CHAPTER –II
EARLY NOVEL–THE DARK ROOM

2.1. INTRODUCTION

The Dark room is the third of Narayan’s novels. It is the only novel where Narayan thought of a social problem, namely the place of women in society, and worked it out with reference to the socio-cultural matrix of India of 1930s. The novel, as he openly averred, was inspired by Ibsen’s A Doll’s House, a drama in which the heroine steps out of the house for self–education. Narayan pursues the theme beyond the theme of protest and indicates the possible threats that await such a stepping out; not essentially to frighten the explorer, but to promote greater awareness of life in side and outside the family.

2.2. THEME

According to narratology, theme may be a general thought or idea. Gerald Prince (1982) says, “it may be love, war, and sadism, respectively.” The novels of R.K. Narayan are cast in the mould of a typical aesthetic pattern in which the protagonist usually sets out on a quest for identity in keeping with certain socio-cultural assumptions. Here in The Dark Room, Savitri, the protagonist, is on the look out for her independent human identity, because she does not wish to remain content with her status as a mere slave to her husband. She cannot totally free herself from the dead weight of a blind tradition and when she realizes that her search for independence and personal dignity does not lead her anywhere, she accepts her fate with calm resignation though an inexpressible despair seeps into
her soul. Savitri’s quest for her identity of at least her independent individual entity, begins in a dark room of her husband’s house. It is a way of protest against the tyrannical behaviour of her husband. At the end of the novel, she is equally powerless, as is obvious from her despairing questions to herself,

“But what can I do? and what have I?” (179).

She at one stage is determined that “she would dedicate her life to the service of God, numb her senses and memory, forget the world, and spend the rest of her years thus and die. No husband, home or children.” (146)

But this determination is shattered when she finds her isolated existence as a temple servant proves insecure and unbearably hostile. What choice could be there if one is trapped between the snake and the scorpion? So she resolves to return home, to fulfill her duties as a mother. Moreover, this acceptance is motivated by the tradition which produces fears in people’s hearts. A heavy price has to be paid for this acceptance in her life.

Savitri goes directly against the classical traditional role of a subservient wife. She asserts her individuality independent of her husband. Savitri revolts against her husband’s brutality and cruelty in a bold manner. She challenges the age–old authority of the husband:

Things! I don’t possess anything in this world.
What possession can a woman call her own except her body? Everything else that she has is her father’s, her husband’s…She removed her diamond
studs on her nose, her necklace, gold bangles and rings and threw them at him. (88)

After the confirmation of her husband’s illicit relationship with the glamorous Shanta Bai, Savitri is angry at her husband’s betrayal. Savitri realizes her dignity as a human being and becomes conscious of the fact that the relationship between the wife and the husband should always be based on equality. In her search for identity, she revolts against her husband. This struggle is led forward by Rosie in *The Guide* and Daisy in *The Painter of Signs*, with greater success.

Savitri tries to assert herself by opposing boldly her husband’s behaviour and treachery and stands against his dominance and injustice done to her. This is the first voice of Malgudi woman to challenge the traditional patriarchal system. This is the beginning of the search of a woman for her existence and independent identity. Inspired by this self-esteem, she dares to rebuke her husband and shows courage to walk out of his tyranny. She challenges his supremacy as a husband and insists on his change. When Savitri leaves Ramani, her husband, she thinks of her future life symbolically as living under the open sky. But the dark room in the temple again makes her understand that it becomes the one condition on which she would be allowed to live alone and the dark room defeats her.

As the hours advanced and the stillness grew deeper her fears also increased. She was furious with herself for this; ‘What despicable creatures of God are we that we can’t exist without a support?’ (141)
She returns to her family, she is not at all transformed, but she is definitely defeated and broken in the end of the novel. Savitri knows she is defeated once and for all, she does not have the necessary strength of non-attachment to live by herself. She must live within the familial norms by accepting its norms, or live outside it, entirely on her own inner resources. Savitri decides to pocket her pride, when the thought of her children made her mind restless and reckless, and she returns to reality only when her endeavour to discover the meaning of life away from the context of her family was just a delusion. Savitri’s return suggests her return to reality. She felt that the world outside her husband’s home is equally dark and dismal, if not more and it does not have to offer her any opportunity of self-realisation. This makes it obvious that under the given socio-economic structure the dark room of her husband’s home is preferable to the dark room of death and renunciation. Thus, she achieves affirmation to accept life. Savitri cannot totally free herself from the dead weight of tradition and when she realises that her search for independence and personal dignity leads her nowhere, she returns home to atleast to fulfill her obligations of motherhood. The novel is successful in giving the ordeal of a woman seeking the realization of identity in conformity with the womanly dignity.

The encounter of a dumb and docile woman over her dependent status ends here defeating her to return to her husband’s house. She decides to live only for the children and for the service of God. She is now a changed woman knows the ultimate unavoidable predicaments and reality of life. The novel shows her
attempt to assert her independence and her awakening to her rights but she loses the battle on the home front.

It is more unfortunate that her return to her husband’s house is a realization once again of her helplessness outside the home suffering mental torture and insecurity, under the dominance of the priest, another male boss. Savitri, therefore pessimistically returns to her family beaten by the unchanged harsh realities of the Indian society. But by 1960s Rosie in *The Guide*, comes away from her husband and pursues her career earlier with Raju’s support and, later without, and Daisy in *The Painter of Signs*, refuses to enter into the commitment of getting married. The author could show the slow progress in all walks of life in the society through his novels stretched over six decades. Society evolves over a period, but *The Dark Room* records the early attempts of a woman to find self-expression and fulfillment, rather than an instant success. Inspite of her failure, Savitri as a character has made not only Ramani, but all the readers to think about the status of woman in the Indian society.

