ISSN: 0976-4976

THE LITERARY MUSING

A REFEREED BIANNUAL JOURNAL OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE & LITERARY WRITINGS

VOLUME - 6 ISSUE - 5 JULY-2012

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Visnagar-384315, Dist.:- Mehsana, Gujarat

SUNRISE PUBLISHERS & DISTRIBUTORS

JAIPUR-302021 (RAJ.)

ISSN: 0976-4976

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R.K. NARAYAN'S THE DARK ROOM: AN AUTHENTIC PICTURE OF A HINDU HOUSE WIFE

J.M. Purohit

R.K. Narayan has engraved a position for himself in the galaxy of Indo-Anglian novelist. His impeccable style of story telling has established him as one of the best story tellers in India and abroad. Narayan was the minute observer of society presenting most realistic pictures charged with gentle irony and light humour.

In *The Dark Room*, Narayan utilizes the Savitri's familiar pattern of domestic disharmony to sketch the status of women in Indian society. *The Dark Room* is the story of conjugal conflict, with three main figures namely Savitri, the traditional wife silently sobbing and suffering, Ramani, the cold hearted and philandering, and Shantabai the flirtatious woman – taken together, represent a situation which is not uncommon in the domestic life in Indian society.

The Dark Room is an authentic picture of a traditional Hindu housewife. Her silent suffering and temporary rebellion ending in pathetic surrender is in keeping with the Hindu culture dominating the Indian society. Savitri, a middle class housewife finds her husband, Ramani infatuated with Shantabai, his new office assistant, and leaves him in a fit of desperation only to realise the bitter truth that a traditional Hindu wife of her class is totally

I won't."[10] Narayan is superbly successful in presenting Savitri as to his ideas. He says in his interview with S.Krishnan:

> In *The Dark Room* I was concerned with showing the utter dependence of woman on man in our society. I supposed I have moved along with the lines.[11]

Ponni, a low caste woman is the only woman stands out prominently with the status and individuality of her own. Ponni who is both contrasted and linked with Savitri, stands upto her husband, who cannot be intimidated, leave alone oppressed by the male world. Ponni, in fact, is the only one in this novel who genuinely attempts to help Savitri to find the life of independence she wats, at the same time respecting and guarding the privacy she needs. She is out spoken and straight forward. Narayan gives Ponni extra dimensions of sympathy and this sharpens and throws into relief the inevitable loneliness to which Savitri returns when she goes home to Malgudi.

The story of *The Dark Room* is suggestive of natural sorrows and panis suffered by a tongueless creature who can only dream of freedom and die heart-stiffled in her den. Savitri's is a spilt personality. This cleft in Savitri's personality is at the root of the novel the spirit of which is expressed through the image of *The Dark Room* which follows her whenever she goes. This darkness is an externalization of her mental condition of her mental condition created by the stuffy oppressiveness which women of the orthodox middle class are destined to endure.

S.C. Sanyal is rightly observes: "In *The Dark Room* the conflict between Ramani and Savitri...is a clash of principle and ideology."[12] The entrance of modern evil in the guise of glamorous Shatabai in the domestic world of Ramani and Savitri causes storms. He is slipped away into the arms of Shatabai, his callous behaviour is made the cause of a major quarrel and the reconciliation that foreshadows the defeat of Savitri in the end. And Savitri accepts the defeat because our society has not yet been ready to recognize the elementary rights of woman hood. However, Savitri's utterances echo the revolutionary voice of rising womenkind.

coming forward to take up their cause and are fighting against the atrocities and humiliating treatment being given to them.

In keeping with the changing times Ramani has taken Shantabai on the staff the Engladia Insurance Company as the chief women agent. The sole purpose of taking Shantabai on the staff was to spread the business of the company.

However, seems to be very contradictory in his character, a mean, hypocrite and callous by nature. He is utterly self centred and utterly self centred and self indulgent who makes his whole family dance to his tune. On one hand Ramani flirts with a woman probationer, Shantabai, giving an air that women have every right to be treated at par with men. On the other hand, his dictatorial face at home is more than enough to sum up that he is an upholder of the ancient Manusmriti to keep the women folk under a strict surveillance. Savitri, the traditional orthodox Hindu woman as she is, bears it all out of fear that Yama's world the cauldrom must be ready for her sin of taking back to a husband and disobeying him.

