

R. K. Narayan's Portrayal of Indian Traditional Women

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Abstract

R.K. Narayan, a forerunner 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 women 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. R.K. Narayan is a novelist who holds Indian traditional views about women, especially in his earlier novels. The traditional concept of woman in the Indian society projects her role in relation to others as wife, mother, sister, daughter, daughter-in-law, mother-in-law and grandmother. Of all these roles, the role of a wife is very important in the Indian society.

The roles women play in society and their images have developed not simply from the exigencies of biology and social institution but from a rather deep rootedness in the myths and legends and the religion of culture. Since time immemorial woman has been playing the role of a wife as meaningfully and inevitably in running of the family as well as society. Kanta Grover asserts that: "Women have been viewed as the highest gift of God to man" Indian tradition woman in the midst of does not stand alone. Her identity is wholly designed by her relationship with others. The dominant psycho-social realities of a woman's life condensed into three stages. Firstly, she is a daughter to her parents. Secondly, she is a wife to her husband and daughter-in-law to the husband's parents. Thirdly, she is a mother to her children. For a woman, it is not her father, her son, nor her mother, friends nor her own self, but the husband who in this world and the next is ever her sole means of salvation. The paper will show the significance of the role, position and duty of Indian traditional woman as wife and mother.

R.K. Narayan has presented two female characters in his novel, *The Bachelor of Arts*. One is the protagonist, Chandran's wife, Susila and the other is the protagonist, Chandran's unnamed mother. The character of Susila is more important as Indian traditional wife. She possesses qualities stronger than those of her mother-in-law. Like every traditional Indian girl, she accepts the arranged

marriage made by her parents. Even after marriage, she is obedient, faithful and loyal to her husband as well as her-in-laws. She has full respect for the family members. She has the Sita-Savitri image of fulfilling every need for her husband. Susila is a perfect Indian traditional wife. She completely changes the life of Chandran. After marriage love becomes a reality for Chandran's life; more secure than he has learnt how to make the world of his dreams correspond to the world of reality. Thus, Susila is the only person who matures Chandran into the adult world. Her life is completely dedicated to her husband. Susila is the picture of a warm and appealing woman who epitomizes the best in Indian Traditional womanhood. Pointing out the ideal qualities of Indian woman, Mary Wollstonecraft remarks: Women are told from their infancy and taught by the example of their mothers, that softness of temper, outward obedience and our scrupulous attention to a puerile kind of prosperity will obtain for them the protection of man ...". Susila is also a pious woman. Every day she offers flowers and incense sticks to God and prays for the welfare and well-being of her husband and in-laws. Interpreting and commenting on the role of a true wife, Susan Wadley lays down as: "The Wifely role is of subordination of devotion in any circumstances of dutifulness". In Narayan's *The Bachelor of Arts*, I would like to appreciate the character of Susila, the female protagonist. She is a friend, a companion, a servant, an advisor, a well-wisher, a nurse, etc. to her husband.

She is also the playmate, the partner, the guide, the beloved, the discipline and learned one enough in fine arts to teach her husband. Giving his own opinion on the roles of woman who remains confined to the fulfillment of interest of the family, William Walsh rightly comments: "... the woman rather than the old represents Custom and Reason and knows what is and what is not proper". A family is constituted of two sectional halves –female section and male section. A society is a composition of many families comprising only the above two sections. So the role played by a wife in the family is not less than that of a husband in the family as well as in the society. A wife is also equally responsible as a husband is to the society which is larger form of family. Women's kinship and family relationships, reinforcing the view of woman as wife. Most Indian women probably will continue to be motivated by the concept of the Indian traditional woman as dutiful wife and will perform her yearly ritual for her husband's long life.

As per norms of Indian tradition, the concept of duty is paramount for Susila. She socializes, educates, loves, feeds and supports the individual of the family with devotion, affection, love, sincerity and obedience. She is the foundation stone of the family in particular and the society in general. In this regard what Pandit J.L. Nehru had observed is worth mentioning: "To awaken the people, it is the woman who must be awakened. Once she is on the move, the family moves, the village moves and the nation moves". Susila is an ideal woman who performs various roles as a wife, a daughter-in-law and a daughter. She does not have a single moment to think about her own self as her life is fully dedicated to her family members. Caring for and looking after her family was her sole concern. Rehena Ghadially, assigning true Indian Woman's identity to Susila, remarks: "Indian women's identity is deeply embedded not in the marital twosome, but in the entire family, caste, creed and community". Thus, Narayan portrays the character of Susila with significant features of an Indian woman as traditional wife to her husband and all in the building up of a happy family

world. His portrayal of such woman character attempts at establishing human values, in an insensitive age, within the existing background to Indian Traditional Culture.