2.3. PLOT

What is of interest in a novel is not the events, but how they are arranged. This in narratology is distinguished as story and plot, or to use the Russian formalist terminology *fable* and *sjuzhet*. Gerald Prince calls the order of narrating, to quote him, “events can be recounted in the order of their occurrence or in different order.” Here in *The Dark Room*, Narayan follows the chronological order. Though the events seem to be a rambling account, they are causally well knit. In the early phase Savitri’s sense of resentment keeps building.
“The boy has fever”

“No, he hasn’t. Go and do any work you like in the kitchen, but leave the training of a grown-up boy to me. It is none of a woman’s business.”

“Can’t you see how ill the boy is?”

“All right, all right, “Ramani said contemptuously.

“It is getting late for my office.” He went to the room. (2)

Another incident when electric supply failed due to misconnection given by Babu,

Ramani was in a terrible temper…. He stood in the doorway and roared.

“What is this?” “Is everybody in this house dead?” he asked. Savitri was angered by this, “What a thing to say on a day like this, and at this hour! I have seen very few who will swear and curse at auspicious times as you do.” (36)

it reaches its crescendo when Shantha Bai enters into her husband’s life. This results in an open protest and sudden activism on the part of Savitri.

“Yes, “she said.”You want me to sit up and wait for you?” She was astonished at her own manner.

Ramani looked up for a moment but said nothing. When the cook had gone for the day, and she had shut the front door and put off the lights, she went to the bedroom, cleared her throat and said, “This sort of things has to stop, understand?” He was already in the bed, with the novel and scowled at her

“Don’t talk. Go and lie on your bed.” “I’m not going to, till you promise to come to your senses.

“She stood firmly besides his cot.’ (85)
However, her own inadequacies in managing an independent life, drives her back to her house and motherly responsibilities.

2.4. CHARACTER

The traditional Indian family at the nucleus of the social structure has zealously guarded norms, mores and values. Marital fidelity is perhaps the most precious and durable of the Indian values. Here in *The Dark Room* every character is living and real. Savithri, the silent and suffering wife can put up with insult and maltreatment, but her husband’s infidelity is intolerable to her. When she becomes aware of her husband’s relationship with Shantha Bai, she cries against her husband:

*Do not touch me. You are dirty, you are impure.*

*Even if I burn my skin, I cannot cleanse myself of the impurity of your touch.* (76)

The relationship between a devoted and submissive wife and a cruel husband is clearly depicted. Savitri as an Indian woman could be flexible to all the likings of her husband and as a housewife she knows how to manage the unexpected guests

*She had a genius for making the existing supply elastic and transforming an ordinary evening course, with a few hurriedly fried trimming into a feast.* (13)

Savitri is intelligent enough to understand the changing moods of her husband by the difference in the sound of the Chevrolet horn. When Ramani loses
his temper, she is efficient enough to divert his attention by bringing him into a professional mood. Savitri is the typical representative of wifely devotion cited in the Indian myth.

According to Hari Mohan Prasad (1981),

Savitri does not submit to Ramani: She submits to her obligations. It may be a failure on the material plane, but spiritually she comes triumphant ... It is in keeping with both her character and her cultural heritage. (46)

Savitri realizes her dignity as a human being and becomes conscious of the fact that the relationship between the wife and the husband is not complete until and unless both of them are devoted to each other. Knowing Ramani’s relationship with Shatha Bai, Savitri demands an explanation. Ramani’s callous behaviour strikes some fire in her and she is at once transformed into Ibsen’s Nora in *A Doll’s House* asserting her elementary rights as a woman. The inner-self of Savitri becomes conscious and rebellious of the traditional values of wifehood. She says:

Do you think I am going to stay here? We are responsible for our position. We accept food, shelter and comforts that you give and what we are. Do you think that I will stay in your house, breathe the air of your property, drink the water here, and eat food you buy with your money. No, I will starve and die in the open, under the sky, a roof for which we need to be obliged to no man. (113)
Savitri questions her social as well as economic independence. She then decides to give her daughters higher education to stand independently on their own and not depend on their husband for food and shelter. But at the same time she is aware of the sublime nature of the husband-wife relationship. It is a reason that the woman never thinks of other men to marry although she wants economic independence. In one of Savitri outbursts, she says:

The prostitute changes her man, but a married woman does not; that’s all, but both earned their food and shelter in the same manner (176)

Being cheated and ill-treated, emotion erupts and activates Savitri to stand up to assert herself as a human being. Now she sets aside all her self-accusing and self-attitude. She bursts out at him,

this sort of thing has to be stopped, understand (81).

She thunders;

I am a human being … you men will never grant that … Don’t think you can fondle us when you like and kick us when you choose (82).

Ramani takes things in a very casual way as usual, thinking that Savitri would accept things as they are, but she warns him:

You are not having me and her at the same time. Understand, I will go out of this house, this minute. (83)
The oppressive measures of her callous husband compels her to revolt and leave the house temporarily. However it is difficult for her to forget the needs of her children.

We understand that the insults over years had been piling to erupt some day and fifteen years is not a short period. Many a time Savitri feels she ought to have asserted herself in the beginning of her married life like her friend Gangu, whose husband lets her go her own way believing himself to be a champion of woman’s freedom. Savitri moves from the darkness of the house to the darkness of the world. Her attempt of suicide is foiled by Mari, a passer by. She even tries to adopt the philosophy of non-attachment to the fruits of one’s action:

What was this foolish yearning for children. This dragging attachment? One ought to do one’s duty and then drift away. (147)

Even the long span of fifteen years of married life has failed to establish a real chord of understanding between Ramani and Savitri because Ramani is inherently incapable of responding to the sentiments of Savitri. Savitri’s revolt gives us a hint of the strength of women and asserts that she can also protest which makes Ramani think that she is not the same Savitri whom he has seen at the time of marriage.