One part, Savitri feels, is dead, then in another part a faint stirring to personal life begins, and in yet another part, the Indian habits or gifts for acceptance as strong as in the middle class as in the peasants, still prevails. We can agree with Meena Shriwadkar, when she observes:

> The Savitri who returns is a spiritual cripple. She has not even the courage or confidence to call Mari, the burglar who had saved her and repay him, for now she thinks she is a non entity.[9]

In fact, it is the women who have comparatively more faith in fate and destiny rather than their male counterparts. Besides, they are steeped in superstition and blind belief. Savitri left her home and children in the dead of night and stood in the waters to commit suicide. She prayed to her gods on the hill to protect her children. But the meek and traditional wife in her did not allow her to take the drastic step. She is also reminded of the sin of disobeying her husband. Savitri was seized with fear, and she at once changed her decision, she said: "...no, no I can't die I must go back home. I won't

despite her education. While narrating her autobiography she remarks: "It is all non-sense to say that woman's salvation lies in education. It doesn't improve their lot a bit."[7]

Shantabai of *The Dark Room*, is an early incarnation of Shanti of *Mr.Sampath* and Rosie of *The Guide*. The majority of women are like Savitri in *The Dark Room*, suffering, tolerating injustice helplessly, with their brains washed by traditional taboos or unable economically and still more emotionally to lead an independent life. It is through the character of Ramani, Narayan, reveals the established views of the society towards women:

> Of course, he granted, there was some sense in women's movements: Let them by all means read English novel, play tennis, have their All India Conference and go to the pictures occasionally; but that should not blind them to their primary duties of being wives and mothers! they mustn't attempt to ape the western women, all of whom, according to Ramani's belief, lived in a chaos and promiscuity and divorce. He held that India owed its spiritual eminence to the fact that the people here realize that woman's primary duty was being a wife and a mother. And what woman retained the right of being called a wife who disobeyed her husband? Don't all the ancient epics and scriptures enjoin upon woman the strictest identification with her husband? He remembered all the heroines of the epics whose one dominant quality was blind, stubborn following of their husbands, like the shadow following the substance.[8]

It is for the far-reaching effect of the ancient Hindu epics and the scriptures that the men-folk are very unlikely to change their out-look, and the women-folk will continue to suffer. However in the present-day society, the plight of women has considerably changed possibly because of the western influence and rapid industrialization of the country. Several organisations have been

attachment with one Shantabai, his office assistant. At first she tries to persuade him to leave the woman and she would forgive and forget. But when she finds nothing is of any use, she musters enough courage to warn her husband. She notes:

> I am a human being, through her heavy breathing, you men will never grant that. For you we are playthings 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.[5] (p.73)

Though the spark of revolt does not last for a long time, the awakening in her mind is a clear indication of the individuality and the rights and liberties, women of the Hindu society have been relentlessly struggling for. It is anybody's guess that the bang of her brave speeches would end in pitiful whimper when Savitri finds herself a alone in the ill-lit secluded temple. She grew homesick. A nostalgia for children, house and accustomed comforts, seized her. Lying here on the rough floor beside the hot flickering lamp, her mind racked with fear. She could not help contrasting the comforts, security and unloneliness of her home. And she returns in the end as a spiritual cripple. She has to face the shame and suffering mutely as a price for the emotional need of a home and children.

Savitri's self-evaluation towards the end of the novel speaks volumes about the survile role the woman is condemned to play in the house.

> What despicable creations of God are we that can't exist without a support. I am like a bamboo pole which cannot stand without a wall to support... this is defeat. I accept it. I am no good for this fight I am a bamboo pole.[6] (p.113)

It requires an intellectually strong mind to put aside all these emotional factors and to come out of the Sita-Sati- Savitri image and the tradition of submission Shantabai is one such woman character Narayan portrayed in *The Dark Room*. She is a bold, self possessed and educated woman who has lost her husband because he ill-treated her. On the whole, Shantabai is shown to be pathetic figure

> it if they are sometimes unreasonable...After all they are better trainers of children than we can be.[3]

Janamma went on this strain for an hour more recounting instances of the patience of wives with a view to make Savitri come out of the 'dark room', where she was sulking after her show down with Ramani over the beating he gave to Babu. She quoted her own grandmother who slaved cheerfully for her husband who had concubines at home, her aunt who was beaten everyday by her husband and had never uttered a word of protest for fifty years; another friends of her mother's who was prepared to jump into a well if her husband so directed and so on, till Savitri gradually began to feel very foolish at the thought of her own resentment. The instances are enough to sum up the picture of a Hindu housewife and her secondary role in the society realistically presented in the novel.

