Chapter - III

Portrayal of Women in the Early Novels of R. K. Narayan
It is the long denunciation of feminine qualities that has gone deep into the blood and bones of women. In this country, there are religious scriptures like *Manusmriti*, five thousand years old and they suggest that if you want to have peace in your house, giving a good beating to the women once in a while is absolutely necessary. She should be kept almost imprisoned, and that is how she lived in different cultures. There is a considerable ambiguity about the nature and status of women in Indian society. She is given exalted status in *Manusmriti* by saying:

"Where women are worshipped, Gods reside there".

Indeed, to understand her complex and rich personality is as enigmatic and difficult as to portray climatic factors (like wind). This study attempts to analyze all the women characters both major and minor in the novels of R. K. Narayan. The focus will be on traditional female characters and how they move out confinement in search of a better independent life. Exploring the various aspects of women’s psyche an attempt is made to understand her self-realization, her struggle to survive in the male dominated society, how she strengthen herself and at last her progress to self definition and fulfillment.
Here in this chapter, the focus would be on discussing Narayan’s early novels from strictly tradition bound society. They portray conventional women characters. In the early novels his women characters largely confirm the traditional role and he exalts her angelic qualities. From the beginning of his writing career Narayan was aware of Indian socio-cultural milieu in which, women’s identity, soon after her marriage, is absorbed in that of her husband. She had to perform number of duties and no rights were granted to her. She is ‘an angel in the house’, taking care of her husband and children. The marriage vows emphasized an adoring partnership. But she entered into an agreement, which denied not only her emotional but legal and economic rights.

Narayan is highly spoken of as a detached observer of life and its beguiling presentation. If one goes through the earlier novels of R. K. Narayan, one hardly has any difficulty to understand his true spirits. These earlier novels are Swami and His Friends (1935), The Bachelor of Arts (1937), The Dark Room (1938), The English Teacher (1946), Mr. Sampath- The Printer of Malgudi (1949) and The Financial Expert (1952).

Swami and Friends is an excellent story with two women appearing in the background of the story- the mother and the grandmother. The author introduces the first woman character Granny
after twenty pages, shows that they just provide supportive role in the story. Indian reader ‘becomes nostalgic almost’ while going through the pages. This novel of boyhood is readable for the sheer joy it unfolds through the series of episodes.

The grandmother is rather garrulous lady and loves to talk elaborately about the events of the past. The novelist makes us smile with an account of her elaborate bed.

“In the ill-ventilated dark passage between the front hall and the dining room, Swaminathan’s grandmother lived with all her belongings, which consisted of an elaborate bed made of five carpets, three bed sheets, and five pillows, a square box made of jute fiber, and a small wooden box containing copper coins, cardamoms cloves and areca nuts.”

She is very old and passes all her time in her ill ventilated room recollecting and talking about her past memories. But often her narration is confused and rambling. Swami, like Narayan, hates school and education, loves to spend time with his friends and lives with his grandmother. The most lovable person of Narayan's family was his grandmother, with whom he spent his childhood in Madras. She looked
after his needs, taught him multiplication, the Tamil alphabet, Sanskrit *shlokas* in praise of goddess Saraswati. The most important was that granny kept a strict watch on his behavior. He recalls:

"My Grandmother's preoccupations were several and concerned a great many others, she was a key figure in the lives of many. My Grandmother was an abiding influence. Grandmothers were in those days very important. They are no longer so – have disappeared."²

Not only was she *a key figure* in the Narayan household, but she became an epitome of all the grandmothers in the novels of Narayan. Swami's granny was benign old lady. Swami enjoyed listening stories in her lap.

"After the night meal, with his head on his granny's lap, nestling close to her, Swaminathan felt very snug and safe in the faint atmosphere of cardamom and cloves."³

Swami used to share every little secret of his school with her grandmother, but she hardly remembers anything. She mixes up different
incidents that took place at different time. She glorifies and exaggerates the stories of her husband. For example, when Swami tells her that Rajam’s father is the SSP of Police, she at once begins to talk about her husband who was a powerful magistrate and the police trembled before him, and the dacoits run away in fear. Grandmother is always pampering as she loves child so much that even she cheerfully bears his rude behavior. Complaining stomachache, she calls Swami and appealed him to bring it without delay. But this imposition of time irritates him; he throws down the coins and said:

“If you want it so urgently, you had better go and get it yourself.”

Swami took the three paisa but instead of returning home he reached play-ground. His imagination conjured before him visions of Granny withering in pain but in acute agony when he returns home he found the same welcoming warmth from Granny. She plays an important role in moulding the personality of Swami. His Granny tells him stories from Indian myths and legends, and so his mind is well-stocked with the stories of Hindu gods and goddesses, but Swami’s rhythmic snoring punctured her narrations.

