CHAPTER - V
MODERN WOMEN

5.1 GENERAL

This fourth chapter, which deals with the women of the modern age has the following novels under careful analysis. The novels are The Painter of Signs, Waiting for Mahatma and The Dark Room. It is surprising to note that R.K.Narayan who has glorified the values of tradition in almost all his novels, has also pictured the modern women. Though they are only a handful, Narayan has instilled in them all the striking qualities of a true rebel.

Tradition and modernity can be considered as the two sides of a same coin. One without the other is meaningless. A normal individual should possess both the qualities. He should respect tradition and at the same time adapt himself to the changing time. One cannot lead a peaceful life if one lacks either of the two. In the first two chapters we already had a glimpse of one side of the coin, that is the traditional women, now let us turn the other side too.

Before, moving further into this topic one should have a clear idea about the characteristics of modern women and their expectations in their life. The women, who are modern in their thinking as well as action can be called the
modern women. They possess the following characteristics. They are educated, independent, brave, rebellious, inquisitive, self-confident and authoritative. They are just the opposite of the traditionals. They possess all that the traditionals lacked. Where they able to succeed in their life unlike their opposite poles? is the question taken for discussion in this chapter.

5.2 DAISY IN THE PAINTER OF SIGNS

Daisy in 'The painter of Signs' leads all other modern women in R.K.Narayan's novels. She is followed by Bharati of 'Waiting for Mahatma' and Gangu, Shantabai and Ponni in 'The Dark Room' Critics often contend that R.K.Narayan is an acute observer of life and an excellent story teller, he is not a social commentator. But a close study of the novels from 'The Dark Room' (1938) to 'The Painter of Signs' (1976) reveals that the novelist draws his creative sustenance form his cultural past and shows a subtle understanding of the present. In an interview Narayan himself counters his critics

Sometimes I hear them say that I do not reflect the great urge of the nation, whatever that may be. I don't understand what they are saying. No one can express the urge of a nation such a big nation as ours, 200 languages, 700 million people so diverse. But
compare my new novel ‘The painter of Signs’ with ‘The Dark Room’, that’s a contrast. The new liberated women and the traditional house-wife completely suppressed. You see a whole social change. (Hamilton 16)

It is obvious that in tune with the changing trend R.K.Narayan has progressed in his theme. He has not side tracked the social issues. On the contrary we can see in his novels, the caste barriers breaking, joint families disintegrating and women raising their voice against social injustice. Usha Bande rightly assesses

He portrays the new trends with deft touches. Most of his women may not fit into the feminist frame but some of them certainly refuse to toe the line drawn by the Sati–Savitri–Sita stereotype. (Bande 103)

With the influence of West, a remarkable change occurred in the status and spirit of Indian women. Their emergence in the society developed in them a general awareness and self confidence. Particularly the attitude of Indian wives underwent a rapid change as they started learning and earning. The writers of this period began their hunt for new feminine figures. As in the word of Meena
Shirwadkar, "A search is on for new images, the Nora or the Draupadi type or he
Shakti type, women as rebel and women as power" (Shirwadkar 152)

The movement of Neo-feminism in the West touched the East also. The
Indian writers started picturing new, modern women. The selfless, long-
suffering timid women gave way to self-assertive courageous, modern women
with daring modern outlook and lust for freedom.

R.K. Narayan, being caught up by this tradition turned his attention from
passive women to active ones. The female in R.K.Narayan ceases to be an easy
tumble. What we get in "The painter of Signs’ is, "The emergent woman with
her individuality, changing attitude attitude and roles has made her appearance”
(Shirwadkar 154)

Narayan produced this major fiction after a long gap of nearly a decade in
1976. His previous novel ‘The Vendor of Sweets’ was published in 1967. In
between the two novels he produced stories, essays, memoirs and retold versions
of myths and epics. It is the eleventh novel and here he deals with the most
topical and contemporary theme. He himself accepts in an interview that this
novel deals with “... neither victimization of Indian women as in ‘The Dark
Room’ nor the Hindu women’s transition from tradition to modernity, but the
new woman herself” (Krishnan 40).
In this novel the writer has moved with times and has shown a working woman with a strong character and a mind of her own. The new model is necessary to show the Indian women that, she need not be always passive and dependent. Narayan himself admit that

In the dark room I was concerned with showing the dependence of women on men in our society. I suppose I have moved a long way this time. This girl in my new novel is quite different, not only is she not dependent on men, she actually has no use for them as an integral part of life (Krishnan 40)

This novel is also an attempt to evaluate the modern and rebellious notions of marriage, womanliness and wifehood. To create a new and fitting atmosphere, Narayan gives the heroine a modern and less conventional name, Daisy. Narayan explains that to show her independence and ability to stand by herself, I took care not to give her a name with any kind of emotional connotation. I am calling her Daisy. She is a very strong character. All the same
when you read the novel you will find she is very feminine also. (Krishnan 40)

From the suffering helpless Savitri to Daisy in 'The Painter of Signs' Narayan has shown the raising consciousness and individuality in women. Daisy, with an unlikely mysterious name descends on Malgudi as a population control officer. She gives a job of painting for Raman, who in the word of Bhagwat S. Goyal,

... is a self-styled rationalist, who wishes to establish the age of reason in world. Daisy on the other hand is a champion of women's right, who asserts women's independent entity and advocates the norms of small families to solve Indian population problem. (Goyal. 161-162)