All the characters, who always receive sympathetic and consoling treatment from the reader, demonstrate the growing pains arising from dissatisfaction with their mundane lives. Nonetheless, achieving liberation in their everyday life through their activities always turns out not as an escape from
the mundane world, but a rise above the mundane, a realization of the human potential and the ability to live in harmony. When she leaves the house, she does not accept charity from anyone and suffers hunger till she earns her food. When she is offered food by Ponni, she announces assertively:

I am resolved never to accept food or shelter which I have not earned. (157)

To quote William Walsh to describe the different shades of Savitri’s personality:

Savitri is a middle class but not highly educated woman, who is burdened by the immense weight of the Indian past, by her caste, her religion and her role as a wife and a mother…. he is an ordinary, amiable housewife; not deeply dissatisfied with her allotted part, given on occasion to boredom with its pointlessness, but increasingly oppressed by her loud, assertive and elegant husband. (61)

M.K.Naik (1983),

Savitri’s plight fails to evoke even pathos, for she is shown to be a bundle of changing moods and conflicting responses and made to talk and act in turns like an orthodox Hindu wife, and an ardent feminist, a brooding fatalist and a bold activist. (76)

Though Savitri’s home coming seems to be a defeat, actually she has made the unbendable Ramani realize that her presence at home is very much a necessity for his comfortable living. His behaviour towards Savitri is completely changed after her return:
“Oh, I should have bought some Jasmine for you”…
“Oh, how poorly you eat! …
Have a little more ghee. Eat well, my girl, and grow fat.” (160)

This drastic change is a great success for her, she can make a comfortable living by behavioural change of Ramani. Thus her protest is not a total waste.

Shantha Bai has been presented as a romantic woman by her artful movement of her lips, the tossing of her head and her humming of a tune all to herself. She finds her existence dull and insipid without a copy of Khayyam’s *The Rubaiyat*.

I can’t exist without a copy of ‘The Rubaiyat’; you will always find it under my pillow or my bag. His philosophy appeals to me. Dead yesterday and unborn tomorrow…. In this world Kayyam is the only person who would understand me; that is the tragedy of my life. Khayyam says: I am as wind along the waste. (113)

This makes Ramani move deeply towards her and contrast it with his wife’s crude sulking in the dark room … that is why he felt that woman should be educated; it made all the difference. The unhappy experiences she had with her husband who was “a gambler and a drunkard” (50) seem to have hastened her to go her own way. She says:

I love unconventional things. Otherwise I should not be here, but nursing children and cooking for a husband. (59)
Her loneliness taught her a sort of philosophy, which she tells Ramani,

Tonight I feel like pacing the whole earth up and down. I won’t sleep. I feel like roaming all over the town and the whole length of the river. I will laugh and dance. That’s my philosophy of the life…. (70)

Savitri’s tragic situation in the novel is counter pointed by the many pictures we get of the other women here. The contrast between Savitri and Shantha Bai is implicit throughout the novel. Shantha Bai is an educated and self-made woman, a stranger to Malgudi society. Like Savitri, Shantha Bai has also questioned the ideals of her society; she has judged her husband, found him wanting, has left him. She speaks of the necessity of maintaining her economic independence, but she enjoys her emotional freedom. Janamma, is another character who always advises Savitri in all her calamity, and helps her to get over her depression and sheepishly asserts the classical Indian concept of wife’s devotion and loyalty to her husband.

“There is no quarrel. I never uttered a single word.”
“That makes it worse. You should either let your words out or feel that everything your husband does is right. As for me, I have never opposed my husband but agreed with him at any time in my life. I might have occasionally suggested an alternative, but nothing more. What he does is right. It is a wife’s duty to feel so.” (46)

Savitri’s profile is not complete without her children – Sumathi, Kamala and Babu. The quarrels among them, their petty rivalries, their innocent
complaints against one another, their unending demand, their love for their sulking mother and their fear for the father all contribute to the challenging characterization of this novel.

Ramani is loud and assertive. He is a little dictator who makes the entire family dance to the tune set by him. The happiness or unhappiness, and the quiet or disquiet of the house depends purely on his mood. Ramani does not respect the emotions and sentiments of his submissive wife. Ramani bullies his uncomplaining wife and docile hapless children. Even his rare moments of love and affection are peripheral and show off. He spares nothing to shroud his wife in the cloak of sadness with his barbarous humiliations. Even the children are accustomed more to their father’s rebuke than to his fitful love and affection. Ramani is aggressive, domineering and unfeeling as a husband and father. He is an adulterous hypocrite. He pretends to show sympathy on the state of Shanta Bai. He says:

Men deserved to be whipped when she hinted at a couple of attempts on her honour. (16)

Extra-marital love relationship is not seen in a dignified manner in Indian traditional and orthodox society as in the cases of Raju-Rosie in *The Guide* and Ramani and Shantha Bai in *The DarkRoom*. Ramani is the representative of the vicious coterie of husbands who look down upon their wives as toys, to be fondled or kicked at their own sweet will. Every individual excels in her/his role in the novel. Uma Parameswaran (1974) appreciates this novel from the point of view of characterization. She states
The characterization is stronger in this novel than most others because Narayan shows a causal sequences in the characters’ interpersonal relationship and in the outcome of their behaviour. (62)

2.5. SETTING AND SOCIO-CULTURAL MATRIX

No assessment of Narayan escapes without a reference to Malgudi. This constant reference to a single world with clearly demarcated topography, with its gradual expansion through the years from an agrarian to an industrial town cannot be ignored in the study of Narayan. William Walsh (1971) in his monograph on R.K. Narayan observes

