ecstasy fused into one structure. It has been discussed earlier that the Narayan is a novelist of individual and his novels are structured on the interactions between these individuals. *The Dark Room* is the novel about the family with Ramani, his wife Savitri and three children Babu, Kamala and Sumati. It has been stated earlier that the interaction among individual makes the prime preference of Narayan as a novelist. *The Dark Room* is also structured on the interactions between these characters. It is obvious that the human relation contributes quite significantly to the theme of the novel, which,

in due course of the development of the narrative acquires new shades. The novel opens with a simple dispute between Ramani and Savitri caused by Babu's sudden dress :

“At school time Baboo suddenly fell ill and Savitri fussed over him and put him to bed. And in the bed he stayed till Ramani come in and asked –  
"What is this?"<sup>2</sup>

The opening paragraph of the novels introduces us the nature of action of the novel and also the major participants of the whole drama. The introductory paragraph of the novel reminds us of the views of Ian Wall. He, commenting on the introductory paragraph of The Ambassador, says that “the function of an introductory paragraph in a novel is presumably to introduce”(540). It is important that the opening paragraph of The Dark Room, performs the task with great success. The nature of interaction between the two principal characters foretells the nature of action during the whole narrative span of the novel. The nature of action revealed in the first paragraph of the novel is ratified again in the succeeding paragraph :

“I don't know when I shall have a little decent food to eat. I slave all day in the office for this mouthful. No lack of expenses money for this and no money for that. If the cook can't cook properly, do the work yourself. What have you to do better than that?”<sup>4</sup>

Ramani's outburst makes the dominance clear and Savitri's subordination to masculine authority sets the nodes and antinodes of the tension that shapes the fiction. Ramani is delineated with sudden unpredictable outburst but Savitri endures the rage with convention submission of an Indian woman.

“As this was almost a daily routine, as regular as her husband's lecture. Savitri ceased to play attention to it and ate in silence. His thoughts reverted to Babu. The boy looked unwell and perhaps at that moment was very ill in his class. How impotent she was, she thought : she had not the slightest power to do anything at home, and that after fifteen years of married life”<sup>5</sup>.

It is quite ironical that Savitri's submission seeks apt revelation in a comment passed by her autocratic husband:

“After undressing and changing, Ramani came very quickly towards the dining hall and said to Savitri, "Hope you have finished your dinner".  
"Not yet".  
"What a dutiful wife! would rather starve than precede her husband. You are really like some of the women in our ancient books”<sup>6</sup>.

It is also remarkable that the harshness of Ramani is not confined to Savitri. Narayan delineates him with natural arrogance and short-temperedness. The event when Babu plays some mischief resulting into the power cut, is a fine instance of his attitude:

“When Babu returned from the Electric office, he found his father standing in the hall and shouting. As soon as he sighted Babu he asked, You blackguards, who asked you to temper with the electric lights ? Babu stood stunned”<sup>7</sup>.

The character of Babu demands attention at this point. He cuts special figure amidst the child characters of Narayan. Most of the children that are born of the pen of Narayan are limited to playful delineation with humorous irony. Generally, the contempt for school is a common phenomenon in almost all the child characters of Narayan in his novels and short stories. These characters share their creator's contempt for school. Ramesh Srivastava rightly observes that 'his

own childhood may easily be reconstructed from them<sup>8</sup>. It is an undeniable observation that Babu's character in the narrative is not restricted to the enactment of playful irony but he is delineated with will to act and imitate. His visit to Electric office symbolizes his will and at the same time, it also puts forth a convincing testimony to this act in the future.

The complication of the plot begins with a new appointment in Engladia Insurance company. The new employee, Shanti Bai contributes to the complication of the situation. There is ironical reversal of the situation. Ramani endures subordination to the new participant of the enactment of the whole action:

“Ramani felt that he had been snubbed, but presently he appreciated the candour and smartness which had released the snub. He smiled and replied briskly that he was grateful for timely warning, otherwise he would have wasted some money and time in going to Mangalore”<sup>9</sup>.