Her Western name, which she has adopted in the place of one given by her parents is the most obvious sign of her alienation from the Hindu tradition. This received the following sarcastic remark "Daisy! What a name for some one who looked so very Indian, traditional and gentle" (PS 31; pt.1)

The slender and gentle appearance of Daisy makes Raman to have the usual 'man-like' doubts as "Who was her protector and what happened to him,
that this slender creature should be left to tackle the population problem of this
nation single-handed” (32; pt.1)

It is just like an Indian male to have such chauvinistic doubts about their
opposite sex. But Daisy though frail-looking is bold, though young is mature in
her thoughts and actions and though she looked like a dancer, she could move
men around her little finger and make men dance to her tunes. In the first
meeting she made Raman blabber like a fool. ”There was firmness, a calculated
coldness in her look, which came through her elegance and feminity and
discouraged one from taking chances with her” (37; pt.1)

She was a contrast to Savitri, who dreaded the very thought of being a
display. When she was inspected by the old temple priest “Savitri blushed, hung
down her head, and felt very uneasy at having to display herself...(DR 173;
ch.10) Whereas Daisy could directly look into men’s eyes “ .....business like and
detached like a zoologist watching an ant” ( 37; pt.1).

Raman, the poor painter dare not look into her eyes lest the worst in him
would be revealed. He was bowled by the simplicity of her appearance and
novel characteristics. Her detached, business like approach puts ‘the sex –
obsessed’ Raman off-guard. As he could not take chances with her, he buys a
pair of cheap glasses to give her a monkeyish look. But, however he tried he
could not escape from her. She broke all his resolution to maintain his wish that
man woman relationship was not inevitable. Her imperious manner both charmed and frightened Raman. He wondered “In her previous incarnation she must have been a queen Victoria or in a still earlier incarnation Rani Jhansi, the warrior queen of Indian history” (80; pt.2)

The modernness in Daisy is revealed in a number of ways in this novel. Her childhood recollections, her attitude towards her marriage, her deadly seriousness about her profession and her madness for independence are the major events where her rebellious and modern nature is highlighted. Her taste for free life owes a lot to her childhood. Daisy is an unusual girl who grew up in the usual way in a Hindu joint family. She did not choose the ordinary satisfactions of life and resented the immense psychological demands made on her as daughter in the huge joint household that she was born into. This was a fore runner of the burdens to come as wife and mother and seeing no way out she runs away. At thirteen she was wiser, mature than her own mother.

I was seized with a feeling that I was in a wrong world and that I was a stranger in their midst. I saw my mothers face beaming with satisfaction and I was irritated at her simplicity. Although I was only thirteen, I had my own notions of what was good for me and what I should do in life. (131;pt.3)
Her behavior at the ‘inspection of her prospective bridegroom’ shows her inherent modern outlook of life. In a traditional joint family like hers, there was no one to guide her to have such high ideals of life. She shocks her family members with her words, “I would not allow anyone to inspect me as a bride and that I’d rather do the inspection of the groom!” and “... I would like to work, rather than be a wife” (136; pt.3).

Though she was only a girl of thirteen, her decision shows her intellectual maturity. The remarkable picture of the bridal inspection scene, through the girl’s eyes reveals how easily a girl’s sensibility and tender feeling could be sacrificed for the sake of family honour prestige and traditional decorum. When she was forced to undergo the ceremony she stormed into the room like a soldier. She even refused to prostrate before them hating the notion of one human being bowing at the feet of another. This shows her self-respect. She is made up of sterner stuff. She believes in the independence’s of the spirit. To her love is a voluntary action not an act of necessity. She could not brook the passivity of an orthodox, arranged marriage. She is educated and enlightened, young as she is head and shoulders above the bridegroom whose only qualification’s his wealth she trounces him easily.

Courageous as she was, she made fun of the whole ceremony. She would not succumb to parental pressure. Taking her life in her hand, she ran away from
home and sought shelter in a missionary. She completed her degree and found the profession of family planning officer.

It may be said that it was her fear of losing her individuality in the joint family, that pushed her into this decision. The yearning for the independent living filled her mind. Belonging to a crowded joint family of brothers, sisters, uncles and cousins, she feared that she would lose her individuality. She craved to be left alone and longed for privacy.

Sometimes, I wished I could be alone; there was no place to consider what one should do or think.

Practically no privacy .... The noise at home which no one else seemed to notice was enough to madden me (129; pt.3)

She was obsessed with the thought of freedom and privacy. She found her studies dull and lifeless. She hated her routine life and felt that she should be doing something better and useful. She disparately longed to escape from the ‘meaningless organisation’

Any other traditional Indian girl would have been too happy and eager about marriage and would have accepted the proposal willingly. But even at that young age she had a different idea about her future. When she was decked up in
silks and gold. She was afraid that she would lose her identity. She says, “I felt sick and felt that I was losing my identity.” (131; pt.3) Daisy’s view about marriage and future might shock an ordinary tradition-bound Indian but not the readers of changing India with their modern outlook of life. In order to free herself from all these stupid customs she ran away from home and joined a missionary. Later, when her father came to take her back, she firmly refused to accompany him. With strong determination and indomitable will power, she started her new life.