Only problem she is having is not following chronology, mixing the events. She had appalling ignorance about the cricket. There is a
special emotional value of the grandmother in the child-life. A woman presented as the grandmother in this novel of R. K. Narayan has a specific role to play in the socio-psychological development of the child. Caring and Sharing is the essence of grand motherhood. Swami very friendly, can advice and explain Granny on any subject. She loves talking to Swami. Swami’s father interrupted when they were talking about M.C.C. (Malgudi Cricket Club) Granny says:

“Don’t tease the boy. The poor thing! He has been trying to tell me all sorts of things. You are not in the habit of explaining things to me. You are all big men………….”

Here are the happiest years of Swami’s life described in the playful mood; and his grandmother is always ready to impart her rich experience in a humorous manner. Though passively, but she is present in the world of Swami’s dreams, promises, betrayal, disappointment and excitement. All the incidents can be seen in the intense light of their immortal relation.

Swami’s mother is another character who is always careful and conscious about him. She is a kind and affectionate mother who loves her son very much, but also sees it that her love does not spoil her son. Like a
caring mother she doesn’t like Swami’s wandering in the terrible sunshine:

“Where are you going?
No where.
Where were you yesterday at this time?
Here.
You are lying, you were not here yesterday.
And you are not going out now.
That is right. Mother added, just appearing from somewhere, there is no limit of his loafing in the sun. He will die of sunstroke if he keeps on like this.”

Swaminathan’s father’s behaviour is always intolerable to him. He is always afraid of his father as he is very strict, but he finds himself very comfortable with his mother. Swami finds warmth and calm shelter in the lap of his mother. The role of Swami’s mother and her relationship with a child in the Indian tradition is sublime one. She is a pious, docile lady, who does her best to minister the needs of the family and to provide Swami with delicious dishes. Swami finds himself uncomfortable, when he does not see his mother. His granny told him that he was going to have a brother.
“Mother had been abed for two days. Swaminathan missed her very much in the kitchen, and felt uncomfortable without her attention.”

Narayan vests her character in his writings in a traditional grab. Her pitiable financial dependence is described in so many incidents. For example, the incident wherein Swami needed six annas to give it to the coachman, to convert them into six rupees, both the mother and the Grandmother haven’t that little amount to spare. Even she has to ask for money to her husband because the tailor has been pestering her for last four days. Male dominance is obvious in this incident when Narayan writes:

“Returned to his bureau, searched for the keys, opened it, took out a purse, and gave her the change.”

Sympathetic towards Swami, she throws away rational thinking when he pretends illness. Swami could bunk school as his mother is easily taken in, and with all affection and care she look after him. Her self image is of a home-maker. She is an embodiment of self-denying personality of a woman. If we consider *Swami and Friends* is story of a school boy it matures as Chandran, a college student in *The Bachelor of Arts*. Another
novel published by Narayan in 1936. The story introduces romantic characters Malathi and Susila to add spice in the story. The rigid caste system and astrological hurdles frustrated Chandran to the point of renouncing the world and becoming Sadhu. Chandran’s excitement to marry Malathi ended in high fever:

“Our though unmarried she belongs to some other caste? A marriage would not be tolerated even among sub-sects of the same caste. If India was to attain salvation, these water-tight divisions must go—community, caste, sects, sub-sects and still further divisions. He felt very indignant.”

It was a silly infatuation that ended drastically. A daughter in the family poses a great difficulty to parents. Marriage opportunities being limited owing to consideration of caste and community, men have to spend beyond his means to give an attractive dowry to the bridegroom and his family members. Sometimes families are absolutely impoverished by this. Chandran’s mother was curious to know about how they are going to spend in a marriage? At this point Shastrigal replies:

“I think they are prepared to give a cash dowry of about two thousand rupees, silver
vessels and presents up to a thousand, and spend about a thousand on the wedding celebrations. These will be in addition to about a thousand worth a diamond and gold on the girl.”

Listing to this Chandran’s mother was slightly disappointed at the figures. Presenting the Indian society in the typical manner Narayan writes that marriage is not a mere private affair. So, the individuals have not much to do in setting marriages. It is the parents, astrologers or the caste that settles it. The system of early marriage is also an off-shoot of it. Chandran’s mother allegedly calls sixteen years old girl ‘hefty, middle-aged girl’. And when Malathi’s father refused very politely as the horoscope does not match, she expresses her anger by saying ‘This is what we get for trying to pick something from the gutter.’ To ‘keep her face in the town’ she cares more for the status than the happiness of his son. Mother sticks to the customs and traditions of the society. The marriageable age in those days was what we call child-marriage today. When Chandran declares that Malathi is getting on for sixteen, his mother screams with a great shock:

“Sixteen!” Mother screamed.
“They can’t be all right if they have kept
the girl unmarried till sixteen. She must have
attained puberty ages ago.”