It is Manu and the later moralists who have made the woman what she is today, weak, submissive and utterly helpless. That a woman should have no freedom is so deeply embedded in the minds of both Savitri and Ramani, the Ramani could bluntly tell her that she has no right whatsoever over the children Savitri could not question him. The Savitri of ancient legend is a paragon of virtues and courage who confronts even death to save her husband Satyavan and is finally victorious in the encounter. But Narayan's Savitri is certainly no tragic figure; she appears to be only a weak whimpering, timid, spineless and vacillating character. Her plight fails to evoke even pathos, for she is shown to be a bundle of changing moods and conflicting responses. Savitri's pathetic utterances showed how miserable she was in her married life. She says:

> I don't possess anything in this world. What possession can a woman call her own everything except her body? Everything else that she has is her father's, her husband's or her son's.[4]

For all her weakness and helplessness Savitri's half-hearted attempt to assert herself as a human being is much appreciating. She is at last stirred to revolt her husband's infidelity and passionate

helpless, cut off from home and children. Savitri ultimately pockets her pride and returns home broken, defeated and sullenly acquiescent to her still unrepentant husband. Narayan's observation in this regard is worth quoting. He observes:

> I was some how obsessed with a philosophy as opposed to man, her constant oppressor. Man assigned her a secondary place and kept her there with such subtlety and cunning that she herself began to lose all notions of her independence, individuality, stature and strength. A wife in an orthodox, milieu of Indian society was an ideal victim of such circumstances, my novel dealt with her, with this philosophy broadly in backgrounds.[1]

True to his observations, Narayan's Savitri of *The Dark Room* appears to be truthful portrayal which by and large, reveals the condition of his wife in the Hindu family.

Savitri's predicament is primarily because of the fact that she lacks the moral courage to assert herself owing to the religious taboos which have a far-reaching effect on the women-folks of the Hindu society. When Savitri tried in vain to fuss over Babu who suddenly fells ill, and put him to bed, Ramani sternly asked her to mind her own business and leave the training of a grown- up by him. Savitri realised 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. Babu did look very ill and she was powerless to keep him in bed.[2]

Janamma, another woman character in the novel is also the victim of the religious taboos, who advised Savitri to know beforehand the man's impetuous character and behave accordingly. She says:

> Men are impetuous, one moment they will be all temper and the next all kindness. Men have to bear many worries and burdens, and you must overlook