Her commitment to her profession is remarkable. She is not like some women who seek job as a means of escape. For her job is everything. It is her life. Savitri in ‘The Dark Room’, seeks a job to escape from her tyrant husband. Shantabai in the same novel takes up a job to escape from her drunkard husband and Rosie in ‘The Guide’ takes up a job to getaway from her indifferent husband. But Daisy of this novel, being a true feminist with a philosophy of her own, sticks on to her profession not to escape from any exploitation but for the pleasure and satisfaction she found in it. Her strong conviction made Raman wonder, “If she were a despotic queen of ancient days, she would have ordered the sawing of the organs of generation.” (57; pt.2) She was a zealot on the question of population. His stay with her for three weeks revealed her adaptability, endurance, simplicity and sincerity in her profession.
Her adaptability was astonishing. She could spread out the little role of carpet that she carried in a bag and sleep anywhere... she never bothered about comforts, conveniences, she accepted any hospitality even the lowliest hut and proved extremely undemanding. (57; pt.2)

She is not like Savitri who craved for comforts and luxuries, inspite of her husband's indifference. The thought of her accustomed comforts was one of the reasons for Savitri's acceptance of her defeat. The lines and she grew homesick. A nostalgia for children, home and accustomed comforts seized her... she could not help contrasting the comforts and security and unloneliness of her home. (DR 189 ; ch 10)

brings out her fickle mindedness. While Savitri was a wavering rebel, Daisy was out and out a firm rebel. When Raman, impressed by her conviction asked if she was a communist she gives a shrewd and sensible reply “What if, if I am or I am not; is there a label one should always carry like a dog collar.” (58; pt.2) Though she had a firm conviction about her job, she did not want to be branded for anything. Her fierce individualism and her rationalism were revealed in the
way she planned her work. Though faced with many difficulties she was undeterred by anything.

The most striking feature of her modernness was her attitude toward marriage and family life. Her attitude to her brief affair with Raman crowns all the other modernness in her. Daisy and Raman became lovers after a tour. But Daisy's conception of their relationship is entirely different from Raman’s. While Daisy’s approach is blatantly modern, Raman’s is blatantly traditional. Raman sensed instinctively that marriage was the only long term solution for his relationship with Daisy. But she considered their affair as a momentary weakness and brushed it off. When Raman confides, his love she firmly retorts

‘I love you, I like you’ are words which can hardly be real. You have learnt them from novels and Hollywood perhaps. When the man says, ‘I love you’ it sounds mechanical and unconvincing. Perhaps credible in Western society but sounds silly in ours (125; pt.3)

But eventually she accepts to marry Raman under certain conditions. These conditions reveals her conception of marriage and her expectations about her husband. Her concept of conjugality is completely different from Raman’s
concept, which is upheld by tradition. Lacking faith in all other systems, she selected Gandharva type marriage. Here the union is between the souls. When they meet in harmony the marriage is consummated. So she decided to live under the same roof at any suitable date. But she firmly disagrees to change her name, “and you call youself Mrs.So and So. ‘No’ she said, ‘I won’t change my name’” (158; pt:4)

It was a great jolt to Raman. But he accepted it without and regret. Not only this condition but two more important conditions were also agreed to get her approval of their marriage. One, she should not have any children and the other even if she has one by mistake she should give it away to make herself free for her social life. She explains how she broke from the routine of women’s life

Long ago I broke away from the routine of women’s life. There are millions of women who go through it happily. I am not one of them. I have planned for myself a different kind of life. I have a well-defined purpose which I will not change... If you want to marry me you must leave me to my plans even when I am a wife. On any day you question why or how, I will leave you (159;pt.4)
Daisy poses a new, rebellious form of marriage by insisting to retain her own name and rejecting the ‘child-bearing role’, because she witnesses these two forces as a threat to her independence and individuality. Daisy’s demand is a model of modern matrimony suitable for the life-style of any modern career woman.

Infatuated by mad love, Raman decides to live according to her demands and wishes. Fearing that child rearing would tie her eternally to house hold work and make her a traditional wife and mother, She even refuses to have any children. By mistake if they have one, she would give the child away, to keep herself free to pursue her social work. Intoxicated by her (proximity) personality Raman promises “What ever you say I will never interfere. I won’t question you. I will be like the ancient King Santhanu…” (159; pt 4)

Inspite of all the sacrifices, their relationship suddenly comes to an end just before their Ghandarva marriage. She, indifferently informed Raman about an urgent call from the head office, which informed her about the alarming increase of population in another remote village. Her devotion to her career forces her to devote herself completely to her work. “ … how can there be an end to it? There are million villages in our country even if I devote myself to this task everyday.” (177;pt:4) shocked by her sudden decision, the poor painter tried several methods to stop her from walking out of his life. But nothing could stop
this career woman to whom, cooking and house-keeping are - 'waste of energy'. A home in her view is only a retreat from sun and rain. Disliking the very term 'house -keeping' Daisy terminates her relationship with Raman. She was afraid that would jeopardize her independence. Her sense of purposefulness in life makes her consider marriage a trap to ensure her soaring spirit though it is a free and generous arrangement. So she pleaded “Married life is not for me. I have thought it over. It frightens me. I am not cut out for the life you imagine. I can’t live except alone. It won’t work.” (179;pt:4).

Though she is emotionally shattered, her brave acceptance of life and especially her failure make one wonder at her firmness in making decisions and unswerving will power to pursue her goals. She is not a bamboo pole like Savitri in 'The Dark Room', She is an eagle cool and calculative in her dealings “She in precise, business – like, automaton, functioning within an iron frame of logicality – cold and aloof like an eagle circling high up in the skies.” (173;pt:4)

The simile that Narayan used here is very significant. The modern woman is associated with strength, independence and self assurance. She is no longer vulnerable to any exploitation. Though she sincerely felt for Raman, she could not succumb herself to worldly pleasures. It was a daring decision to be made. She has patterned her life as an escape from culturally imposed and narrow minded placid domesticity. In her relentless drive to pursue her vocation, she
kills Raman’s love. She may appear ruthless and capricious in her decision but she is not a helpless victim of socio-cultural injustice and male desire. The victimhood is reversed to the male. Raman is being exploited here. By disrupting Raman’s life and causing mental distress, Daisy becomes ‘the exploiter’. The idea of being a lady underwent a transformation in Daisy.