The complication in the pre-existing set up is attributed to Shanta Bai, who is delineated with sharp wit and all worldly guts of snatching sympathy. Shanta Bai had a split marriage and then she did graduation from Madras and joined the office of Engladia Insurance Company. Shanta Bai, replies with admirable candour when Ramani asks about the people around her. “It is a difficult question”, she replies, ‘and it will take a lot of answering’<sup>10</sup>. Besides candour, her extrovert behaviour in fetching the sympathy of a man is another very conspicuous aspect of her character :

“I passed my B.A. three years ago. Since then I have been drifting about. I have had odd teaching jobs and I have also been companion to a few rich children. On the whole it has been a very great struggle. It is all nonsense to say that women's salvation lies in education. It doesn't improve their lot a bit, it leaves them as badly unemployed as the men”<sup>11</sup>.

Shanta Bai's guts and candour excites the passions of Ramani that works out the chaos and disorder in his family set up. She drives Ramani crazy and makes him oblivious of his duties towards his wife and children. She earns Ramani care that is due for Savitri. Narayan make use of Savitri's bench to illustrate the idea. It make the absence of the bench prominent through the words of Gangu. She asks:

"What has happened to the bench which used to be here all these days ?  
You are lying on the floor", asked Gangu and unwittingly started the very thoughts that Savitri had been at points to smother since morning”<sup>12</sup>.

Ramani's growing fondness for Shanta Bai draws a close parallel with his growing indifference to Savitri and his children. He develops a habit to visit the office on his way back home from the club. 'It would be improper', he tells himself and passes on 'but the car had hardly run a few yards when he told himself that ought to inspect his office periodically at nights'<sup>13</sup>, whereas Rani on his 'unconventional' visits proclaims that she 'loves conventional things' otherwise 'she shouldn't be here but nursing children and cooking for a husband'<sup>14</sup>. Ramani's growing endearment with Shanta Bai is paralleled with growing estrangement between Ramani and Savitri. He is never worried about his wife and children but his care for Shanta Bai grows up day by day. Ramani gets infatuated like a teenager and Shanta Bai's hypnotism works on him almost completely;

"I suggest that we go round Race Course Road and then, if you don't mind, to the river. Have you seen it at night?"

"Is it a very lovely night?"

"Come and see it yourself", he said.

"You don't mind the trouble?"

"Don't ask ridiculous question!"<sup>14</sup>.

The conversation quoted above is a wonderful illustration of the infatuation of Ramani for Shanta Bai. On one hand he was incessantly growing indifferent for his wife and children, on the other hand, he was beginning to feel worried about Shanta Bai because even after one month, 'she exhibited no aptitude for canvassing work'<sup>15</sup>. This is the reason why K.V. Suryanarayana Murthi likes 'Shanta Bai's Life to be a failure in identity'. He further elaborates:

"Married to an unscrupulous husband she rejects identity with him and escapes to Madras, studies up to B.A. ..., seeks a job and joins the Insurance Office of Ramani as Probationary Assistant. She fails to fulfil the insurance business, and thrives on luring identity with crazy Ramani. But Ramani can hardly exempt her forever from doing her business, and failure forces her to leave Malgudi"<sup>16</sup>.(133).

Ramani's eccentricities and infatuation bring out the wreck of the family. Ramani's involvement with Shanta Bai reminds us of the view of Suryanarayana Murthi that Narayan's 'characters are prisoners of their ego and ignorance and their actions are silly'<sup>17</sup>(127). Ramani is delineated with pathetic irony that he gets infatuated after fifteen years of marriage. His visit to the movie is conveyed to Savitri by Gangu. The narrator confides:

"Gangu wept a little herself and said, clearing her throat : I won't hide anything from you. They didn't stay very long in the theatre. She said something and both of them went out at ten o' clock"<sup>18</sup>.

