CHAPTER - I

INTRODUCTION

1.1. GENERAL

The first chapter, the introductory chapter of this study, gives a clear idea about R.K. Narayan’s reputation as an Indian novelist in English and the characteristic features of R.K. Narayan as an Indo-Anglian novelist. It is followed by the focus of this study which in turn leads to a brief glimpse of the status of women in India and Indo-Anglian literature. Finally in the scope of this study, the feminine image in R.K. Narayan’s novels and the methodology of this study are briefly presented.

1.2 R. K. NARAYAN AS A REPUTED INDO-ANGLIAN NOVELIST

Rasipuram Krishnaswami Iyer Narayanaswami, Popularly known as R.K. Narayan, is the most accomplished and most widely read Indian novelist in English. His desire to write in English was born of an early infatuation with English novels beginning with Scott and Dickens. Today he justifiably occupies a major place in the world of not only Indo-Anglian fiction but also of Common Wealth Fiction. He has earned the discerning expert critical acclaim of writers like Graham Green and William Walsh as well as the most difficult acceptance of the general readers of fiction in his own country.
Malgudi, the fictional setting of Narayan’s novels and short stories claims as remarkable a place in literature as “The Wessex” of Thomas Hardy. It is of absorbing interest to the readers of R.K.Narayan. It is not a mere geographical expression, it has a distinct personality of its own. Dr. Srinivasa Iyengar rightly remarks in ‘The Indian Writing in English’ that Malgudi is the real hero of his novels and short stories.

It is Narayan’s triumph as an artist that he makes us have complete faith in the reality of Malgudi. It is so strongly implanted in our imagination that we wonder whom we are going to meet in this town... The streets and the lanes appear to be as familiar as one’s home town. (Iyengar 282)

R.K.Narayan may be described as a novelist of the middle class. His novels present a true picture of a middle class Indian confronted with the various problems of life. To Graham Greene, Narayan is Indian, and his works are a lively representation of Indian population and their way of life. He writes for the most part about the smaller professional middle class with a gentle irony and haunting sadness that has gained him the reputation of ‘Indian Chekov’. Himself being a product of South Indian middle class, Narayan does not go beyond his
own province. Human relationships form the theme of all the novels of Narayan. William Walsh has rightly stated in ‘The Times of India’ (1964) that

The family is the immediate context in which his sensibility operates and his novels are remarkable for the subtlety and conviction with which family relationships are treated. (Walsh 15)

Narayan has also presented the plights of Indian women in his novels. In a tradition bound Indian society, the range of roles that women can fill is very limited indeed. Obviously, the effect of patriarchy or male culture is clearly at work here. “Women have traditionally occupied domestic spaces which were prisons for some and courtyards for others. For the very few privileged ones, gates opened on to the world.” (Chatterjee 73)

1.3 FOCUS OF THIS STUDY

The focus of this study is the image of women in R.K.Narayan’s novels. It is a general view that in the conception and portrayal of women characters, Narayan shows a typical Indianness. Many critics have branded R.K. Narayan’s women characters as ‘insignificant beings’. As R.K.Narayan does not encourage any open talk about his works, it is quite risky to arrive at any definite conclusions about his characters. But in an interview, in the ‘Indian literary
review' he speaks openly of the relationship between the author and his community.

The author is the spokesman of the community in which he lives and of himself. He has to free himself even from his own previous standards in order to be creative. At the same time he is also a product of the society in which he lives and has to maintain the balance between the two. (8)

R.K. Narayan, being a reputed social novelist, many may wonder why an analysis on 'Feminine' rather than the human experience. It is true that this study could have been made simpler and easier if it had focused only on 'human experiences', which in turn no doubt would have led to an analysis of 'masculine experiences' alone. For centuries human experiences have been synonymous with 'masculine experiences'. The collective image of humanness has been one sided and incomplete. Women's experiences have interested man only as it has involved himself and he has defined her experiences on the basis of his encounter with the women in both his real life and fantasy life.