She provides a new pattern of behaviour. She points to complex modalities of change in the Indian woman we could keep cutting into her as into the rich density of a wedding cake... (James 87-88)

Daisy stands for the fading away of older image of women in literature as weak, malleable and subordinate beings. R.K.Narayan has allotted Daisy a newer role. The effect of education and the sudden widening of horizons makes the new women dizzy. It brings them out of the kitchen which has been their place from time immemorial and challenge the age-old taboos.

Daisy, who is almost a masculine female, most ‘un Daisylike’ as Raman pursues her could evoke admiration of the villagers with her energy, zeal and dogged persistence, Beside Daisy, Raman fades into insignificance. He appears unheroic, weak-minded and often a comic figure. His male superiority could be exercised only at the level of imagination. He cannot keep pace with her in reality. She is the decision making authority. Generally in folk stories fairy tales
and legends man is shown the quester, the conqueror. Even in reality majority of the men who are the bread makers of the family imagine themselves as the conquerers but, in ‘The Painter of Signs’ Daisy is the questor and conqueror. When she leaves Malgudi in the end Raman awaits her return. Usha Bande rightly sums up her character thus.

There is, however, no conflict in Daisy’s psyche. She is at peace with herself because she is sure of herself… She does not whine or whimper, nor does she sulk or rebel. Sentiments have no place in her life, though she has sufficient human warmth. She has indeed crossed the stage of sulking, rebelling, whining and has trained herself to stand for her ‘self’.(Bande 110).

In Daisy, Narayan has presented an Indian woman far ahead of times. Her unconventional name, outrageous profession and radical feministic approach to life make her an unwelcome person in a tradition bound town like Malgudi. He does this because he probably does not wish to defeat Daisy by letting an able and fiery women fall into the traditional rut. Daisy’s growth is rightly analysed by Shantha Krishnaswamy as

Indian woman growing up through Savitri, Suseela, Bharathi, Ambika and Rosie, into Daisy, has now
come of age. She is an image of social revolt and knows the world for what it is. She fights, manages, endures, but never whines or sulks in the dark room. She is radically a new role model... (Krishnaswamy 134).

Thrown outside the stability of a joint family, Daisy faces a world of innumerable alternative patterns. In her quest for wholeness, she demands autonomy. Like Rosie she takes up a specific career decision and sticks to her vocation at all costs. Both of them are subject to the double pulls of instinctual urges and career possibilities. But their physical passion soon falls into its place giving them a free rein to achieve in their respective chosen fields of work.

Daisy is an extraordinary being with a psychological and sexual sophistication that leaves her predecessors far behind; We come to admire and fear her boundless energy. Through her Narayan shows the power of the female intelligent and vitality which shapes an altogether new balance between the sexes. The existing cultural absolutes are transformed, the roles are reversed and we get a Huxleyan Picture of a new world where, without the aid of a new biological weaponry
like cybernetics and parthogenesis, the female attains a titanic womanhood, disregarding all known bounds.

Daisy and Raman, an endearing pair of loves, battle and love constantly, but at the end of the novel they go their separate ways: he to his bachelordom and she to her spinster-hood and family planning propaganda. Life amounts to a complicated system of checks and counterchecks resulting in the enthronement of the absurd. Daisy is not a mere ‘femme fatale’. To be free completely, to equip herself to battle against male power hypocrisies, she tries to eliminate emotions altogether from her life. She does not desire to have children. It is a bold decision to take but it is a great breach for any woman. Her intellect makes sex amoral and she gets rid of what she calls the absurd male fetter, love. She can state with justifiable pride. ‘I am my own work’. It is the apogee of feminism.

To express their creative powers in a male ordained world woman like Rosie and Daisy tend to become masculine. They try to arrogate the masculine role to themselves. Rosie after Raju’s eclipse is her own mistress. Her mental anguish over the breaking of traditional ties like marriage and family honour vanishes quickly. The romantic heroes are reduced to nullity. Raju and Raman have descended a long way down the evolutionary ladder; they are not like Krishnan or Margayya or even Jagan. They are weak-minded enough to
constantly bow down to the lady’s wishes, grateful for the minor favours even in moments of intimacy. Rosie breaks the shackles of the devadasi caste. Daisy runs away from strict Brahminical orthodoxy. In the process of liberation they acquire masculine traits and manners. Though they escape from being crushed by dominance, a part of their female heritage is denied to them.

5.3 BHARATHI IN THE WAITING FOR MAHATMA

Bharathi, the heroine of ‘Waiting for Mahatma’ is another example of a perfect modern woman. She is an educated, independent, career woman. Like Daisy in ‘The Painter of Sings’ she also gave up the traditional role for the cause of her nation. Britta Olinder makes the comparison thus

In both cases the woman is politically conscious and working for a cause, demanding her admirer to join her in those endeavors. In both cases the young man is weaker and cannot fully engage himself in this task

(Olinder 99)

But while Daisy fails to influence her lover, Bharati succeeds in not only influencing him, but also persuading him to join her in the national cause. She, with her charm, love, kindness and authority could make Sriram an ardent
follower of Mahatma. While Daisy wrecks the life of Raman, Bharati moulds and gives new shape to Sriram’s life.