The natural flavour of Malgudi, oriental and British, escapes like a scent from the press of detail, and one comes to know the geography and feel of the place as well as and perhaps better than one knows one’s own town. (42)

Narayan’s Malgudi, a mythical town which provides the setting for most of his novels and short stories, has been compared to Hardy’s Wessex. Narayan’s Malgudi is the main town in that area, typical of south India with houses, bungalows and huts clustering around a gold–crested temple that towered over an expense of rice fields and coconut groves, similar to a hundred others in India. Narayan felt that an imaginary place would afford him more creative freedom according to the need of the story than the actual one.
Very soon he became comfortable by the world of Malgudi. Malgudi resembles any district head quarters or taluk with its respective offices and its extension, within a short walk from the town:

The Taluk office gong was being struck, its notes came clearly through the still air. Savitri counted one two three. (93)

The country side flourishes with its river and hills. Especially the Sarayu, which forms the life of the whole town, is present in all the novels of R.K.Narayan

She walked all the way to the north end of the town and reached the river an hour later. The Sarayu was flowing in the dark, with subdued rumble. (90)

We have Race Course Road and Vinayaka Mudali Street and Kabir Lane, the Engladia Insurance Company:

One evening while retuning from the club Ramani passed his office in Race-Course Road, and had an impulse to stop his car and go in. (60)

There are talkies and photo bureau and many halls for entertainment of Malgudi people,

Malgudi in 1935 suddenly came into line with the modern age by building a well–equipped theatre – the Palace Talkies – which simply brushed aside the old corrugated sheet –roofed Variety Hall, which from time immemorial hadentertained the citizens of Malgudi with tattered silent films. (34)
The new extensions with their neat cross roads and trim houses and bungalows were only a few minutes walk from Ellaman street very sophisticated people live in them.

Mari turned his steps from the crowded Market Road, Vinayaka Mudali and Grove Streets and with a last hope moved towards Lawley Extension. Here were rich bungalows: and people who never carried umbrellas but went about in cars. (96)

Malgudi represents the focal point into which Narayan concentrates his entire vision of what the Indian experience is or should be. Narayan in his *My Days* speaks of Malgudi as representing:

My own values in milieu and human characteristics. (24)

Pujas, rituals, festivities, celebrations, lengthy and heated debates – were the favourite activities in Malgud. Within this ambience one has right to exercise one’s individual will. Wealth of characters, crowds the streets and homes, river banks and railway station of Malgudi- every character settles in the mind of the reader, because of the sureness of tone and detail with which they, and their lifestyle, are described. This small town affiliation gives them a definite identity, as it were. Rituals act as templates for structuring one’s existence. The celebration of Navaratri in The Dark Room is one such major experience. The enthusiasm gained by the children, the expenditure accepted by Ramani, and the co-operation given by Savitri and even the cook participates by giving some suggestions. Malgudi may be said to be situated both as real physical space and time and
Mythic space and time. Its environment takes on the attributes of a chronotope as defined by Bakhtin (1973).

We will give the name chronotope (time – space) to the intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically expressed in literature. (42)

Any setting reflects an entire culture as it has evolved through history. Again to quote Bakhtin (1973)

All the novel’s abstract elements- philosophical and social generalizations, ideas, analyses of cause and effect – gravitate towards the chronotope and through it take on flesh and blood permitting the imaging power of art to do its work. Such is the representational significance of the chronotope. (54)

Malgudi does the same. M.K. Naik (1982) illustrates in his article how the Malgudi novels and short stories are strongly imbued with what D.H. Lawerence has called ‘The Spirit of the Place’. He goes on:

The action of all the novels and all the short –stories is set in the imaginary small town of Malgudi in south India ------ a place which ultimately is not so much the back cloth for his narrative as their very backbone. (67)

Representations of space should always be related to the story's underlying narrative situation. As Ronen (1994) has pointed out, any description of space invokes a perception of space: apart from the reader's imaginative perception, this is either a narrator's perception, or a character's perception; both can be either
actual perception or imaginary perception. For this reason, fictional space is evidently strongly correlated to focalization.

Talking about his writing of “The Dark Room”. Narayan says in My Days:

“I was somehow obsessed with a philosophy of woman as opposed to man, her constant oppressor. This must have been an early testament of the ‘Women’s Lib’ movement. Man assigned her a secondary place and kept her there with such subtlety and cunningness that she herself began to lose all notion of her independence, her individuality, stature and strength. A wife in an orthodox milieu of Indian society was an ideal victim of such circumstances.”(119)

Thus in The Dark Room Narayan enquires into the place of women in India of 1930’s. In the socio-cultural context, it was difficult to pursue life outside the family fold. But, the unfortunate element is that even after eighty years and 60 years of India’s independence the place of women has not changed to any remarkable extent.

Our Indian constitution provides equality between men and women. It ensures through its Fundamental Rights “Equality before law” and “prohibits any discrimination” and further empowers the State to make “any special provision for women and children.” However, it is seldom practised. Many of the legal provisions for equality remain on paper only. Equality before the law is not necessarily equality in life. In fact, Indian society is still largely male dominated and women are often looked down upon. The world is organized on terms dictated
by men in all cultural domains: the family, the state, law and religion. In all these domains, women are usually defined only by negative references to men, they are the others. It is a social process or conditioning whereby women come to accept in their thinking --- the idea of male superiority. Cultural constructs define masculine as active, systematic and brave, and feminine as passive, quiet and emotional. Acknowledging this concept, offering a rare insight into the complexities of Indian middle-class society, R.K. Narayan extends in his The DarkRoom, a searching look at a difficult marriage and a woman who at one stage rebels against the demand of being a good and obedient wife. The Dark Room reveals the traces of the 1930s Women’s Movement in India in its intersection with Indian nationalism of the time. Narayan himself mentions in his interview with S. Krishnan at a much later date,

In The Dark Room I was concerned with showing the utter dependence of woman on man in our society. I suppose, I have moved along with times. (92)

The author has crafted the marital saga of an orthodox couple with his own reformist idea. Narayan has carefully studied the Indian mind and the Indian woman under complex social motives. The novel is an account of marriage from a wife’s point of view of which the image that has been projected is that of an Indian woman as a victim of the whims of her husband.

