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Reflection of Indian Woman as Traditional Hindu Wife in R.K. Narayan's *The Dark Room*

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Abstract: The paper has depicted the role, position and duty of a traditional Hindu wife in the character of Savitri in R.K. Narayan's *The Dark Room*. Savitri, the female protagonist, is a tradition-bound loyal Hindu wife, totally devoted to her husband and her children. She represents a modest woman who does not complain and keep under the chain of restrictions that have destroyed her freedom. The paper has also dealt with how a dutiful wife suffers silently in the orthodox Hindu culture and patriarchal norms of the Indian society. Savitri belongs to the group of oppressive women who do not have the slightest power to do anything of their own. She loses all notions of her independence, her individuality, stature and strength. Besides playing the traditional wifely role, Savitri is also an affectionate and considerate mother who always thinks for the welfare and well-being of her children. After her attempt to commit suicide, she pockets her pride and returns home only for her children but not as a submissive woman. She leads a life of toil and travail for the rest of her life. After all, she is the symbol of wifely devotion who bears the image of mythological character like Sita of *The Ramayana*. She is also the mother who acts like a tree nurturing her children under its shade and an epitome of selflessness, humanity and morality justified by nature.

Keywords: traditional Hindu wife, Savitri, middle class Indian, custom, society.

R.K. Narayan is an eminent Indian novelist who created wonderful and marvellous women characters full of vigour and vitality. His portrayal of women characters attempts at establishing human values within the existing background of Hindu metaphysics. In analyzing the women characters of R.K. Narayan here, I have taken up the character of Savitri from his novel, "*The Dark Room*". This novel has an ideal traditional Hindu wife, Savitri. She represents an authentic picture of silent suffering and abject surrender of a traditional Hindu middle-class housewife. Savitri in the role of a wife is depicted as victim of tyrannical and egoistic husband, Ramani. She suffers and puts up with her husband's promiscuous ways. In the very opening of the novel, Ramani, the husband, appears as an autocratic husband and father. He forces his son Babu to go to school despite having fever. When Savitri tries to protest against her husband's treatment of their son, Ramani rebukes her by saying that she has no business to meddle with his handling of the children. He did not hear even a single word from Savitri. He tried to rule his family on his will. He even finds faults with the preparation of food without any reason. He always complained for something or the other.

Savitri always bears her husband's unwarranted insults and taunts silently. She withdraws from all responsibilities and merely lies with her face to the wall, withdrawn into herself. She fully knows that it is useless thing to give any comment. She dances in the tune of her husband whether it is right or wrong. She has neither the right to ask or discuss any matter nor time to think whether she should obey or not. She is pulled in the direction he likes. Even after fifteen years of her married life, she accepts defeat and finds failure everywhere. Describing this predicament of Savitri, William Jones says:

Though they have married for fifteen years, his wife has received nothing from her husband except his hot and cold temper. Even his children are recipients more of his rebukes than of his fiftul love. (Jones 29; cited by Krishna Kant Singh 62)

Savitri, through her own experiences and efforts, finds that a woman's place is only by her husband's and children's side. Her only function is to look after her husband and family and always keeps herself ready to fulfil their requirements. In doing a lot for her husband and children her life is like a "caged bird" — a bird without wings. She finds herself helpless before her husband and has no alternative but to retire mutely into the dark room. Since time immemorial women have remained cloistered and confined within the four walls of the house and treated as 'the second sex'.

Savitri is a convention-bound loyal Hindu wife, attached and devoted to her family in spite of her suffering of constant neglect and insult at her husband's hand. On the day of the *Navaratri* festival, the husband, Ramani, beats their son Babu for the failure of electricity. Savitri tries to protect Babu, and revolts against the suppressive behaviour of her husband as well as against the male-dominated society. She is so deeply pained by the 'beating scene' that she refuse to take her food. She even turns down the request of the children. In the Indian society, women are kept under the chain of restrictions which have destroyed the freedom of women. A wife who does not complain is regarded as the modest woman in the society. Savitri has revolted against the age-old custom of the society but she is defeated. Thus, women are helpless victims of exploitation.

The middle class Indian girl and woman had terrors on the domestic front a million times more oppressive than any political subjugation. To justify the truth of this statement the novelist makes Savitri enumerate a series of fears:

from the cradle to the funeral pyre, even beyond of father and teacher and everybody else in early life, of husband and children and neighbours later on... which culminate in the cauldron of boiling oil prepared by Yama in hell for disobedient wives. (Narayan 102)

Even fifteen years of married life have failed to establish a good relationship between Savitri and her husband. Ramani likes to derive sadistic pleasures in the suffering of his family members. Sometimes,

Ramani seems to love her and even want to accompany her. But it is not the genuine affection of a husband. It is a pleasure which arises out of possession for a rare object. An extremely incommunicative wife creates herself a commodity. She is the victim of the oppression of her husband. Even in this situation, she adapts perfectly, to a traditional role of a good wife or a good mother. She considers her husband a sheltering tree in whom she has to rely.