Waiting for Mahatma first published in 1955 has a distinctive theme and setting. It is precisely a political novel although the backdrop has distinct national, more precisely political overtones. It is often regarded as Gandhian novel in the genre of Raja Rao’s Kanthapura and Mulk Raj Anand’s ‘untouchable’. Uma Parameswaran affirms that

It is a Gandhian novel Technically Sriram is the hero of the novel and the plot revolves around him; but the predominant figure even though he is seldom on stage, is Gandhi and the theme is Gandhism (Parameswaran 65)

The theme of Gandhism as portrayed in the novel has a certain context. It is to be viewed in relation to Sriram, the hero of the novel who is weak, indecisive and unassertive. He is incapable of understanding Gandhi’s message but something in him responds to its grandeur.

It is primarily a Malgudi novel with the middle class life as its milieu – Sriram the central figure is seen mainly with his beloved Bharati and his granny, his old Guardian and upbringer. Jagadish, the firebrand terrorist, and kanni the
inevitable shopkeeper of the Malgudi scene complete the setting of the novel. The plot traces the adventures of the youth Sriram his sudden removal from a quiet, apathetic existence to an adventurous life of a hero, brought about by his involvement in the campaign of Mahatma Gandhi against British rule in India.

The novel has five discernable phases, each coinciding with distinct development in the discipleship of Sriram. The first portray Sriram’s thoroughly self-centered uneventful existence until his encounter with Bharati. He meets Bharati in the market place and falls in love with her instantly. She was young and slender with eyes that sparkled with happiness. He wanted to ask her the usual manly questions “How old are you? What caste are you? Where is your horoscope? Are you free to marry me?” (WFM 13;pt 1)

From the beginning Gandhi’s exhortations towards nonviolence and self discipline are shown to register but vaguely on Sriram whose mind is filled mostly with sensual longings for Bharati. He has his second glimpse of the girl, in the civic reception given in honour of Gandhiji. He finds her irresistible and follow her as if enchanted. He decides to join Bharati as one of Gandhiji’s followers

Bharati’s father also was a freedom fighter. When he died in 1920 movement, Gandhiji became the God Father of Bharati and he was the one who named the fatherless child, Bharti, which means the daughter of India. After her
mother’s death Bharati became a truthful and dedicated devotee of Mahatma Gandhi and devoted her entire life for her nation. Unquestioningly and willingly she did all the work assigned to her by Mahatma Gandhi and followed him everywhere like his shadow. In one such occasion while she was collecting funds for a noble cause, she met Sriram.

Sriram, a wealthy young bachelor of Kabir Street who enjoyed a life of a mammon, eating, reading and sleeping, mesmerised by the charm of Bharati, gave up his luxurious life, to spend the rest of his life with Bharati. His life took a different turn, the moment he looked at Bharati. Though his main aim was to be with Bharati, slowly he becomes an ardent follower of Mahatma Gandhi.

His first encounter with Gandhiji is highly amusing, especially due to the mischievous playfulness of Bharati. He blurts out before Gandhiji “I like to be where Bharati is” (46; pt.1). Part one ends with Sriram leaving Granny at dead of night to join Gandhiji’s camp.

Part two takes Sriram into the vortex of the national activities but the main line of interest continues to remain Sriram - Bharati relationship. Sriram’s plunge into the turmoil has at the back of it, his overpowering love for Bharati Sriram’s love has an equally ardent, though less eloquent response from her. "They had delight in each other’s company which mitigated the gloom of the
surroundings” (59;pt.2) in the famine-stricken villages. After the departure of Gandhiji, Bharati assumes a new role- that of a Guru

Bharati, dominates the scene, whenever she was with Sriram. She, with her shrewd and smart nature, excels Sriram in everything. She also encourages Sriram to learn the skills needed for a Gandhian. She looked after him and becomes his ‘Guru’. She proves herself to be a task master of no mean order. She also expects Sriram to be afraid of her because she is his ‘guru’. Sriram’s first reaction in the Indian tradition of male female relationship is, “the whole thing is extremely false. She ought to be my wife and come to my arms.” (65;pt.2)

Bharati was not only tender and kind hearted but also ruthless and authoritative. Sriram treaded making mistakes infront of Bharati “He dreaded making a mistake and provoking the girl’s mirth. He hated her for her levity and making him feel like a fool so often.”(65;pt.2)

The sureness with which Bharati performed her duties, made Sriram feel unsure about his actions and do absurd things infront of her. Sriram, basically being a traditional Hindu man, very often was disturbed by the very Indian chauvinistic thoughts. He found it very difficult to think of Bharati as his ‘guru’. “Absurd to think that she was just his ‘guru’, guru indeed! Absurd that a comely young woman should be set to educate a man! Educate him in what? He checked
at the thought” (67; pt 2). Bharati could easily read Sriram’s mind and easily judge him. Even after their brief acquaintance, she was able to guess rightly that Sriram was lazy and irresponsible. She took it a challenge to reform him completely and make him a true Gandhian, before marrying him. Bharathi’s utmost devotion to her cause, authoritativeness and courage frightened Sriram. He loved as well as feared Bharati. But he was so infatuated that he was willing to be her slave for ever and do anything for her. Captivated by her charm, he rambles that “I will be your slave. I will do anything you ask me to do for you.” (89;pt.2)