Savitri, a middle-class woman is not well educated but she is loaded with the weight of caste, religion and her role as wife and mother. She has a strong
cultural base in herself and is deeply entrenched in its values, traditions and ethos that are exclusively Indian. Every morning, apart from doing daily chores, she has to look after her three children – giving bath to Kamala, tying up her daughters’ pigtails and packing them off to school, and also listen to the nasty comments of her husband Ramani, when his choice food is not served. She should behave like a typical housewife doing everything to keep her husband happy.

Savitri’s only recreation is to share her grievances with Gangu and Jannama. Once when Ramani finds that Savitri is not at home when he returns early from office. He shouts at her,

“You have made me wait for half an hour.” He adds. “A fellow comes home from the office, dog tired and he has only doors and windows to receive him.” (20)

A typical Indian attitude of life here is that the husbands are lords and the wives are duty bound to obey their commands. Ramani then takes her to watch an old movie leaving the kids at home. Savithri tries helplessly to convince her husband to take the kids but he adamantly refuses. He treats her only as a commodity and a proud possession. Narayan writes:

Ramani sat with his wife by his side very erect. He was very erect. He was very proud of his wife. She had a fair complexion and well proportioned features and her sky blue saree gave her a distinguished appearance. He surveyed her slyly, with a sense of satisfaction at possessing her. When people in the theatre threw looks at her, it increased his satisfaction all the more. (22)
Patriarchy operates as a hegemonic force governing gender relation. Though woman is supposed to be treated as goddess and man’s other part in Hindu mythology, practically she is a puppet and made only to satisfy man’s pleasure. Shantha Bai on the other hand, frolicks with Ramani to promote her own personal interests. She combines her own feminine independence with shrewd opportunitism that characteristically belongs to the new generation. Ramani’s romance with her and his willing servility to become a plaything in her hands is contrary to the relationship of Ramani and Savithri. Savitri being traditional and religious celebrates Navarathri, when dolls of gods, demons, animals and people depicting various episodes of religious myths are arranged on wooden steps and the celebration takes place for nine days. All the family members are busy decorating; Babu, the son of Savitri, tries to add some lightings to enhance the beauty of the dolls. But in the evening, as he puts on the switch, the electrical connection fuses and the house is filled with darkness. When Ramani comes home he thrashes his son like any short-tempered middle class father. The happiness or unhappiness of the house depends purely on his mood. When Savitri comes to Babu’s rescue, Ramani orders her to confine herself to the kitchen, that is the place where a woman is supposed to spend her life. Being unable to bear her son mercilessly beaten, she resents within herself. The author records her stream of thoughts:

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 she felt she ought to have asserted herself a little more at the beginning
of her married life and then all would have been well. (36)

Her predicament is not peculiar. It is an archetypal pattern of Indian woman in general. She remembers her own grandmother who enslaved herself cheerfully to 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 and another friend of her mother’s who was prepared to jump into a well, if her husband so directed. These memories indicate the critical position of a wife as she is bullied not only physically or abused sexually but traumatized mentally as well. Savitri, a weak, submissive and utterly helpless woman can not question her husband because Ramani can bluntly tell her that she has no right over their children. So she weeps, obsessed with feeling of helplessness, she curls herself in the dark room, next to the stores. It is the only way of protest against her husband’s tyrannical behaviour, but he never consoles and helps her to come out of this dark room. As she lies there, Ramani tries to prove that no one is indispensable and orders the cook to do the preparation of food, instead of bothering to convince his wife. At this time, he shows extra love to his children and goes to office, ignoring Savitri altogether. He proves himself a typical Indian man full of male chauvinism with unbending and unmending behaviour. P.K. Singh rightly points out:

The hero Ramani, a man of middle-class family, belongs to the old conservative set of husbands and regards marriage an institution in which a wife has to have implicit obedience. (86)
Her sulking goes unrecognized. Later, after being convinced by her friend Janamma how men are, Savitri comes out of the dark room and returns to her routine. He spares nothing to shroud his wife in her sadness with his barbarous humiliations. This reaches the climax with the entry of the glamorous Shanthabai, a modern woman divorcée, who causes a tsunami in the domestic life of Ramani and Savitri. Ramani meets Mrs. Shantha Bai in Bangalore in an interview in his office, and is immediately drawn by her beauty. He provides her with a room in his office a spare cot, a few vessels, a chair and a teak wooden bench – the favourite one of Savitri, and develops an illicit relationship with her. He does not take pride in loving a woman who is his wife but could love and flirt with this new office assistant. Ramani is the representative of the common middle-class

A.V. Krishna Rao writes about the Indian tradition:

The darker shades of moral aberration are noticed in this novel *The Dark Room*. Ramani, temperamentally a callous man, violates the traditional family morality under the alien influence of modernity represented by the coquettish Shantha Bai with her Greta-Garbo manners. (74)

Even Sampath in *The Printer of Malgudi* of R.K. Narayan advocates bigamy and justifies