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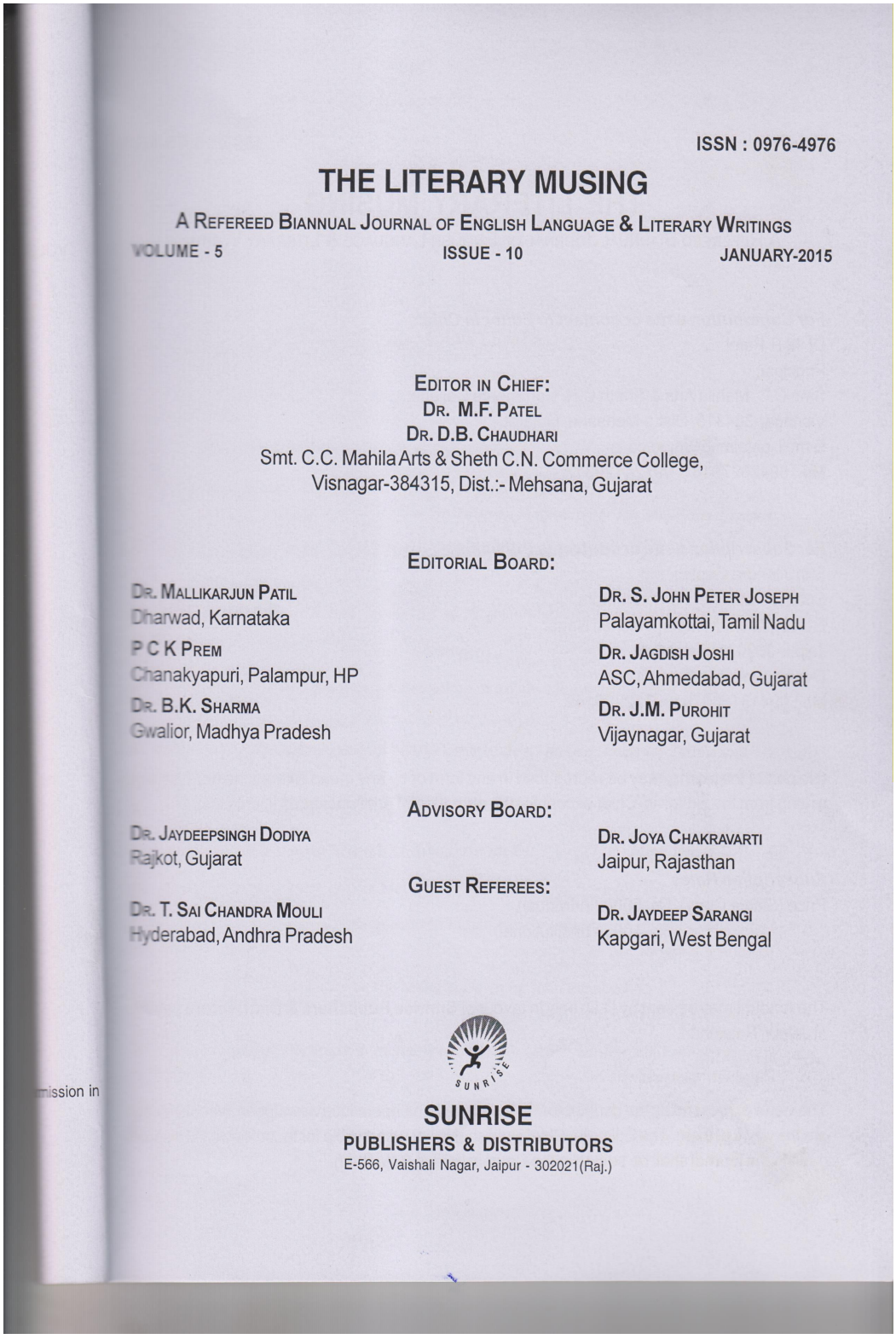
ISSN : 0976-4976 (Print)
January-2015

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Published by
Sunrise Publishers and Distributors
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1

R. K. NARAYAN : A DELINEATOR OF INDIAN SOCIAL ETHOS

Dr. J. M. Purohit

The social vision and view of art of the stature of R. K. Narayan, "who is one of the few profoundly humanistic writers of our time"[1] is absolutely essential. He is a delineator of Indian social ethos deeply rooted in traditions and conventions. It has rightly been pointed out that Narayan presents a microcosm of Indian society. Malgudi, which is at the center of his creative endeavours, is a microcosm of the Indian social system, mode of life and values cherished and followed through the ages:

> "Malgudi is a Narayan's 'Caster bridge', but the inhabitants of Malgudi – although they may have their recognizable local trappings – are essentially human, and hence have their kinship with all humanity."[2]

In his article, "The Fiction Writer in India – His tradition and his problems." Narayan points out that a writer in India

> "hopes to express through his novel and stories the way of life of the group of people with whose psychology and background he is most familiar, and he hopes that his picture will not only appeal to his circlebut also to a larger audience outside."[3]

As a matter of fact, this is indicative of Narayan's own view of 'novels and stories' and the 'people' he sought to portray in the world of his fiction. The ethos of his fiction is the externalization and enlargement of the microcosmic world of Malgudi. He is the social and moral chronicler of Malgudi. He has lent a living touch to Malgudi depicted in his fiction. He is the Hardy of Magudi.

