

# Feminism in R.K. Narayan's "The Dark Room" And "The Guide"

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### Abstract

*Narayan is among the best known and most widely read Indian novelists who wrote in English. Although Narayan never accepted the fact that he was a feminist. But we find such traits in some of his novels which appeal to feminism. In this paper, I will explore the portrayal of women and language used for them in the light of feminism with special reference of The Guide and The Dark Room.*

**Keywords:-** Exploitation, Marginalized, Predicament, Socio-political, Self-reliance, Underestimated

### Introduction

Feminism is a serious attempt to talk about marginalized status of women. Women are not given equality whether it is socio-political or economical. They are exploited outside as well as inside the home. Financially they have to depend on males. Even they have no right to take their own decisions. Right from the beginning of the world, the world is dominated by males and females are given secondary status. They are considered as the co-supporter of the males. In our past also, there are several incidents which show helplessness or marginalized condition of women. For example in 'The Ramayana,' Sita is supposed the goddess but she had to go to fire test in order to prove her piousness. In 'Mahabharata' also Dropadi was insulted among the crowd but no one came to protect her. It raised the question on five husbands and rest of the males, who were present in gathering. The situations are not changed even today. That's why feminism came into entity to elevate the status of women. There are many authors who raise their voices against women's exploitation, humiliation and predicaments. They are – Mary Wollstone Craft, Virginia Wolf, Friedrich Engels, Kate Millet, Dale Spender, Simone de-Beauvoir and Elaine Showalter etc. 'The Dark Room' in the light of feminism-

It's a story of a woman, having 3 children and a dominating husband Ramani. Who is an arrogant husband, who never cared for the feelings of others. In the beginning of the novel we find that Savitri does not have the slightest power to do anything at home even after the 15 years of her married life. "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"(6). All decisions are taken by Ramani, even what should be prepared in food, is also decided by Ramani. Her husband treated her on 'other' and 'lack' terms.

For instance- when every morning Ramani leaves for office, he stands at the street door and calls who there is. It is an indirect instruction to Savitri to come there and see him off. There are five female characters in this novel. They are presented meek and submissive as Savitri and Janamma or in a ridiculous manner as Shanta Bai is represented as a slut. Gangu is represented in 'lack' term as lack of knowledge, lack of beauty, etc. For example, she wants to be a heroine, but she has not good figure or features. She also wants to be a singer, but she has the lack of good voice. Ponni is also represented as a bad wife, who knows only to misbehave with her husband. She is presented as an arrogant housewife rather than a sensible one.

Weakness of the fair sex in Indian society has been shown in the novel very effectively through the weakness of Savitri. Right from the beginning her helplessness is presented. For example when Babu suddenly becomes very ill, she meekly pleads Ramani that the boy has fever, so he cannot go to his school. But Ramani shouts at her to mind her own business. She can do any work, she liked in the kitchen but leave the training to grown-up boy to him. It is none of women's business. Even Savitri cannot take decisions regarding her children. She is made only for kitchen. Savitri is so much fed with her routine drudgery that she asks herself, "Was there nothing else for one to do than attend to this miserable business of the stomach from morning till night?" (8). In this novel women are shown as irrational being and they can do god job only in the matters of kitchen or decorating themselves. As Ramani says-

Women are exasperating. Only a fool would have anything to do with them. Hours and hours of dressing ... Stacks of costly sarees, all folded and kept inside, to be worn only when going out. Only silly-looking rags to gladden our sight at home. Our business stops with paying the bill. It is only the outsider who has the privilege of seeing a pretty dress (21).

In chapter four, hawkers are selling 'dolls' in the streets; and even in the house dolls are exhibited; just as women are exhibited in our society. The doll becomes an apt symbol for women in the male-dominated society. Like dolls, women are also considered play things by males. For instance, in the

novel, Savitri said to Ramani, "I'm a human being," she said, through her heavy breathing. "You men will never grant that. For you, we play things when you feel like hugging, and slaves at other times. Don't think that you can fondle us when you like and kick us when you choose" (85).