The growing estrangement between Ramani and Savitri leads to revolt on the part of Savitri:

"Don't touch me !" she cried, moving away from him. "You are dirty, you are impure. Even if I burn my skin, I can't cleanse myself of the impurity of your touch". He clenched his teeth and raised his hands. She said, "All right, strike me. I am not afraid". He lowered his hands and said, "Woman, get away now"<sup>19</sup>.

Ramani's attitude reminds us of the views of M.K. Naik. He points out that Ramani is 'an utterly self centered and self indulgent man'<sup>20</sup>, and this attitude of Ramani obliges revolt in Savitri that begins with escape from her monstrous husband;

"She walked all the way to the north end of the town and reached the river an hour later. Sarayu was flowing in the dark with subdued ramble"<sup>21</sup>.

Savitri's exile reminds us of many mythological characters who suffered exile. Sita and Shakuntala are two leading female characters of Indian mythology that invite a close comparison with Savitri. It is, however, remarkable that Savitri is closer to Sita than Shakuntala. The use of Sita myth is an important aspect of the narrative. The concept of myth invites our attention. Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics states:

"Myth may be defined as story or a complex of story elements taken as expressing and therefore as implicitly symbolizing certain deep lying aspects of human and trans-human experience"<sup>22</sup>.(p 538)

Savitri, in this part of the narrative owes its meaning and experience to the leading female character of the Ramayana – Sita. Irony operates the use of myth. Savitri, like Sita is submissive and dedicated but unlike Sita, her exile is not an act of obedience to her husband but it is a revolt against male domination. It is chiefly the reason why Narayan himself take Savitri to be 'an early testament of Woman's Lib. Movement'<sup>23</sup>(p119). Mari and Ponni reconstitute the identity of the

sage, Valmiki which in the context acquires completeness in the temple. It is ironical that unlike Valmiki, Mari and Ponni are untouchables and cannot offer food to Savitri from their kitchen:

“Only fruits and coconut. I knew that you wouldn't like anything else cooked by me, so I have brought only fruits and coconut”<sup>24</sup>.

Savitri's exile in the temple is metaphorical to her quest for identity as a woman. She refuses the food offered by Ponni not because of her social status but because of consciousness for identity. Mari tells the vendor of fruit about her consciousness for identity:

There is a mad woman in there who won't touch food unless she is given work. Hard enough for men to get work these days<sup>25</sup>.

The temple under the old man, makes the last station of Savitri's exile. The character of Valmiki has been split into Mari and old man. Mari as a thief is Valmiki's past whereas the old man of the temple is the present. Mathur observes that Savitri has more points of similarity with Sita, the heroine of the *Ramayana*<sup>26</sup>(p 70). Savitri's stay at the temple accounts for the realization, which has been ratified through the recreation of the image of the dark room. The symbol of the river, Sarayu makes us identify Savitri with Sita, but the symbol of the temple and the dark room with stink of burning oil and smoke obliges realization on her part. There is cyclic recreation of the image of the dark room, which, in the first part of the novel is applied with much simpler meaning but now in the last phrase of the narrative it is used with deeper layers of irony. Savitri refuses mercy when Mari and his wife offers him food. She denies fear when she agrees to stay in the dark lonely shade:

“Charity! Charity! Savitri was appalled by the amount of it which threatened one. 'All right I will live in this', she said choosing the lesser charity”<sup>27</sup>.