In a male-chauvinistic society like India, it may be argued that the choice of the women as the subject tends to be restrictive and lopsided. Patriarchy
which is the ruling system almost all over the world ordains that women’s place is the home, her role as a wife and mother is quite often synonymous with her total human existence. So, one may wonder what use is it to study a creature who as a child is sold off to strangers for a bridal price or when she grows up serves as a supplier of dowry to her husband’s family? The very term ‘family’ as is now well-known derives from the Latin word ‘famulus’ which means ‘a household slave’ and ‘familia’ signifies the totality of slaves belonging to one individual, who is the male head. One therefore expects the presentation of women in literature, created and dominated by man to be mere role-fulfillments.

The exploitation of the so called ‘Weaker Sex’ is the burning problem, which the world faces today. ‘Feminism’ has become the sacred mantra of even a highly male-dominated society like India, where as in the words of Meena Shirwadkar. “The woman in life and in literature had no existence save that of a shadowy, suffering, pathetic creature.” (Shirwadkar 3)

1.4 STATUS OF WOMEN IN INDIA

The personality of a typical Indian women is being crushed by the deep rooted dominating nature of the Indian men. Her hands are tied in the name of tradition and culture. She is even forced to feel glorified in the sufferings which
are inflicted on her. She continued to be the ever-suffering Sita until very recently. As Kate Millet has rightly put,

For her the world is her husband, her family, her children and her home, hence the outstanding and highest calling of woman is always that of wife and mother (Millet 164)

Such women, who are steam rolled and flattened into the family roles are tend to be dehumanized in so far as they are invariably stripped off all the individualising traits of a sentient being. As in the words of Showri Daniel, the ‘female incarnate’, “… has no shape or form: She is everything or nothing. She is fluid. Pour her into any mold she takes it … Idles and principles lie outside her nature.” (Daniel 12) As she is the void, the hole she becomes a being only in so far as she can be regarded as an object in relation to man who is of course the subject.

In the midst of all these generalisation about Indian women our aim in this work is to trace out the steady growth in the outlook of Indian women as perceived by R.K.Narayan in his novels. Due to the Western influence the social, political, economic and cultural aspects of India have undergone a
tremendous transformation. Even the most submissive, docile and self sacrificing Indian women have started thinking about their selfhood and identity.

The banner of insurrection which has already been hoisted in the West has reverberated through the East. Abuse of power cannot continue for long. Thraldom cannot exist for ever. The greed for power that has kept woman down for ages has been rudely shaken. Woman the weaker and the most injured of all is also on the warpath. She is bent upon improving herself without the help of man. She is trying to help herself. The struggle in her life has spread to many fields – society, politics, education, work and the most important of all ‘her-home’.

1.5 WOMEN IN INDO - ANGLIAN LITERATURE

Even literature which has been dominated by men until recently has started reflecting her struggle. Women, who has been bound by tradition and culture has started looking at herself in a different angle. There is also a tremendous change in men and their attitude towards women. This change of attitude in both the sexes has found a remarkable place in literature.

In the Indo-Anglian literature which was found along with the Western awareness, woman is no longer a symbol of self-pity, submission, retreat and personal regression but a symbol of growth and development. Literature has
realized the greatest truth that what is wanted by women everywhere, whether East or West is their ‘Self-Emancipation’, from the social taboos in the name of tradition and culture. In an age of alienation and particularly in a developing country like India, there is a tremendous shift in the status of women. Indian women with their new awareness has started to stir out of their placid stoicism. They are in the open in protest marches against all kinds of oppression, discrimination and exploitation.