Another important character in *The Bachelor of Arts* is the protagonist, Chandran's unnamed mother. She is a typical tradition bound, orthodox, conservative and a homely Indian woman. As a mother, she abounds in love for her son. She always thinks for the welfare and well-being of Chandran. The role of a mother in building up of the child's future and personality is extremely important. The relationship between the mother and the son in the Indian tradition is a sublime one. The influence of materialism and commercialism is not noticed in the relationship between the mother and the son. Money and power cannot cast their dehumanizing effect on the relationship between the mother and the son. Chandran's mother is the representative of mother Goddess Earth who bears the burden of both fair and foul and good and evil. She does everything for her family and her children Nissim Ezekiel has presented the selfless love of mother for her children in his poem, *Night of the Scorpion*, as: "My mother only said, Thank God, the Scorpion picked on me and spared my children". In *The Bachelor of Arts*, Chandran's mother represents the age-old customs and traditional values. She has a firm belief in superstitions. Like every womenfolk of the Hindu family, she is against the marriage of Chandran with Malathi when the horoscope of the two does not match. She insists upon observing the set of code of marriage and religious ritual. She wants to do everything perfectly in accordance with the customs and traditions in Hindu society. She was the conventional image of the mother who loved and cared for her children. She loved Chandran so deeply that she could not bear to see him in miserable condition. In the middle class tradition ridden ambience, the role of woman remains confined to the fulfillment of the interest of the family, what William Walsh has said about the role of women in Narayan's novels, applies fully to Chandran's mother.

He says: It was, as Narayan shows, the duty of women to translate and refine the principles of orthodoxy and correctness into codes and etiquettes covering the basic drive for food, shelter, sex and company. Chandran's mother is a God-fearing and saintly woman keeping herself busy with prayer-beads. She utters the name of Sri Rama, at the same time, her husband, home, children and relatives. Chandran's mother, like all Hindu mothers, is willing to marry her son to the most desirable young girl with the best dowry. She insists that the settlement of marriage is to observe certain well-set procedures and principles of social prosperity. She thinks that a girl's parents should have good social status. She wants to take rich dowry in the marriage of her son. She scorns when she hears the dowry which Malathi's father proposed to give for his daughter was not good and costly. She gives references to her own marriage many years ago. She wants to marry her son to the daughter of a rich man of high social status as she is very much aware of her status. She strongly believes that marriage is made in heaven long time before the birth of the bride and bridegroom on earth physically. Chandran's mother is the symbol of pathos in Indian tradition. She is also a good mother. She always keeps herself busy with the welfare and well-being of her children and husband. She does everything for her son.

Her relationship with Chandran is totally emotional rather than sentimental. In an attempt to define what a “mother” is Krishna Kant Singh writes: “the very word „mother. is an inspiration for children from the very beginning. The labour pain which a mother feels at the time of childbirth has both biological as well as philosophical significance. Such a role taken by the mother for the children is a sublime one.” As a result of Rosie bold actions, it is often thought that she is very different from common Indian women. I have tried to show that in reality she is just like our diverse Indian culture which conceives both tradition and modernity. Her desires, dilemmas and decisions can happen only to an Indian woman. She may seem ahead of her time but certainly contemporary in 2014. Thus even today’s modern Indian women can identify themselves with Rosie. In fact her journey towards self establishment somehow forecasts the evolution of women's role in the Indian society. Rosie in this aspect stands as a quintessential Indian women.

She can disregard all her conservative ideas when she finds her son’s happiness at stake. She is also a good relative of the near and dear ones and she cares very much for them. Though, she is orthodox and superstitious, yet she does not impose any undesirable and unnecessary conditions on anybody for her selfish ends. Despite her conservative thinking and orthodox nature, she is a noble, kind and gentle lady always busy making her husband, children and family happy. She believes that the duty of a woman is to translate and refine the principles of orthodoxy and corrections into codes and etiquettes. Thus, mother always provides inspiration and helps in understanding the complexity of human existence. The Indian mother, though fettered by domestic injustice and tyrannical custom, has been placed on pedestal and is worshipped as Goddess in literature, history and society. So also, Chandran’s mother is the sole giver to her son. Meena Shirwadkar has rightly pointed out that the image of Indian womanhood is that of the mother in the following words: “Indeed, the mother-image shines like an unbroken ray in the whole of Indian Culture”. For a woman, it is not her father, her son, nor her mother, friends nor her ownself, but the husband who in this world and the next is ever her sole means of salvation.

If thou dost enter the impenetrable forest today, O descendant of Raghu, I shall precede thee on foot, treading down the spiky Kusha grass. In truth, whether in palace, in chariots or in heaven, whether the shadow of the feat of her consort falls, it must be followed 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.” 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 had done.”

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.”

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 unchartered 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.”

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.

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