The significance of Malgudi is tremendous in the context of Narayan's fiction. Narayn holds the view that Indian lives in her villages and is symbolic of her native strength, vitality, simplicity and orthodoxy. But western civilization has been making its dent. As a consequence, Malgudi marks a departure from the rural milieu to the urban, from the old to the modern, from the static to the dynamic.[4] Rao justly observes,

> "Malgudi is a compromise between the oriental age – old traditions and the modern occidental civilization. As the western modernity comes to Malgudi in due course of time, its own indigenous values are corroded. For, Malgudi is the symbol of modern India rooted in the ancient tradition."[5]

Malgudi has the impact of both ancient Indian culture and modern western civilization. Narayn paints the external as well as internal topography of Malgudi which represents the twilight, the transition and the meeting point of both ancient and modern, Indian western:

> "He (Narayan) is content, like Jane Austen, with his 'little bit of ivory,' just so many inches wide. He would like to be a detached, observer, to concentrate on a narrow scene, to sense the atmosphere of the place, to snap a small group of characters in their oddities and angularities. He would, if he could explore the inner countries of the mind, heart and soul, catch the uniqueness in the ordinary, the tragic in the prosaic."[6]

It can be seen that in *Swami and Friends*, Malgudi appears as a pure semi-agricultural town, largely untouched by modern civilization. *The Bachelor of Arts* marks a change, a distinct departure from old values. Modern ideas have started making their incursion into the semi-rural atmosphere of Malgudi. Chandran, for instance, revolts against traditional values and customs. This is symptomatic of the invective spirit of the modern civilization over Malgudi, the citadel of ancient Indian culture. *The Dark Room* shows the world of Malgudi vitiated by money, commerce and sex. *Mr. Sampath* and *The Financial Expert* bear the impact of craze for money and pleasure. As Rao observes,

> "Materialism, hedonism and hypocrisy which are the ingredients of a commercial civilization vitiate the salubrious atmosphere of Malgudi, operating through Ramani in *The Dark Room*, the old landlord in *Mr. Sampath* and Sampath himself, Margayya and Dr. Pal in *The Financial Expert*."[7]

However, novels like *The English Teacher* and *Waiting for the Mahatma* indicate the novelist's aim and attempt to revive the spirit of ancient India culture, which alone can help us to survive the materialistic invasion of the west. William is of the view that the novels of Narayan

> "trace the half-lamented 'growing-up' of Malgudi from pastoral simplicity to contemporary complexity, a 'growing-up' paralleled by Narayan's treatment of the growth of his Indian characters from childhood to old age, through the traditional four ashramas : student, householder, hermit, sanyasi."[8]

But the world of Malgudi goes on in its own peculiar way in spite of the new changes. Graham Greene thinks that Narayan's view of Malgudi is comic :

> " – The life of Malgudi – never ruffled by politics – proceeds in exactly the same way at it has done for centuries, and the juxtaposition of the age – old convention and the modern character provides much of the comedy."[9]

A leading characteristic of Narayan as writer is his broad humanism. Narayan is an accepter and respecter of life. Life is never negated. His novels and short stories give illuminating evidence of his love and compassion, tolerance and understanding of the world he lives in. Iyengar maintains that "Narayan has no axes of any kind: he is that rare thing in India today, a man of letters pure and simple."[10] Narayan, like Chaucer, sees creates and enjoys the comedy of human life, the rich cavalcade, with all its follies, foibles, frailties and failings. He is neither a moralist nor a reformer nor a crusader. He is a detached spectator of life. Raizada rightly remarks,

> "He (Narayan) loves humanity but does not take side. In his novels, we have no didacticism, no philosophy and no propaganda. He is an artist pure and simple and interprets Indian life – aesthetically with unprejudiced objectivity."[11]

Mukherjee also observes that "Narayan's greatest charm lies in making Malgudi and its people and their values real for us – Narayan is neither a social pathologist nor a social reformer. He accepts life in totality."[12] For this reason his work is unsullied by moralism, and didacticism.

There is no implicit purpose or motive behind what he creates. The portrait of life presented by him is objective, impersonal, unbiased and unspoilt by any extraneous consideration. Narayan's unburned, clear and compressive social vision is reflected in his creative and artistic endeavours. The result is obvious. His writing is free from narrowness, anger, bitterness, acrimony and rancor, sarcasm and satire. There is no deliberate consideration social, moral aesthetic or philosophical, which could obscure, blur or cloud his vision as a creative writer. This is attributable to his broad and tolerant humanism. He is a realistic painter of life. However, his realism is untouched by didacticism as well as satire. There is no sting or banter. It is evident that he does not lash out at follies and frailties of the persons he portrays. There is no cynicism to malign mankind. He does not, like an angry dragon, breathe fire to scare people away. He is more like a siren sans the destructive power. His way is benign and gentle.

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