The Indo-Anglian novels are no longer novels of ‘consent’ in their treatment of women. They have become novels of ‘dissent’, as they reflect the change in the general outlook. The change reflects not only the change in the sensibility of the reader but of the writer as well. Indo-Anglian fiction is the inevitable outcome of the Indian exposure to the Western culture and art forms. In the early Indo-Anglian novels women were a far-cry from reality too moralized and too sentimentalised. The writers were unable to grab the reality. But later the demands of reality pressed the writers. A slow but steady progress was seen in the Indo – Anglian novels of the early twentieth century. As Srinivasa Iyengar points out, in ‘The Indian Writing in English’, “There is an increasing bolder approach to the actualities of life.” (Iyengar 10)

Traditional ‘Sita – type’ images in fiction gave way to new emerging women. There is no doubt that the average Indian woman of today is a far cry
from her vedic ancesstress, the Nari, the Prakriti, the graceful half of Ardhanareeswara, the winsome Parvati, the glowing Usha, the awe-inspiring Mother Kali. The Indian women are now beginning to stir out of their placid stoicism. Arising political and social consciousness in a fertile milieu has brought them out into the open in protest marches against discrimination, dowry death, rape and exploitation. The age of the novel of consent has become extinct in India. The woman in fiction often serves as the symbol of the seething discontent raging within the heart of the ordinary Indian. She is no longer the paragon of virtue and chastity to be extolled by poets, priests and philosophers. She is the symbol of the imagination, of sensibility itself. She is the artist’s expression of his awareness of the cumulative pressures of social experience. She is no longer a symbol of retreat into personal regression and self-pity but a symbol of growth, purity and development. She provides a fascinating glimpse into a hither to scarcely known aspect of Indian fictive and social life.

In Western countries the women’s issue is mostly one of identity, job equality and sexual roles. But in India it is a question of stark survival. Even the few who have escaped the vicious existential circle through education and better opportunities also find themselves in a constant tussle with inevitable social modes, with the oppressive weight of tradition behind. All talk of transcending
biology, of clonal reproduction, polymorphous perversity, cybernetics and ERA would be out of place and out of time in an Indian milieu.

In India the issues are different. It is not a question of who brings in the bigger pay packet, who would do the dishes, who would wash the nappies, who would wash the curtains and who would walk the dog. The priorities here are not the same as in the West. At each economic level the problems are different. In short what is wanted by women everywhere India or otherwise, is the same emancipation for the female as for the male. The aim is to be a human being regardless of difference in sex, colour, religion, caste and country. It is timely to redress the imbalances and take a close look at women created out of fact by fiction.

The novel though an importation from the West has taken roots in the Indian soil. This is one realm where one feels one could explore for permanent values. This fictive world while declining the burden of philosophical problems, is a peculiarly sensible way of revealing the Indian woman's nature, on grounds not primarily biological, psychological, economical, sociological and political but essentially literary, though the later may at times partake of all these modes. Here it is a question of the Indian woman defining herself by a set of relationships and modes of conduct within a created society. It is through her
that the artist gives loving form to Indian life in general and through her we try to see the reality.

1.6 WOMEN IN R.K.NARAYAN’S NOVELS AND THE SCOPE OF THIS STUDY.

In the seven long decades of a widely acclaimed career as a novelist, Narayan has dealt with a panopoly of themes and motifs.

.... the place of the woman in Indian society, the disruptive influences of modernity, the status of the wife and the mother in a society influx, the femme fatale, the crumbling of the joint family and similar olden institutions, the limitation of the newer materialistic way of life, the consequences of flouting time - honoured codes of behaviour, the impact of Western cultural concepts, the Indian woman’s passive or assertive adjustment to Western and readjustment to traditional values, the validity and relevance of Hindu cultural and religious concepts such as Karma, Mayic philosophy, life after death, renunciation and acceptance; and finally a lively, sardonic discussion of new theories free love,
women's liberation birth control and their implication on characters both male and female the varied options available to modern Indian woman from traditional mother to manless life style. (Harrex 41)

are the feminine themes dealt by Narayan, with local habitation and colour in his novels.

Woman in his fiction is the powerful vehicle for the exposition of the author's perception and she cannot be ignored or dumped together with other minor characters Narayan's women play an important role sometimes passively and at times aggressively in a believable net work of family, religion and society.