Savitri bears the inhuman attitude of her husband. She is scolded or fondled by her husband. She thinks that she is impotent and has not the slightest power to do anything at home. She has been given a secondary place. Her personal feelings and individuality receive no consideration. She is considered nothing more than a slavish automation that should automatically respond to him in the way he likes. In the male-dominated society, she suffers in the hands of her husband who is an oppressor.

Savitri's life became more miserable when her husband had illicit relationship with another woman. She became a helpless victim exploited by her husband. She sulked in the dark room of the house like the mummy inside the pyramid of ancient Egypt. Even though she knew her husband's affairs with Shanta Bai, she never thought to divorce him. She also knew that her husband ill-treated her as well as her children. She tried to bring him in the right way. She did not like to live in confusion and feared that if anything happened, her family would be a broken family and the reaction of such a situation would be fallen to their children. But Ramani did not care for the feelings of his wife. Seeing no way to correct her husband, she left her house. She realized her dignity as a human being and became conscious. Like Ibsen's Nora, she refuses to be treated as a doll and left the house. But she was frustrated after leaving her house as she was constantly haunted by the memories of her children. Describing her mental state the novelist writes: "Perhaps Sumati and Kamala have not had their hair combed for ages now ..." (Narayan 190).

The fact that she comes back for the sake of her children only enhances her glory as a mother. She presents the predicament of women in the male chauvinistic society by bewailing as: "What possession can

a woman call her own except her body? Everything else is her father's, husband's or her son's" (Narayan 75).

She leaves her house fighting against her fate, against the society and against her own husband but she is defeated. Like a true Hindu woman, she pockets her pride and puts up with the harsh and cruel treatment of her husband. She accepts the traditional view that the husband is a god and she must accept what fate has ordained to her. She accepts the declaration of the great Manu as reproduced below:

Woman to be a helpless creature guarded by her father as a child, by her husband in her youth and by her son when she is old and a widow. (Dhawan 132)

She realizes that an ideal Hindu wife should learn to put up with her erring husband. She is not blind to the faults of her husband, but she keeps silent. The tragic life of Savitri is initially one like that of Desdemona, a Christ figure, who suffers in silence instead of registering a vocal protest. She is too docile a doll and too meek like the mother-cow to either attract or arrest her husband's attention. Savitri is an ideal Hindu wife who suffers silently or who prefers starving till late night to take her food without serving her husband. Simple and devoted, Savitri initially adopts a symbolic protest and shuts herself in a dark room to think anxiously about her life and children in future and her such behaviour is the symbol of women's pathetic condition in the Hindu society. She is pining for her independence for individual existence. But she is reminded of the children. And this has made her ultimately decide to give up her fight for independence. The revolutionary phase of her life is suddenly collapsed. She realizes her lack of confidence and dependency on man. She loses the hope to survive all-alone. She curses her fate but accepts the defeat. The futility, the frustration and her own inescapable weakness make her cry and sob. "This is defeat, I accept it. I am no good for this flight" (Narayan 190).

All her hopes are burnt to ashes. She accepts defeat with a feeling of a "defeated soldier", who has lost the battle of life.

Savitri is a pious woman who believes in the existence of God. She

is god fearing and she attends her Puja room in the house daily. Like every Indian woman, she prays and meditates for at least a few minutes every day, and it may be one of the reasons why, with all her sorrows and sufferings, she still survives and is able to take a calm view of existence.

Besides her wifely role, Savitri is presented as blind, affectionate and considerate mother. She nurses her children with motherly responsibilities and dutifulness. She feels concerned about her son, Babu who has been forced to go to school by the father despite this fact that he suffers from fever. She advises her daughter, Kamala, not to come running in the street during recess lest she should stumble over and get hurt. She insists upon Sumati to take more of rice and curd in the recess as she is too weak and frail in body. While leaving her husband's house, she wants to take the children with her. But she changes her mind afterwards on the basis of the argument that they too belong to her husband. She says that she has no claim upon them because her husband "paid the midwife and nurse". Though Savitri leaves the roof of her husband yet she is not able to forget her children. The cruelty of her husband towards her is compensated by her love of her innocent children. Even though she has left her children alone, she always prays to God for their welfare. And her concern for her children is shown by her own question: "What will they do without me?" (Narayan 61).

Though Savitri is unwilling to submit herself to her husband because of Ramani's illicit relationship with another woman, yet nostalgia for children compels her to reconsider her decision once more. She hates her husband but she loves her children. She always remembers her children in her loneliness. This fact is evidenced when she says: "What a void they created! I must see them; I must see Babu, I must see Sumati and I must see Kamala" (Narayan 186-187).