As a part of the movement when he was given a new job of visiting various strategic places to write ‘Quit India’, he felt lost and helpless without Bharati. He was seized with a sense of exhaustion and futility of it all. “He was hungry and homesick. He wanted to go back to his Kabir lane home preferably with Bharati and forget all this” (75;pt.2). As long as he was sustained by Bharati’s encouragement and example he remained faithful to his job. He remained a weak and dependent character. His words, “I can’t do anything. I want to suspend everything till I have guidance from my leader” (83;pt.2)

When Bharati departed voluntarily to prison, as instructed by Gandhiji, he becomes an easy victim to the terrorists. In part four Bharati’s place was filled by the terrorist Jagadish. He is a photographer – turned – terrorist. He comes to
Sriram’s hide out to install a small two-way battery radio set there. This ‘bear-like personality’ has his own ways of fighting the British and he thinks that he is also a follower of Gandhiji in his own right. Sriram, weak as ever allows himself to be used by him and over works with all his limitations. However Jagadish is good enough to help Sriram meet Bharati whom he has known for quite sometime.

The fourth part of the novel gives a peep into the prison life of Sriram. He feels lost in the alien world. In the last part of the novel Sriram is seen once again in the Kabir street. He feels lost without Bharati and learns about Bharati from the Photographer Jagadish. She is thousand miles away at Noakhali lending the victims of the communal holocaust caused by ‘the great division’. Overcome by passionate longing he breaks down completely. It is Jagadish who contacts Bharati through a letter and receives a reply asking Sriram to meet her at Birla House, New Delhi. An unnerving train journey takes him for the first time out of South India to the ‘exotic’ North. Once again Bharati, as resourceful and composed as ever, takes charge of him immediately.

To him it is only Bharati who gives meaning to life. —“I only want her” he confesses even before Mahatma, “I have waited for five years thinking of nothing else “. He has not been able to overcome his feeling of inferiority, “She seemed too magnificent to be his wife”. His sense of inadequacy and lack of
direction also come out in his candid confusion before Bapuji, “Bharati went away to jail, and there was no one who could tell me what to do: no one who could show me the right way”. (172-173)

In front of Bharati, he felt foolish and lost. He humbled himself completely before her and felt satisfied with his humility. After a long separation, when he met Bharati in New Delhi, as usual she took charge of him completely. “This was the first time in his life that he was completely at peace with himself, Satisfied profoundly with existence itself.” (165; pt.5) Bharati’s kindness and understanding restored his confidence in himself. She gave his whole life a new meaning and new dimension.

Thus Bharati who is rightly labelled ‘Malgudi Portia’ by Srinivasa Iyengar is a decided improvement over the meek heroines encountered so far. She represents the new breed of women who emerged during the days of independence struggle, women who had larger national goals, women who came under the spell of magnetic leaders like Gandhi and Nehru.

Daisy in ‘The Painter of Signs’ and Bharati in ‘Waiting for Mahatma’ show many parallels. Both are modern women who dedicated their life completely for the cause of their nation. While Bharati’s cause is Gandhi’s cause, comprehensive and idealistic, Daisy’s is more specifically social, focussing on family planning. Both of them took the role of a Guru, eager to
teach their lovers about the society. In both the novels the young men were dominated by their women. Both were willing to give up their routine life to please their lady love. The men are shown inferior and weak compared to the women.

From these two novels it is clear that the modern women with their education, independence, authoritativeness, shrewdness, intelligence, self confidence, courage, single-mindedness, adaptability, tolerance and awareness dominated the menfolk and made them feel inferior and foolish in front of them. All the chauvinistic feelings just disappeared from them and they behaved like a normal human beings, considering their opposite sex as their equals.

It is also obvious that in tune with the changing trend Narayan has succeeded in portraying the modern women with their modern and rebellious views about life. One can no longer brand him a traditionalist. He has proved himself out and out a modernist too. He himself asserts in his ‘My Days’ that he is “obsessed with philosophy of women opposed to man, her constant oppressor” (119)

Bharati is important as a transition point between the passive and the active feminine consciousness in Indian fiction. The female in Narayan’s fiction ceases to be an easy tumble. The male starts accepting the redemptive influence of the female. There is a compulsion to succeed in what she is setting out to do
and she desires satisfaction from this compulsion towards success. The meek female has given place to a vibrant female like Bharati, Rosie and Daisy.

5.4 MODERNS IN THE DARK ROOM

Rabellious modern women are found in ‘The Dark Room’ also. Though this novel belongs to the pre independence era, R.K.Narayan has surprisingly sketched three modern, self-awakened women in this novel. It is surprising to know that R.K.Narayan has presented the two opposite poles in the same novel with the same dexterity and art. The three minor characters in the novel Gangu, Shantabai and Ponni are discussed in detail in this part.

Gangu, the friend and confidant of Savitri is downright modern in her thinking and action. She is a perfect foil to Janamma, another friend of Savitri, whom we have already discussed in the earlier chapter. While Janamma is an uncompromising traditionalist, Gangu is a staunch modernist. The advise which Janamma gives to Savitri when the latter had a quarrel with her husband reveals her attitude to wedlock, child rearing and other such important aspects of life. She stands for the type of women untouched by Western principles and ways of life.

As a contrast, Gangu’s character is depicted. Gangu has renounced the secluded husband and home-centered life. Which is customarily appropriate for
Hindu women. Having decided to assert her rights both inside and outside home, she followed a strikingly unorthodox life-style. She had good humour abundant frivolity and high ambitions.