Savitri's stay in the dark room, now excites nostalgia and home sickness. The rebel dies. The woman is reborn. Fear returned. 'A nostalgia for children, home and accustomed comforts seized her'. It is a master stroke of irony that all the emotions that she forcefully denies are fused into one:

“When she shut the door and put out the lights, how comforting the bed felt and how well one could sleep! Not this terrible state. And then the children, what a void they cheated! "I must see them : I must see Babu. I must see Sumati and I must see Kamala. Oh ..." But what about the fiery views, and the coming out at midnight?”<sup>28</sup>

The realization of Savitri makes D.V.K. Raghavacharyulu infer that the nove “has, after all been kept ajar to the influx of undeceived self vision”<sup>29</sup>(p38). Savitri returns Narayan celebrates the festivity of her return by recreating the symbols of dialogues between Ramani who doesn't question anything about his wife's absence in the house.

The novel ends with a pathetic note on the Savitri's part which culminates the realization. It was 'one afternoon when she was lying on her carpet in the hall' and heard the loved call from a distance "Lock repaired sirs, umbrellas repaired"<sup>30</sup>. Savitri's excitement draws a sharp contrast with her realization. She felt excited that she 'could give him food, water and a magnificent gift and inquire about her great friend Poony'. She almost called him but she suddenly checked herself and let him pass. She felt 'unhappy' and felt that it was 'eman and unjust'<sup>30</sup>. K.V. Suryanarayana Murti opines that “at once she realizes her helplessness and dependency in the house though she remains haunted by his cry”<sup>31</sup>. Savitri's realization confirms the cyclic reversal of the situation that Savitri in the beginning of the novel is same as Savitri in the last page.

The Dark Room, thus, is an important novel of R.K. Narayan from the point of view of

the study of man–woman relation. Narayan explore the wide range of human relations through a love triangle, and a contrast offered by the rustic couple, Mori and Ponni. The novel begins with echoing reverberation of mate domination and ends with silent realization of it.

## REFERENCES

1. Naik, M.K. *The Ironic Vision : A Study of the Fiction of R.K. Narayan*. New Delhi : Sterling Publishers Pvt. Ltd., 1983.1. Print.
2. Narayan, R. K. *The Dark Room*. Chennai : Indian Thoughts Publications, 2005. Print.
3. Walt, Ian "*The First Paragraph of the Ambassador*" *20th Century Criticism – A Reader*, ed. David Lodge. London : Longman. 1989. Print.
4. Narayan, The Dark Room, p 2.
5. Narayan, The Dark Room, p 5.
6. Narayan, The Dark Room, p 11.
7. Narayan, The Dark Room, p 38.
8. Narayan, The Dark Room, p 50.
9. Narayan, The Dark Room, p 50.
10. Narayan, The Dark Room, p 51.
11. Narayan, The Dark Room, p 76.
12. Narayan, The Dark Room, p 60.
13. Narayan, The Dark Room, p 62.
14. Narayan, The Dark Room, p 64.
15. Narayan, The Dark Room, p 66.
16. Murti, Suryanarayan, K.V. "*Monkey and Hanuman*" *Kohinoor in the Crown*. New Delhi : Sterling, 1987.Print.
17. Ibid 127.
18. Narayan, The Dark Room, p 79.
19. Narayan, The Dark Room, p 87.
20. Naik. p 21.
21. Narayan, The Dark Room, p 90.
22. Preminger, Alex. (ed.) *Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetic*. London : Macmillan, 1979. Print.
23. Narayan, R.K., *My Days*. London : Chatto and Windus, 1975. Print.
24. Narayan, The Dark Room, p 122.
25. Narayan, The Dark Room, p 123.
26. Mathur,O.P. "*Two Modern Versions of the Sita Myth : Narayan and Anand*" *Modern Indian English Fiction*. New Delhi : Abhinav, 1993.Print.
27. Narayan, The Dark Room, p 140.
28. Narayan, The Dark Room, p 146.
29. Raghavacharyulu,D.V.K "*Small Scale Reflections on a Great House of Fiction*" *Pespectives on Indian Fiction in English*" Ed. M.K. Naik. New Delhi : Abhinav, 1985. Print.
30. Narayan, The Dark Room, p 161.
31. Murti, "*Monkey and Hanuman*" Kohinoor in the Crown, 133.