Every sane man needs two wives. A perfect one for the house and a perfect one outside for social life. (54)

Savitri hears much about Ramani’s infidelity. She protests in vain. Savitri as an ideal Indian wife never wants to quarrel with him. She remembers her
wifely devotion. In her innocence, she thinks to be attractive and likable for a man as a womanly duty. Her first efforts is to conform to this paradigm. She starts paying attention to her looks, she wants to win him back by dressing well. She is not unaware of the fact that she is middle aged, old fashioned and plain. She knows her beauty has shrunk because she had given birth to three children and enslaved for the house but when she is ignored she feels totally hurt. The male counterpart in the society is too selfish. Ramani roams about with Shantha Bai with little concern for his children. Always the patriarchal society has an assumption that man of the house is at liberty to do just about anything. He penalizes his wife when she is not found at home when he arrives there, but he is absent till mid-night repeatedly. Once when he does not come right through the night, Savitri grows suspicious and develops a major argument with him about leaving Shantha Bai, though the spark of the revolt does not last for a long time. This awakening in her mind is a clear indication of her individuality. She claims

Do you think that now I will stay in your house, breathe the air of your property, drink the water here and eat food you buy with your money? No, I’ll starve in the open under the sky, a roof for which we need be obliged to no man. (87-88)

Again when she is asked to gather her belongings and leave the house, she immediately reciprocates bitterly with all her strength:

Things! I don’t possess anything in this world. What possession can woman call her own except her body? Everything else that she has is her
father’s, her husband’s or her son’s. Even the children are absolutely yours -- you are right. Didn’t I say that a woman owns nothing? (88)

Woman always remains at the mercy of her male counterpart, she gets care and guidance from her father in her childhood, from her husband in her youth and from her own son in her old age. As a result, she becomes a mere object rather than a human being. As Naik says,

It is a sort of thing that takes place in every society where the old double strands are still valid and the women are economically so helpless that they just have to lump what they do not like. (196)

Savitri charges and rebels not only for her own self but for the sake of some social and cultural mission. Ramani’s relationship with Shanta Bai compels Savitri to realize her individuality. She becomes conscious of her existence. She says

I am a human being. You men will never grant that. For you, we are playthings when you feel like hugging, and slaves other times. Don’t think that you can fondle us when you like and kick us when you choose. (110)

Savitri’s use of us twice in the last sentence shows her vigour in assuming a representative role of the whole race of woman from the tyranny and injustice of the male. What Justice V.R. Krishna Iyer says in another context validates Savitri’s protest
The fight is not for women’s status but for human worth. The claim is not to end inequality of women but to restore universal justice. The bid is not for loaves and fishes for the forsaken gender but for cosmic harmony which never comes till woman comes.” (31)

But Savitri is too fragile to sustain the spirit of revolt. There is very little of a feminist activist in her. Once she leaves home her usual lack of will overpowers her, Narayan writes on the social matrix,

to talk back and to disobey to one’s husband is not the good value of an ideal womanhood and her new found individuality made her to be in a fit of mental agony and she entered the Sarayu river to end her life. (89)

As P.S. Sundaram observes:

Refusing to be a discarded drudge, Savitri goes out of the house, not dramatically banging the door like Nora, but fleeing like a hunted animal …freedom is a fine concept but creatures like Savitri can do only one thing with it … commit suicide. (46)

At the riverbed she realises that she suddenly acted on a previous occasion by her assumption of a representative role. She steps into the river and says to herself.

“This is an end….” She is amazed by the statement and asks herself: “Am I the same old Savitri or am I someone else? Perhaps this is just a dream. Or, I must be someone else posing as Savitri because I could not have had the courage to talk back never
done it in …. I couldn’t have had the courage to walk through the street at midnight. (90)

But Savitri comes to feel the unreality of it all very soon

Savitri went through it all as if in a trance, unconvinced of the reality of things. How could the one now tramping a village street with unknown people in search of employment like a boy just out of college be old Savitri of old extension, wife of so and so. (148)

Saved by Mari, the robber blacksmith, she confronts the problem of existence. She wants to be self-reliant and work for herself but what are the avenues open to her? The role of a temple assistant confined to a dark room is of no comfort. She performs many chores around the temple and, at the first opportunity, prays before the idol:

“Protect Sumathi, Babu, and Kamala. Let them all eat well and grow. Please see that they are not unhappy.” (186)

She is reminded of her motherly duties and feels guilty for having abandoned them.

“And then the children. What a void they created? I must see them I must see Babu, and must see Kamala.” (189)

Her motherly responsibilities will render her life more meaningful than the life of isolation and spite. She decides on returning:
What despicable creations of God are we that we can’t exist without a support? I am like a bamboo pole which cannot stand without a wall to support it. (189)

This is the normal predicament of a wife in a male dominated society. They will lose self-confidence to face the challenges of life:

This is a defeat, I accept it, I am no good for the fight Perhaps Sumathi and Kamala have not had their hair combed for ages now… (190)

Her willing acceptance of the defeat is not a failure, it is the motherly instinct which has over-powered her return to her husband’s house.

Sadhu (1960) focuses,

Yet Narayan chooses to treat this situation … presenting a sharper conflict between traditional values and individual choices. (45)

The most honourable vocation for a woman has been held out as the bearing and rearing of children. It can be said that the Indian mother optimizes the Indian woman. Her heart must be a repertoire of universal love, originating from the home, embracing the society at large, and extending to animate and inanimate objects. Whereas Shantha Bai once says

Oh! I love unconventional things. Otherwise, I shouldn’t be here, But, nursing children and cooking for a husband are not for me. (54)

Savitri protests as Bharathiyar’s Revolutionary woman but she seems to be a failure when she comes back. Savitri’s endeavour to discover the meaning of
her life away from her family does not prove successful. She decides to swallow her husband’s insult and returns home. However in a broader sense it is not a failure. She has realized her limitations and accepted her obligations to her children. Her firm resolve never to return weakens before her maternal affection, it has the effect of understanding the reality. Instead of asserting a protest against the patriarchal society which would throw up no realizable solution, the novel promotes greater awareness. Savitri grows in the process of her protest and returns home.