She talked irresponsibly and enjoyed being unpopular in the elderly society of south extention. She left home when she pleased and went where she liked, moved without an escort, stared back at people and talked loudly. (DR 19; Ch.2)

She did all that a traditional woman dare not do. In a traditional Indian society women are expected to be docile, humble, submissive, soft, silent, obedient, respectful and modest. But Gangu deliberately ignored the traditional qualities and behaved in a funny way. Though her peculiar way of expressing a modern view on life brings laughter to the reader, yet it points out the emancipation of women from the clutches of tradition. She firmly believed that tradition led women to their doom. So, she ignored tradition and blindly imitated the West.

Gangu’s ambitions are also modern,
She hoped to be sent some day as Malgudi delegate
to the All-India Women's Conference, to be elected
to various municipal and legislative bodies; and
to become a Congress leader... (18; Ch.2)

Her words reveal her craving for recognition and popularity. Through her character R.k.Narayan has brought the general tendency of the Indians in the early twentieth Century. The modernization of the country due to Western influence is beautifully pictured here. Gangu is portrayed as a woman, who is intoxicated by the modern, Western ideas, that emerged in India with the Gandhian movement. Outwardly her behavior may appear absurd, but they are the symptoms of rapid social -cultural change and modernization. Her wish to be recognized as some one in particular, a public figure shows her individual awakening. It is this awakening of the self, which helped the Indian women to come out of their shell slowly, shattering all the obstacles in their way. Inspite of all her eccentricities she was tolerated in the Extension because she was very religious and not immoral like Shantabai.

Gangu's husband, a school teacher is another representative of modernism. The sort of modernism that he embodies is associated with self-deception or pretentiousness. "He believed himself to be a champion of woman's
freedom; he believed he was serving the women's cause by constantly talking about votes and divorce” (19; Ch.2)

He gave full freedom for his wife and never interfered in her affairs. He sides modernism not because he is genuinely convinced of the rightness of the attitude of the modernists but merely because of the fancy he had for it. His modernism is merely a role that he plays. He enjoys playing the role of a modernist. The readers should understand that the modernism practiced by this Indian couples is harmless unlike the one practiced by Shantabai. Though it provokes laughter yet it symbolises the smooth and peaceful life of a modern couple with compromises and equal rights:

Next comes, Shantabai, the evil temptress, who disrupts the harmony of the Indian house. As the modern women were not bound by tradition, and led a carefree life, most Indian writers had the tendency to portray them as immoral and self-centered. R.K.Narayan is not an exception. He too has shown the modern women as immoral ladies. May be sarcastically the author is trying to point out the fact that under the name of modernism, these women have forgotten the value of their chastity. These women found nothing wrong in losing their chastity because they firmly opposed everything traditional; While the traditional women blindly stuck to their husbands even when they had other affairs, these modern women not only threw their men out of their life but also never hesitated
to manipulate them to meet their ends. They found nothing wrong in entertaining men other than their husband. May be it was the price that they had to pay for being modern. Shantabai in ‘The Dark Room’, Rosie in ‘The Guide’ and Daisy in ‘The painter of Signs’ are the best examples of such type of women.

Shantabai, the villain of Savitri’s life is a university graduate from Mangalore. Searching for a job, she visits Malgudi and enters Raman’s office and also his life. Her modernism is more deep-rooted than other modernists in the novel. The fact that she is a graduate and a career woman strengthens her character and modern outlook. Though she had married early, in keeping with Hindu Custom, she did not hesitate to divorce her drunkard and gambler husband against the wish of all the elders at home. Like a true modernist she even left her family and faced life all by herself. Her education helped her to understand her ‘self’. This ‘self-realisation’, the ‘individual awakening’ dared her do to things feared by a traditional woman. A traditional woman would never oppose her husband and would adjust with him under any circumstances. But a modern woman is not so. She gives more importance to satisfy her ‘self’ than ‘others’. Whereas a traditional woman is more bothered about ‘others’ than her ‘ownself’. This is one of the major characteristics of a modern woman. This individual consciousness forced her to adopt all the ‘survival techniques’ (of which manipulating the men is the most common aspect).
While one can appreciate Shantabai's strong will power, firm determination and daring courage, one cannot help grimacing at her immorality. Chastity is the long cherished unique aspect of the Indian women. When that uniqueness is at stake, a true Indian finds it difficult to digest. No practical explanation would satisfy an Indian. When a woman is deserted by her husband, she has every right to find solace and comfort in another person. She should be firm in her decision. But in the case of Shantabai modernism becomes a negative force when she starts manipulating men to meet her ends. This is the negative side of modernism. One's freedom to enjoy life should not in any way harm the freedom of other persons. One can admire Shantabai's modernism as far as her educational background, aspirations and tastes are concerned. But when the same modernism has far-reaching effects on the lives of other people, it has to be feared. It is a threat to the stability of a traditional Hindu family life.

Ramani, the philandering husband of Savitri, blindly believes that Shantabai's love is genuine. Attracted by her flawless, fair complexion and modern ideas he fails to understand the reality. His first attraction was her look, Suppose if she was not fair and attractive, it is doubtful whether Ramani would have had an affair at all with her. May be Ramani wanted a change from his routine so, he encouraged all her tactics and fell into her trap willingly. But what was the net result. Loss of peace and harmony at home. He almost lost his
faithful wife and there by his peaceful life too. Thanks to Savitri and her new
found courage to quit home. When the foundation itself was shaken, things
came to normalcy. The infatuation came to an end.

