



Portrayal of Women in the Fiction of R.K. Narayan

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R.K. Narayan, one of the four runners of Indian English fiction has presented a wide variety of women characters in his fiction. His novels reflect the social reality and the predicament of woman in Indian society. On going through the works of Narayan, I found that even a male writer can understand and write about women and their psychological urges. His novels are a study of the female psyche.

After Independence, rapid social changes took place in the Indian society and a new woman emerged as a force in every field of life. Even today women's issues are dominating the literary field. In his novels, Narayan has dealt with the position and role of women in family and society. His novels show the march of Indian women from traditional to a modern and progressive one. He has painted multiple facets of a woman's personality.

Narayan's women characters exhibit his characteristic attitude to life, arising out of certain deeply cherished Indian social values. He gives supreme importance to chastity in marital relations. He seems to be against pre-marital and extra-marital affairs, as the traditional Indian society does not recognise these ideas. Narayan, a believer in loyalty demands fidelity in marital relations. Men and women who attempt to cross the boundary of fidelity disrupt the normal order of society and bring unhappiness to themselves, family and society. Any deviation from the institution of family and marriage destroys domestic life. This can be seen in Sampath-Shanti relationship in Mr Sampath in Raju-Rosie relationship in The Guide and in Vasu-Rangi relationship in The Man Eater of Malgudi.

Sampath in the novel, Mr. Sampath, violates the moral-social codes of society and gets into an extra-marital relationship with Shanti Devi, a film actress. He even justifies his illicit relationship with Shanti Devi.

"Some people say that every sane man needs two wives – a perfect one for the house and a perfect one outside for social life... I have the one. Why not the other? I have confidence that I will keep both of them happy and if necessary in separate houses."¹

R.K. Narayan believes in the theory of Karma. Sampath is rejected by Shanti Devi. Narayan's women feel a peculiar sense of guilt if they protest and break prevalent social and moral norms. In The Guide, the love affair between Rosie and Raju ends in frustration. Rosie, the female protagonist feels guilty for trespassing the social, marital and moral codes of conduct. While living with Raju, her lover, she finds herself in a state of utter confusion. Finally she detaches herself from her lover and returns to her husband Marco because she realizes,

"After all, after all, he is my husband... I do and I deserved nothing less. Any other husband would have throttled me then and there. He tolerated my company for nearly a month, even after knowing what I ahddone."²

Daisy, the female protagonist of *The Painter of Signs*, signals the arrival of the new woman eager to fight against orthodox male dominated society. With her new ideas she re-interprets the traditional social values. She is against the institution of marriage and considers it as an obstacle in the path of her career. She is also against old customs and the caste system. She has strength and will to transcend her biological urges and sacrifices her own comfort for her missionary zeal. Raman acknowledges,

“I don’t know if she cares for any other god or religion, and I haven’t asked. Her worship takes the form of service to the poor and the ignorant and helping them live a decent life. She cares not for wealth or luxury or titles. She can live with the poorest in their huts, eat their food and sleep on the mud floor.”³

Narayan grasps the psychological essence of his characters. He has a deep understanding of human psychology and this provides his characters a reality and vitality. He has explored and analysed the emotional world of women with admirable insight. He understands the sufferings and the inner conflict of women. His women characters struggle to free themselves from the traditional roles imposed on them by society and family but ultimately they show their faith in traditional family values.

“In Narayan’s novels, the characters—the men folk to a greater extent and the women folk to a lesser extent – swerve from the normal path. The men characters move along uncharted ways, as far as the orthodox Indian tradition is concerned in quest of some relief from the suffocation or oppression of domestic life. As they move, they clash with the established codes of a traditional society and thus appear funny, pathetic and absurd. They are ultimately led to a point where their whims and fancies can no more sustain them. When the stage of ripeness is reached, their illusion crumbles and normal reality is restored.”⁴

A comparative study of Narayan’s early and later novels show that women were getting educated and coming out of their traditional domestic roles. These women are conscious of their individuality and career. From the silently suffering housewife Savitri (*The Dark Room*) to a vivacious exuberantly youthful dancer Rosie (*The Guide*), to Bharati, a true follower of Gandhiji to Daisy, a population control officer in *The Painter of Signs*, show the rise of individuality in women. Pooni, a minor woman character in *The Dark Room* too is conscious of her individuality and is independent in her outlook she represents the new woman.

The feminist movement which fought for women’s liberation originally started in the west but gradually spread in India and other countries. A number of Indian English writers have championed the cause of women. Ellen, E. Jordan writes,

“The English feminist endowed the new women with her hostility to men, her questioning of marriage, her determination to escape from the restrictions of home life and her belief that education could make a woman capable of leading a financially self-sufficient, single and yet fulfilling life.

In his fiction, Narayan has shown the transformation of passive, meek, suffering women into educated, active and independent individuals. His characters are all realistic—modern yet traditional. They are all strong-willed individuals with a progressive outlook towards life moving ahead in life with confidence.

Reference

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