A little storm in a colourless domestic cup more than slightly cracked (45) says Naik. She protests against her husband’s infidelity not only for her own security but for her children’s security from their father’s callousness. However, the protest is not a total waste, so far as Ramani is forced to sit up and think of the family; so he asks no question when Savitri returns. As a realistic writer, Narayan does not provide an impossible redemptive solution, but socially relevant awareness of the problem. Her plight is no longer a tragic one she attains identity through her recovery of her role as mother, hence her return home to husband and children is a return to reality while her expedition to discover the meaning of life away from the social context of her family is just an illusion. Narayan explores the place of women beyond the simple closing of the door by Nora in A Doll’s House and realizes that the society has not devised any place for woman outside the family.

There are other women in the novel with full freedom and even domination – variation is common and is always possible. Alternate chapters
show the life of Savithri and Shantha Bai in Ramani’s world. Shantha Bai, with callous behaviour abnormal in the conservative Malgudi, has left her harassing husband and lives independently on her own. But this economic independence does not enable her to lead any life of value. Even Gangu, can easily bully her husband and keep him under her control. Both ways of living are possible by women, poor or rich, educated or uneducated, but these examples are exceptions rather than the rule. However, in later novels like *The Guide, The Painter of Signs, Grandmother’s Tale* and *Talkative Man*. Narayan shows women capable of totally independent and purposeful existence. We have, no doubt, made some progress in the matter of women’s education since 1947 and now many women are educated, and employed, but even now when a female child is born she is not welcome even by her own parents and after marriage, her contribution to family well being remains unrecognized. It is time that the role of women gets redefined. As Hillary Clinton says,

I did not join politics when my daughter was growing, I am pleased, I could pursue electoral politics later. To me, it is important to take care of family responsibility …. It is part of continuing balancing act …I feel there is no better time to be a woman in the history than now.” Women should learn to balance the activities at home and those of the world. (11)
2.6. POINT OF VIEW

The term 'voice' metaphorically invokes one of the major grammatical categories of verb forms -- tense, mood, and voice (Genette 1980: 213). In terms of voice, a verb is either 'active' or 'passive'. In a more general definition, voice indicates "the relation of the subject of the verb to the action which the verb expresses" (Webster's Collegiate). In narratology, the basic voice question is "Who speaks?" (who narrates this?). In the present account, voice is also understood as a characteristic vocal or tonal quality projected through a text. Functionally, focalization is a means of selecting and restricting narrative information, of seeing events and states of affairs, from somebody's point of view, of foregrounding the focalizing agent, and of creating an empathetical or ironical view on the focalizer. Though apparently Narayan is the narrator, he focalizes the major events through Savitri, who is not wholly reliable. It is the bonafides of Savitri as a point of view, that help Narayan to distance his strong feelings towards the place of women in the orthodox milieu of Indian society and save the work from being a feminist tract. It is the limitations of the character that help Narayan to keep the novel within the frame work of realistic writing. Savitri herself at a later moment, was ashamed of her excessive concern for her son. Her son only pretended as suffering from fever, and Ramani’s assessment of him proved true. She becomes unreliable as all her musing and murmuring are merely a waste, because she talks of her precarious position in the house, though enjoying the comforts like lying in the bench after lunch and chewing a little areca –nut and a few betel leaves along with murmuring for petty things. Ramani
has arranged for a cook and a servant inspite of that she speaks of her burden in the house. A few incidences are mentioned here, to confirm to the comforts of Ramani household: The cook served her with a doleful face. He asked,

“Are the preparations very bad today madam?”

After food she went to her bench in the hall and lay down on it, chewing a little areca-nut and a few betel leaves, and browsed over the pages of a Tamil magazine. (4)

The next morning the cook brought her a tumbler of coffee. She drank it. The cook took back the tumbler from her hand and asked nervously, “what shall I cook?” “Don’t ask me,” she said. “There are only a couple of potatoes. We will have to send for some vegetables and also for some mustard.” (39)

She dressed her hair, washed her face, renewed the vermilion mark on her forehead, looked at her saree for a moment, wondering whether she should wear another and dismissing the thought with, This is quite good; I’m not going outside the extension. She was ready to go out on her afternoon round of visits at three-thirty. She called the cook and told him: Tell the children I’ll be back very soon. Don’t forget about Babu’s coffee. (9)

Though in most of the places the voice is omniscient, when the emotions of Savitri have to be expressed focalization takes place and only through Savitri, her memories of the past could be imparted: A focalizer is the agent whose point of
view orients the narrative text. A text is anchored on a focalizer's point of view when it presents (and does not transcend) the focalizer's thoughts, reflections and knowledge, his/her actual and imaginary perceptions, as well as his/her cultural and ideological orientation. While Genette (1972) and Chatman (1978) prefer to restrict focalization to 'focal characters' only, most narratologists today follow Bal and Rimmon-Kenan's proposal that a focalizer can be either 'external' (a narrator) or 'internal' (a character). External focalizers are also called 'narrator-focalizers'; internal focalizers are variously termed focal characters, character-focalizers, reflectors, or filter characters.