Ramani, has a reputation as a ‘woman hunter’ in the office. But in
Shantabai’s case he becomes ‘the hunted’ and not ‘the hunter’. Shantabai’s
identification with the West has alienated her from her own culture and distorted
her views of it. She looks at Indian culture through Western eyes and finds it
primitive and ugly. This is implied, when she informs Ramani looking at the
cinema posters, “A wretched Indian film! I’d have given my life to see a Garbo
or Dietrich now”. (91; Ch.6) She finds Indian films with ‘mythological nonsense’
unendurable. She continues her curse.

Our people can’t produce a decent film. Bad
photography, awful acting ugly faces. Till Our film
producers give up mythological nonsense there is no
salvation for our films (91; Ch.6).

The mentality Narayan depicts here is of course one of the hallmarks of Western
colonial culture.

Though Shantabai plays the role of an evil temptress and allurer in the
novel, she stands for the individual consciousness of modern women. The only
flaw in her character is her undue manipulation of her sex. This 'immorality' soils her daring modern outlook. But for this flaw, she would have been a person to be placed on a high pedestal and admired and followed by all other women of the pre and post independent era of India.

Her utmost self-confidence and dare-devil approach to life challenges even the most egoistic male chauvinist like Ramani. In her presence he is reduced to nothing. Though she is a problematic figure of conflicting beliefs, she towers over men. She proves that the realm of intellect and career is no longer an exclusive masculine pressure. This violation of tradition may not bring her ever lasting peace or happiness, but it leads her to inward enlightenment.

Ponni, the wife of the lock-repairer Mani, who saves the life of Savitri, when she almost drowned herself in the river, is an ideal example of a modernist. She is an uneducated, poor country woman. Still she has learnt the secret of controlling men. While even educated, city-bred women like Shantabai, Daisy, Rosie, Brinda, and others failed to control their men, Ponni, the lay woman could easily handle her husband. She advises Savitri "Sister, remember this, keep the men under the rod, and they will be alright. Show them that you care for them and they will tie you and treat you like a dog." (136; Ch.8).

Her philosophy is so simple but very effective. She believes that when men are given love and care, they take advantage of the situation. The humility
and submission shown by women out of love and affection are most often misunderstood by Indian men. They mistake it for women’s inability and weakness and try to master them at all the opportunities. If it is not set right by the women in the beginning itself, they are suppressed by the male. Ponni, who understood this great philosophy, could handle men very easily under any circumstance. She just cannot believe that any husband is unmanageable. She can control husband even when he is drunk. She proudly says that

when I know that he has been drinking, the moment he comes home, I trip him up from behind and push him down and sit on his back for a little while, he will wriggle a little, swear at me, and then sleep and wake up in the morning quiet as a lamb. I can’t believe any husband is unmanageable in this universe...

(137;Ch .8)

Inspite of her being an illiterate and poor she was able to handle her husband easily. To Ponni, it was not only her husband Mani, who was easy to handle but also the other men too. Her skillful handling of the village priest is a perfect example of her tactfulness and shrewdness. It was she who sought a job for Savitri from the temple priest while the priest dodged her husband and even over worked him for quite some time. Once she was introduced to the priest she
could easily dismiss her husband with the words "Go away and mind your business do you understand? We can look after ourselves quite well without you."(177;ch.10) She could easily order about her husband and extract work from him. With her tactfulness and outspokenness, she was able to get a job for Savitri too. When the priest proved difficult to handle, she could tackle him shrewdly and get things done for Savitri.

Ponni shows no pretentions or exhibit any shows like any other modernists in the novel, to assert her rights. She knows the correct approach to life. She proves that one need not sulk in the dark room like Savitri or bang doors like Ibsen’s Nora or become immoral like Shantabai or behave frivolently like Gangu to become a true feminist. Education and money alone cannot give the true freedom that women crave for Ponni is not a feminist in the real sense. She does not even know the existence of terms like ‘feminism’ or ‘modernism’, yet she dominates all the other modernists in this novel with her simple philosophy ‘keep men under rod’. We can congratulate her for her outright boldness and confidence. No other champion of women’s liberation movement could have spoken so daringly and bluntly about the opposite sex.
5.5 CONCLUSION

An extraordinary variety of feminine temperaments have been countered so far in Narayan. Women have been identified in the main with the older image in literature as weak, malleable, economically backward and subordinate. But Narayan has shown us how Savitri has gradually given way to Rosie and Daisy, the newer role models to ponder about. To break from cultural conditioning, to belong and to be accepted on one’s own merit even in a traditional bound male oriented society is possible. The newer role model is necessary to show women in India that a female need not always be the victim of the species, that even though she is in an in-group society, in an insensitive age, she can establish values of her own if she has sufficient energy and volition to do so. Narayan’s later heroines like Rosie, Daisy and Roja have the strength to resist social pressures that exact conformity and they courageously placed their personal integrity above the instincts of the herd.

The double standard is now weighed in favour of the feminine, who now has an inner coherence, a confidence to face life. Wifehood is not a great marvel that it was deemed to be and the blessedness of motherhood is thoroughly defamiliarized; Femaleness is no longer regarded as a punishment for wrongs done in one’s previous birth or the result for one’s ill fate. Daisy is as much at ease with her gender identify as any male around her. Virtuous womanhood,
educated motherhood and wife companion have all yielded pride of place to woman as person. Some like Daisy act upon life directly, not willing to be acted upon as before, others like Ambika do not break out so openly, yet there is a growth in consciousness and their way of looking at life has definitely changed. The transformation of the passive feminine into radical and active woman like Daisy shows how imaginative literature could reflect the progress of Indian Women from novel to novel successfully.