Harsh and derogatory language is used for females in this novel. Even Ranga and the cooking support Ramani's viewpoint that a wife should not interfere in the husband's affairs. We find several instances in the novel as the cook says, "Only once has my wife tried to interfere, and then I nearly broke her bones. She has learned to leave me alone now. Women must be taught their place"(41). Mari is another example; he said- "This was what came of allowing too much liberty to women; they ought to be kept under proper control, and then all would be well" (125). Even an old priest also used derogatory language for Ponni- "If she doesn't let you rest, thrash her; that is the way to keep women sane. In these days you fellows are impotent mugs and let your women ride you about" (129). Child imagery is used for Savitri- "You are a child, perhaps a precocious child but a child all the same" (12).

Such types of abuses are used for women as 'restless rat' is used for Gangu, temple chariot is used for Janamma because of her bulky size and carriage. Ramani also used such words for Savitri as the 'Ungrateful woman' and the 'Thankless Wretch' etc.

We also find several instances of gender biases in this novel such as- Babu, being a boy goes to study in a superior college than the one in which Kamla and Sumati go. Somewhere in the novel Babu also remarks for Kamla and Sumati as- being a girl, they are a silly creature that's why they cannot understand Hollywood movies. In other words, Babu considers himself superior to Kamla and Sumati. Ramani also gives suggestions to his daughters, how should they behave to be a good lady? He scolds Babu for weeping like the girl. He should behave like a boy. In other words, the word weeping/cry is made only for the female not for the males according to chauvinistic males like Ramani. Thus Simon-de-Beauvoir rightly says-woman is not born, but she is made through socialization.

## **'The Guide' in the Light of Feminism**

Rosie, like Raju, is a multi-faceted personality, who moves from being a devdasi, to a highly educated girl, then to a housewife rejected by her husband and finally establishes herself as an independent professional dancer.

The portrayal of Rosie's character is somehow mysterious one. Rosie was a difficult girl to understand and handle. She would allow Raju to make love to her, but in the midst of their love-making she would suddenly think of her husband, and would at once like to go to the hills and see him. In the beginning she was a liberal girl who takes her decision on her own accord. She challenges orthodox Hindu society even after being a devdasi she manages to be an educated girl and have an M.A degree in Economics. She also manages to be out of devdasi system by breaking the chain of caste system. In the middle of the novel she is presented as a seductress and an unfaithful wife who has an extra marital affair. Raju's uncle insults her in such words –“you should not be seducing young fools, deserting your husband.”(149). Marco also uses such words for her- “You are a woman who will go to bed with anyone that flatters your antics.”(134)

The fact is that she lives entirely for her art. She leaves her husband because he takes no interest in her art as “Dead and decaying things seemed to unloosen his tongue and fire his imagination, rather than things that lived and moved and swung their limbs” (71). He regards her art as ‘monkey tricks’ or ‘street acrobatics’. She falls for Raju because he appreciates and admires her art “The way you danced, your form and figure haunted me all night” (62) and helps her in her single-minded pursuit of it.

When we analyze the text, we find that Rosie is a good and gentle lady by heart, not a seductress at all. It is not Rosie but Raju who manipulates the situations. Raju seduces Rosie. The first step towards their intimacy is always taken by Raju. For instance, when Rosie becomes sad due to Marco, he finds the opportunity to be more close to Rosie- “I sighed deeply, overcome with the sadness of her life. I placed my hand on her shoulder and gently stroked it. “I am very unhappy to think of you; such a gem lost to the world. In his place, I would have made you a queen of the world.” She didn't push away

my hand. I let it travel and felt the softness of her ear and pushed my fingers through the locks of her hair” (74).

We can also trace another example as Raju says,-  
At the door of Number 28 I hesitated. She opened the door, passed in, and hesitated, leaving the door half open. She stood looking at me for a moment, as on the first day. “Shall I go away?” I asked in a whisper, “Yes. Good night,” she said feebly. “May I not come in?” I asked, trying to look my saddest. “No, no. Go away,” she said. But on an impulse I gently pushed her out of the way, and stepped in and locked the door on the world. (77)

If Rosie deviates from her path it is only due to Marco and Raju. Marco never treated her as living being. He cares only for painting and old art and things like that. He paid only lip service to Rosie as a husband. He marries her only to beautify his home with a beautiful, good looking and charming wife. He never cared for Rosie's feelings. As Raju says -“What a treasure you have in your hand, without realizing its worth — like a monkey picking up a rose garland!” (69).

Som Dev rightly remarks “If Rosie is driven to the arms of a stranger, it is partly not her fault. Had he considered the basic needs of the woman whom he takes for a wife? He has offered insult to the womanhood and in turn womanhood in Rosie raises its hood to leave ‘fangs marks’ on him”.