Children are more close to their mother than to their father, as mother has consoling and inspiring power which the father lacks. The role of the mother in building up of the child's future and personality is extremely important. Mother is the symbol of pathos in Indian tradition. The image of mother enshrined in the Vedas celebrates her as an

epitome of the qualities of magnanimity, affection and devotion. Commenting on the symbolic qualities of traditional Indian mother Girija Khanna and Mariamma Varghese remark:

Whatever may be her status, sees herself primarily as a mother, and considers this role the most significant one. Whatever she does or whatever she achieves is an extension of this primary image. (106)

The position of women, who constitute nearly half of the population of a society, is a true index to the conditions prevailing in that particular culture and civilization. A harsh truth which cannot be explained or justified by any rational system is that of the inequality of woman's condition vis-a-vis man. A place of subordination has been traditionally accorded to her at the behest of male-dominated culture which ordains a grim existence for her. Not self-assertion, but self-denial; not self-awareness, but role fulfilment are expected of her by society, with its entrenched ideas of male-dominance.

The Dark Room is, thus, silver-lined with maternal affection and mother's grace, the supreme quality of a woman in the Indian cultural context and heritage. From the days of the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*, woman has been considered as a property of man.

Savitri, being a dedicated wife, on the other hand, finds that some actions of her husband are likely to lower down his own position in the eyes of others. Sometimes after spending the whole night with Shanta Bai, Ramani returns early in the morning. The milkman asks Savitri if the master had gone out very early. Savitri, at first, avoids answering it but when the milkman repeats his question, she calmly replies that he had to go out very early in the morning to visit someone. She doesn't like to hear anything against her husband. When Gangu, her friend, comes to her and starts talking about Ramani's negligence to her, she tries to divert Gangu's attention to other points. When Kamala sees Savitri's swollen eyes and red nose she asks if her father has scolded her, she immediately replies that there is no question of scolding her, as their father is not a person to scold her without any reason. He rarely does so only when she does something wrong. Even when the children

are asked about their father's absence for the whole night, Savitri defends him saying that when men have work, they forget food, sleep and even home.

Savitri's attempt to commit suicide and her later living like an ascetic are a complete failure and so she returns to her children and her comfortable home. She returns to her husband because she has nowhere else to go. Explaining her own predicament she remarks: "I am like a bamboo pole which cannot stand without a wall to support it" (Narayan 55).

Savitri feels the impact of the curse of dependence and decides that her daughters must complete their education so that they do not face the same predicament of living like parasites. She appears like Sita in her suffering and endurance, but since Ramani is not Rama, the mythical parallel ends here. Savitri returns to her home with the realization that: "A part of [her] is dead" (Narayan 208).

Helplessness is overpowering her. She has no right over her own children and cannot protect them from her husband's ill treatment or take them with her when she leaves her home.

Here in Narayan's, *The Dark Room* I would like to appreciate the character of Savitri, the female protagonist. Her returning to her husband's house cannot be considered as Savitri's submissiveness. She returns only because of her children. Like a traditional Indian mother, she cannot suppress her maternal affection and emotions. It is the mother who thinks more for her children than the father. Her emotional and sentimental attachment towards her children does not permit her to keep away from her children. We can easily see such happenings in our day-to-day life. Suppose in an Indian family, if the father dies, most of the mothers remain as widows and sacrifice the rest of their life to bear their children. But on the other hand, if the mother dies much earlier in a family, the father re-marries again in the context that he needs another mother for his children to bear them. Thus, the case is same with Savitri's life. Ramani remains the father of her children just for the name sake. The maternal instinct in her asserts itself. She decides to come back to the homely warmth of her children. Her motherly

affections over-power her previous rebellious and bitter self. But Savitri is now a changed woman. She no longer runs to open the gate for her husband– as she was accustomed to do it earlier. She fights against her husband and tries to change his habits. She recognizes the limits of her protest in the given social environment. She is more experienced and mature than she is before she leaves home.

From the sociological, cultural and historical points of view, the place of woman in the Indian society has always been envisioned as being backward. Thus, Savitri of *The Dark Room* is a classic exposition of the Indian woman, struggling to maintain equilibrium in the face of grave situations, trying to look upon everything as an aspect of Fate and seeking inner contentment and peace in the world of illusion. Emphasizing on the popular traditional qualities of the Indian Hindu wife Mahatma Gandhi remarks:

Only an Indian Hindu wife would tolerate these hardships, and that is why I have regarded woman as an incarnation of tolerance. A servant wrongly suspected may throw up his job, a son in the same case may leave his father's roof, a friend may put an end to the friendship. A wife, if suspects her husband, will keep quiet; but if her husband suspects her, she is ruined. (21)

To remain as wife in the family she finds it necessary to sacrifice other needs in her nature and to suppress part of her heritage. She has to accept this imbalance. Thus, in this novel, R.K. Narayan shows that various obedient and dutiful Indian Hindu wives suffer silently without having freedom, choice and strength to abandon their role as housewives. Savitri serves as an agent of psychological insight and awareness of the plight of the unfortunate Indian woman who has neither the strength of will nor the economic and educational opportunities to withstand the unfair male aggression. Thus, Savitri, like Anita Desai's Maya of *Cry the Peacock*, makes a valiant attempt to demolish the traditional image of women in general.

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