The women, whether she is the active feminine or the passive, has her own place, her own corner of acceptance in the Malgudian setting with its sense of place, social interaction and interior consciousness.

(Coole 113 –133)

The issue of woman, the woman torn between her career and her home, between her needs of nurturance and autonomy, between her pull towards modernity and her bias in favour of tradition and superstition – all these are present in Narayan's fiction.
In the presentation of women in his novels, R.K. Narayan has projected three different images. They are the traditional women, transitional women and the modern women. The women under the first category are the Sita-Savitri type. They are docile, submissive, powerless, dependent, oppressed and depressed. They are fettered by domestic injustices and tyrannical customs. They perfectly fit into the code of Manu, the famous codifier of Hindu Laws. Accordingly she is viewed solely as subject mother and wife. She is never allowed to be independent. She is under the custody of either her parents or husband and in later stage her son. R.K.Narayan’s early novels are crowded with such traditionalists.

In the third chapter she is pictured as a dutiful daughter, obedient daughter-in-law, docile and submissive wife, loving and sacrificing mother and dominating mother-in-law. The most respectful period of her life, the old age also is pictured colourfully in this chapter. R.K.Narayan’s Savitri in ‘The Dark Room’ is the perfect example of a typical traditional Indian wife. Her character is analysed in detail in this chapter. Apart from Savitri, all the other women characters in R.K.Narayan’s novels such as Swami and Friends (1935), The Bachelor of Arts(1937), The English Teacher (1945), Mr. Sampath (1949), The Financial Expert (1952, Waiting for Mahatma (1955), The Guide (1958), The
Vendor of Sweets (1967) and The world of Nagaraj (1990) are analysed in detail in this chapter.

From this self-effacing and self-sacrificing women, Narayan move on to the women of the second category, that is the transitional women. The fourth chapter deals with women of the transitional period. They are a fine mixture of both tradition and modernity. Due to their new found awareness, they cannot remain happy in either roles. The political, social and cultural changes awakened their 'self' and thereby they slowly started to come out of their shackles. But being the beginners they dare not give up tradition completely and become modernist whole-heartedly. Though they were willing to accept and adjust with the changing trends, they were so deep rooted in tradition that finally they reconcile with their traditional roles. Women of this type are called transitional women. Such women are found in R.K. Narayan's 'The Dark Room', 'The Guide' and 'Talkative Man'. The marked features of these women are they are submissive as well as dominating, timid and brave, dull and inquisitive, silent and loud and dependent as well as independent.

Women of the last category are the modern women. The fifth chapter deals with this type. The modern women are educated, employed, self-reliant, powerful and dominating. They are no longer the shadow or the mirror image of their husbands. They are strong-willed, sensitive and intelligent. They have
lifted up their romantic views to take a hard look at society’s injustices towards them. The stark reality has exploded the Cinderella syndrome. They have now understood that in real life Cinderella does not get her prince and that life is never a rosy dream. Hence they keep their eyes open to see the new dawn through their own eyes. In the novels a modern woman is pictured as a redeemer, a reformer around whom social changes whirl. She is thrown into a whirlpool of a world along with the men and is burdened with great many choices and responsibilities. R.K. Narayan’s Daisy in ‘The Painter of Signs’, Bharati in ‘Waiting For Mahatma’ and few minor characters such as Gangu, Shantabai and Ponni in ‘The Dark Room’ are fine examples of women who are modern in their thought and action. A careful study of these women is made in the fifth chapter.

The last chapter serves as a conclusion for this study. R.K. Narayan’s excellence as an Indo-Anglian Novelist, his remarkable place in Indo-Anglian Literature, his speciality in picturing female characters, the steady growth of feminine consciousness and individual thinking in his women characters and the various possible reasons for this gradual progress and its outcome are dealt in detail in this concluding part. It also provides possible remedies for the problems faced by women of all the three categories.