

The Bond and Burdens in Family Relationships

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Abstract: R.K.Narayan's central characters in his novels show everything that occurs in the development of human relationships. R.K.Narayan's contribution to the Indian English novel has been exemplary. Narayan presents lively middle class mannerism and their tension between tradition and modernity of the urban middle class. The family relationships in R.K.Narayan's novel depend upon time, situation and the temperament of the character and are sometimes happy or at other sour, but displays the vigor and vitality of full blooded life. *The Dark Room* illustrates more somber atmosphere. The novel draws a poignant picture of a South Indian middle class family, in which the wife's life becomes much of burden because of her bond with refractory husband Ramani. Human relationships are the most important of human existence. It is a bond that binds human beings intimately, emotionally, sentimentally and spiritually. In this world nothing is more vital than family relationships.

Keywords: Human relationships, Indian family, middle class society, tradition.

R. K. Narayan's *The Dark Room* shows us a more somber atmosphere. Today, a woman's goal is expressively defined, first her indignation against the oppression and depression by men in patriarchal society, and second, the consequent quest of her individuality. The novels of Narayan are cast in the mold of a typical aesthetic pattern in which the protagonist usually sets out on a quest for identity in keeping with certain social cultural assumptions. In *The Dark Room*, Savitri, the protagonist, is on the lookout for her independent human identity, because she does not wish to remain content with her status as a mere slave to her husband. She cannot totally free herself from the dead weight of a blind tradition and when she realizes that her search for independence and personal dignity does not lead her anywhere, she accepts her fate with calm resignation though an inexpressible despair seeps into her soul. Savitri's quest for her identity of at least her independent individual entity begins in a dark room of her husband's house. It is a way of protest against the tyrannical behavior of her husband.

Narayan shows us how the husband is like a God in the Indian household and women have to accept whatever fate has done to them. This is the cause that the priest, in charge of the temple, gives the advice: "If she won't let rest, thrash her that is the way to keep women safe. In these days you fellows are mugs, and let your women ride you about." (*Dark Room*, p.100). Thus, Savitri feels nothing is her own and even her children are her husband's absolutely. Savitri, in an effort to assert to her individuality, revolts and leaves home only to retreat and compromise with the situation.

Savitri represents thousands of other Indian housewives who are depressed and helpless creatures in the hands of their husbands. When Savitri prohibits her son to school due to illness, she is humiliated by Ramani her husband: "Mind your own business, do you hear..." (p.5).

Narayan suggested that relationships are based on good values, truth, honesty, sincerity, mutual trust and faithfulness would live long. Human relationship is the most important of human existence. It is a bond that binds human beings intimately, emotionally, sentimentally, spiritually and intellectually. In this world, nothing is vital, real and enduring than those human relationships of home and family. Love and marriage, the joys of parenthood and family ties, are the bases of all that is best in life the supreme happiness. Narayan's *The Dark Room* concentrates on the problems in the relationships among the family members. This is one of the rare Narayan novels, which deals with social consciousness.

In *The Dark Room*, Narayan has presented the husband-wife relationships in a somber wifely devotion cited in the Indian myths and legends, but Ramani is very cynical and domineering. Every aspect in the household depends purely on his mood. Narayan is very critical in presenting the relationship between a devoted and submissive wife and a cruel husband. Savitri is an outstanding representative of Ramani does not respect the emotion and sentiments of his devoted and submissive wife. Ramani's relationship with Shanta Bai compels Savitri goes directly against the orthodox and conventional rule. She asserts individuality independent of her husband. Savitri revolts against her husband's brutality and cruelty in bold manner. Savitri does not remain in her devotional and submissive temper throughout the novel. The inner-self of Savitri becomes conscious and rebellious about her social as well as economic independence. But at the same time she is aware of the sublime nature of the husband-wife relationship.

Savitri goes directly against the classical, traditional role of a docile wife. She asserts her individuality, independent of her husband. Savitri revolts against her husband's brutality and cruelty in a bold manner. She challenges the age-old authority of the husband. After the confirmation of her husband's illicit relationship with the glamorous Shanta Bai, Savitri is angry at her husband's betrayal. Savitri realizes her dignity as a human being and becomes conscious of the fact that the relationship between the wife and the husband should always be based on equality. In her search for identity, she revolts against her husband.