Savitri felt a sudden inexplicable self-pity at the thought of herself as an infant. She next felt an intense admiration for her mother, who never let even the slightest toy be lost but preserved everything carefully, and brought it all out for Navaratri display. How frightfully she and her sister used to quarrel over these dolls and their arrangements! She remembered a particular Navaratri which was completely ruined because she and her sister had scratched each others’ faces and were not on speaking terms. (28)

Even the character of Sumathi is known to the readers only through the focalization of the protagonist, Savitri. The novels written from the external point of view where a superior mind outside the story views the characters and incidents are limited in scope. Selective omniscient point of view is used in *The*
Dark Room by putting only the protagonist in focus. Sometimes the narrator shifts his focus on different characters viewing them from an equal distance. Here Savitri’s character is viewed ‘from Babu’s point of view.

He was troubled in mind about his mother. It was he who received the slaps, so why should she go on lying there as if a great calamity had befallen the house? Perhaps he ought not to have cried like a girl. (42)

Probably he implies that her emotions are for the time being in excess of the situation. They lack an objective correlative. After two days strike; and by Janamma’s advice, she hated herself for her selfish gloom. She was ready to come out of the dark room for the sake of her children. Here is a sample dramatic presentation of the situation:

“What else could the poor thing do? When the elders quarrel it is the children who really suffer.”

“There is no quarrel. I never uttered a single word.”(46)

Savitri hated herself for her selfish gloom.

“Girls, your mother wants to bathe. See if there is hot water.” (47)

He avoids the authorial intrusions of the garrulous omniscient narrator and presents a detached approach to life by perceiving the wrong and right actions of the characters with certain neutraluality. Though the story of The Dark Room is thus told from the neutral omniscient point of view, in the treatment of most of the incidents, Savitri remains the main view-point character,
Savitri said, “I am middle-aged, old-fashioned, plain. How can I help it? She must be young pretty. He has not been coming home before midnight for weeks. And yesterday he did not come at all; came only in the morning, and would not talk to me.” She said, blowin her nose, “He is indifferent even to the children Tell me everything! (79)

Narayan has portrayed Savitri as an unreliable character by her wavering mind filled with fear, fear of torture and torments. Only through her, he can illustrate his ideas without any biased opinion. He wants to reveal the status of wife in an Indian family. Though she is an ideal victim of many critical circumstances, she must realize her real worth, which is more precious and noble. And Narayan also wants to illustrate that in a husband wife relationship Savitri defers to her husband’s wishes and is reinstated in the conventional wifely role, the final defeat in Savitri’s challenge is the result. Since she is an unreliable character, she accepts her defeat and takes over her house hold responsibilities

Poor man, she said; not so bad by himself only poisoned in mind now by that slut (was she such a heavenly creature that one should lose all one’s senses?). Hadn’t he said when they talked to each other for the first time, on the fifth day of marriage, up in the lonely upstairs room, that the moment he saw her decided to marry her. (92)

The tone of the third person reliable narrator’s voice is serious and non-ironic in The Dark Room, the only novel of Narayan written with a declared aim
of highlighting the helplessness of an Indian housewife in the man dominated society. As, expected, the perspective is that of the heroine Savitri and the focus is generally on her. However, it shifts to other characters, according to the story requirements. It is only in *The Dark Room* that the narrator shifts his focus on different characters viewing them from an equal distance.

In the first four chapters of the novel, Savitri dominates the scene of action and the story is narrated from her viewpoint, but a sudden shift occurs in the narrative perspective in the fifth chapter when the interview for appointing a woman probationer is held in the Malgudi office of Englandia Insurance Company. The narrator uses the neutral omniscient point of view to describe the conversation between Pareria, the office Manager and Kantaiengar, the accountant of the company as they react to the interview. The early part of chapter six describes Ramani-Shanta Bai relationship.

Chapter seven describes Savitri’s break with Ramani through Savitri’s point of view. In chapter eight the focus shifts to another character, Mari, the burglar black smith who saves Savitri from getting drowned in the river to end her life. In chapter nine the state of affairs in Ramani’s house without Savitri is described – the anxious enquiries of Babu, Sumathi, and Kamala about their mother. It ends with Ramani’s visit to Shanta Bai. The impact of Savitri’s temporary revolt is evident here. In chapter ten the focus shifts alternately to Savitri and the persons of the village Sukker- Mari and his wife Ponni who shelter Savitri and their finding for her a job in the temple. Chapter eleven brings once again Savitri’s children and deals with their sorrow and anxiety. The novel
concludes with the surrender of Savitri and her return to her house. In this novel the lives of different characters in variable situations are involved and hence the alternate use of neutral omniscient point of view and focalization is justified.

To sum up, Narayan adopts almost the same narrative strategy in all his novels. The narrator, the author himself is the chief. There is a narrative distance allowing a detached, ironic and humourous tone. The attitude of the narrator is sympathetic but there is no emotional involvement. The narrative focus is often on the protagonist but conveniently shifts to others if and when required. As a result, the narrative rhetoric makes the reader take an amused but understanding attitude towards the story.

2.7. CONCLUSION

The foregoing discussion on The Dark Room with reference to the theme, plot, character, setting, socio-cultural matrix and point of view brings out the various narrative strategies through which Narayan signifies his theme of the place of woman in Indian society, in the 1930s. Education among women had not caught up in any significant way and male dominance and non-challance were the order of the day. The simmering discontent of a middle class woman results in a protest to its fold, when the alternatives proves more formidable, she returns home to fulfill her motherly obligations, but to the husband who also realizes the importance of his wife. Thus, the protest has not gone a total waste. Both of them settle down to a more knowledgeable life. The author restrains his own critical judgement on the theme, through constantly focalizing the situations from Savitri’s point of view, who has the tendency to think too precisely on the events.