At the end of the novel, she is presented as a rising star in the sphere of cultural dance and helps to revive the beauty of classical dance through her dance. Rosie is exploited by both Raju and Marco. Raju had his motives behind the flattery and love made to Rosie. He reveals his plan to Gaffur-“I outlined to him a plan to utilize Rosie's services and make money. The thought of her warmed me up. “She is a gold-mine,” I cried. “If I had money to start her with — oh!” My visions soared. I said to him, “You know Bharat Natyam is the greatest art business today. There is such a craze for it that people will pay anything to see the best. I cannot do anything about it because I have no money. Can't you help me, Gaffur?”(143)

When Rosie gets name and fame through her dance, their engagements multiplied, and they were paid whatever they demanded. Engagements

were finalized three or four months in advance. However, Rosie's attitude to dance is completely different from Raju's. For Raju, dance is a cultural commodity which can be exploited for money and fame. For Rosie, dance is a vocation symbolizing her independent attitude and being nearer to God.

Rosie lived in the dream world of art and knew nothing about the practical side of her affairs. Rosie soon fed up with too many performances and went through her engagement with a touch of resignation rather than her earlier enthusiasm. She says – "I don't think it's going to be possible until I fall sick or break my thighbone," she said and giggled viciously. "Do you know the bulls yoked to an oil-crusher — they keep going round and round and round, in a circle, without a beginning or an end?" (179). "Till the thought of it makes me sick," she added. "I feel like one of those parrots in a cage taken around village fairs, or a performing monkey, as he used to say —" (180).

Tanmoy rightly says-

She is grateful to Raju who has made her national celebrity as the greatest dancer of Bharat Natyam. But the same Raju remains responsible for the abrupt end of her career. He has made her dancing art a commercial venture tainted with the vices of cheap popularity. The loud fanfare with which it storms defeats the very purpose on which Rosie is so keen. And yet she shows a remarkable consideration for Raju. She slogs day in and day out, parts with her diamonds and gives dance performance enough to raise funds to satisfy an expensive lawyer to save him from imprisonment. And Raju, instead of feeling grateful, grows jealous of her self-reliance.

If we talk about the language, many abusive is used for Rosie as-'a snake woman', 'horrible nagger,' 'devil' etc. Sarcastic remarks are also used for females as- "If a man has to have peace of mind it is best that he forget the fair sex."(61)

Marco asked Raju "You have probably no notion how to deal with women, have you?" (61). Thus Guide is remarkable because it gives an element of agency and shows a woman's ability to come out of the clutches of both an indifferent husband and an exploitative lover.

## Conclusion

According to the three historical feminism phases given by E. Showalter, females of the novel 'The Dark Room' can be categorized in the following phases- Janamma comes into feminine phase because of her traditional point of view. Savitri can be placed in feminist phase because in the end of the novel she is totally aware for her rights but she is unable to protest against them. Dark room also symbolizes the ignorant state of Savitri's mind this ignorance shattered when she realized that she should be educated. She might have become teacher or something. It was foolish of her not have continued her education. She wished that her daughters Sumati and Kamala had to study up to the B.A, and not depended for their salvation on marriage. She has only awareness but she is helpless because lastly she had to return her home and had to accept the things as they were. Gangu, Shanta Bai and Ponni all can be placed in female phase. They live their own accord no one can dominate them. The ending of this novel is somehow pessimistic. We find no change in Ramani's attitude towards savitri. He has dual personality. He is devil inside the home (as in case of savitri) and tries to be gentle outside the home (as in case of Shanta Bai). Savitri also trapped into two ideologies-motherhood and angel inside the home.

On the other hand, Rosie can be placed in female phase. She remains firm towards her goal. Her husband Marco and Raju both underestimated Rosie as Raju says-

"She would go from strength to strength. I knew, looking at the way she was going about her business, that she would manage — whether I was inside the bars or outside; whether her husband approved of it or not. Neither Marco nor I had any place in her life, which had its sustaining vitality and which she had underestimated all along" (198).

Thus Rosie succeeds to make her own identity as a dancer. In the end, she becomes independent. In his article, Tanmoy says for Rosie that she is "purified by a self-imposed penance and free from the patriarchal descriptions of mythical Sites and Savitris that have fettered women for centuries.

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