Savitri tries to assert herself by opposing boldly her husband's behaviour and treachery and stands against his dominance and injustice done to her. This is the first voice of Malgudi woman to challenge the traditional patriarchal system. This is the beginning of the search of a woman for her

existence and independent identity. Inspired by this self-esteem, she dares to rebuke her husband and shows courage to walk out of his tyranny. She challenges his supremacy as a husband and insists on his change. When Savitri leaves Ramani, her husband, she thinks of her future life symbolically as living under the open sky. But the dark room in the temple again makes her understand that it becomes the one condition on which she would be allowed to live alone and the dark room defeats her. She returns to her family, she is not at all transformed, but she is definitely defeated and broken in the end of the novel. Savitri knows she is defeated once and for all, she does not have the necessary strength of non-attachment to live by herself. She must live within the familial norms by accepting its norms, or live outside it, entirely on her own inner resources. Savitri decides to pocket her pride, when the thought of her children made her mind restless and reckless, and she returns to reality only when her endeavour to discover the meaning of life away from the context of her family was just a delusion. Savitri's return suggests her return to reality. She felt that the world outside her husband's home is equally dark and dismal, if not more and it does not have to offer her any opportunity of self-realisation. This makes it obvious that under the given socio-economic structure the dark room of her husband's home is preferable to the dark room of death and renunciation. Thus, she achieves affirmation to accept life. Savitri cannot totally free herself from the dead weight of tradition and when she realises that her search for independence and personal dignity leads her nowhere, she returns home to at least to fulfil her obligations of motherhood. The novel is successful in giving the ordeal of a woman seeking the recognition of identity in keeping with the womanly dignity.

Savitri's return to her husband's house is a realization once again of her helplessness in outside world. She suffered the same mental torture and insecurity, under the domination of the priest, another male boss. Savitri, therefore pessimistically returns to her family beaten by the unchanged harsh realities of the Indian society. *The Dark Room* records the early attempts of a woman to find self-expression and fulfilment, rather than an instant success. In spite of her failure, Savitri as a character has made not only Ramani, but all the readers to think about the status of woman in the Indian society.

Typical image of an Indian family that is a subservient wife and a cruel husband is clearly depicted. Savitri as an Indian woman could be flexible to all the likings of her husband and as a housewife she knows how to manage the unexpected guests. Savitri is intelligent enough to understand the changing moods of her husband by the difference in the sound of the Chevrolet horn. When Ramani loses his temper, she is efficient enough to divert his attention by bringing him into a professional mood. Savitri is the typical representative of wifely devotion cited in the Indian myth.

Ramani is loud and assertive. He is a little dictator who makes the entire family dance to the tune set by him. The happiness or unhappiness, and the quiet or disquiet of the house depends purely on his mood. Ramani does not respect the emotions and sentiments of his submissive wife. Ramani bullies his uncomplaining wife and docile hapless children. Even his rare moments of love and affection are peripheral and show off. He spares nothing to shroud his wife in the

cloak of sadness with his barbarous humiliations. Even the children are accustomed more to their father's rebuke than to his fitful love and affection. Ramani is aggressive, domineering and unfeeling as a husband and father. He is an adulterous hypocrite. He pretends to show sympathy on the state of Shanta Bai.

He says: "Men deserved to be whipped when she hinted at a couple of attempts on her honour." (16)

The relationship of Savitri and Ramani could drag for such a long time only because of the sacrifices and compromises made by Savitri. No adjustment or flexibility can be expected from Ramani. Ramani used to bring guests into the house without any prior information and expected them to be fed with utmost diligence, to his utmost satisfaction and in a way that the honour of the family is not hurt. He never bothered to give a thought to the trouble that Savitri would have to undergo in transforming the ordinary food in a splendid feast and that too in matter of minutes. This irked Savitri and when she complained, Ramani's answer is: "We are not so down and out yet as not to afford some extra food without having to issue warning beforehand" (p.13). Though Savitri had acquired "methods of dealing with sudden guests ... and making the existing supply elastic" (p.13), yet no credit is given to her for the efforts. It is the husband who cheerfully grabs all the credit and the overburdened housewife who actually did all the work is not attributed a word of praise. Savitri's problem is not understood by anyone because it runs contrary to the Indian tradition which propagates honouring a guest like a God and serves him with best efforts. It does not permit a wife to grumble just for having to offer food to a sudden guest brought by her husband. It is considered indecent. The demand on Savitri is undoubtedly heavy. It is clear to see that serving a guest is not the real trouble, but serving him excellent and special food in a matter of minutes that is not only edible but what will not let down the family "honour" is something very troublesome. The balance of the relationship is tilted when Savitri as a wife is expected to stoop lower and lower whereas Ramani as a husband stands erect.

A typical Indian attitude of life here is that the husbands are lords and the wives are duty bound to obey their commands. Ramani then takes her to watch an old movie leaving the kids at home. Savitri tries helplessly to convince her husband to take the kids but he adamantly refuses. He treats her only as a commodity and a proud possession. Narayan writes:

Ramani sat with his wife by his side very erect. He was 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 in the theatre threw looks at her, it increased his satisfaction all the more. (22)

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"(87).

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'(Naik.p 21), 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” (90)

The Dark Room, thus, is an important novel of R.K. Narayan from the point of view of the study of family relationships. Narayan explores 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 male domination and ends with silent realization of it.

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