Susila was fourteen when he agrees to marry her. Another system
to be noted is that the boy’s side never proposed first. The girl’s parents
take the initiative in the matter. Boy’s parents oblige the girl’s parents as
if they encash the barer cheque. Though having traditional thinking,
mother remains glorified character in the fiction. As Kailash, said:

“Mother is a sacred object. It is a
commodity, whose value we don’t realise as
long as it is with us. One must lose it to know
what a precious possession it is.”

Mother’s image as a home-maker is again intact in this novel also.
She had lot of work to do in the morning-‘tackling the milk-man, the
vegetable seller, the oil-monger, and the other trades people; directing the
work of the cook and of the servants; gathering flowers for the daily
worship; and attending to all the eccentricities and wants of her husband
and children.’ It is the morning time when she is over burdened with
variety of works.

In the third part of the novel when Chandran aimlessly wanders in
the different parts of South India, Mohan explained him new philosophy
of love and friendship and man-woman relationship. He explained that people married because ‘their sexual appetite had to be satisfied and there must be somebody to manage the house. There was nothing deeper than that in any man and woman relationship.’ Even Chandran’s father who is not very orthodox expresses his views on qualifications for marriage:

“Look here, you will never be qualified to marry unless you cultivate a lot of patience. It is the only power you will be allowed to exercise when you are married.”

While his mother who is conservative by nature thinks that:

“It is all a matter of fate……….You can marry only the person whom you are destined to marry and at the appointed time. When the time comes, let her be the ugliest girl, she will look all right to the destined eye.”

The girl who was destined for Chandran is Susila. Malathi no doubt, had once upset Chandran but the novel ends with an optimistic note. It gives us the message that life must flow on, in spite of rude set backs that hurdles the smooth progress. Chandran becomes the chief agent of *The Daily Messenger of Madras* (Now known as Chennai) which provides him handsome perks. Now he is settled and mature. He has a
sweet wife to look after his household affairs and life is fragrant with jasmine flowers and sandal paste:

“Susila, Susila, Susila, Her name, music, figure, face, and everything about her were divine. Susila, Susila,—Malathi, not a spot beside Susila; ..........There was a radiance about Susila that was lacking in Malathi.” 15

True enough, one lives and learns. Chandran’s innocent infatuation makes him experienced and mature. Chandran believes that the love in a socially arranged marriage is more successful. He glorifies the traditional concept of marriage.

The influence of Norwegian dramatist Henrik Ibsen and his play A Doll’s House is apparent in the next novel by Narayan in the feminist movement. His third novel, The Dark Room, in which woman is the victim and man is her constant oppressor. The Orient Paperbacks edition of The Dark Room carries an explanatory subtitle on its cover: A Moving Tale of a Tormented Wife. That is just what the novel is. He thought deeply and wrote:

"I was somehow obsessed with a philosophy of women 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 cunning that she herself began to lose all notions of her independence, individuality, stature, and strength. A wife in an orthodox milieu of Indian society was an ideal victim of such circumstances. My novel dealt with her, with this philosophy broadly in the background."\textsuperscript{16}

*The Dark Room*, again recommended by Graham Greene, was published Macmillan in 1938, and once more favourably reviewed. He had now written three novels. In many of Narayan’s novels, conservatism and reform are contrasted with the quiet irony and subtle humour. With this novel, we enter graver, more disturbing territory. Marriage is the common theme in these three novels and *The Dark Room* as Narayan describes as an early women’s liberation novel. In this we see how the traditional marriage can trap a wife in complete subservience. Love is not domination. How can you dominate someone you love? How can you make her dependent and still love? But that’s what goes on happening in this novel in the name of love, something else—a lust to power, to dominate the other. And the moment freedom is destroyed, love dies.
Savitri is married to a tin-god husband, Ramani. Her husband, the domestic tyrant, expects in his home life to be danced attendance upon by his wife. Even William Walsh says:

“The Dark Room is the account of marriage given throughout from the point of view of the wife, in which the image projected is that of the Indian woman as a victim, written, it should be remembered, some thirty five to forty years before the current talk of women’s liberation.”

The title and the name of the characters are taken from the traditional Indian mythology. They communicate the theme of the novel. *The Dark Room* reminds us of *Kop Bhavan* of Kaikeyi in the *Ramayana*. Savitri is the mythical heroine who worshipped the lord and saved her husband from the clutches of the death. Savitri is an outstanding representative of wifely devotion cited in the Indian legends. But Narayan’s Savitri is completely fed up with her husband and is tortured by him. She has been forced to become slave unwillingly. Naturally, she tries to revenge. This male chauvinist attitude hurts her. She hovers between the cook and the servants in her domain, the kitchen. Ramani was ‘eccentric and lawless in his taste’. Savitri cannot interrupt him in
any situation. As an old Chevrolet growls when it is taken out to go to the
office, calm fell in the house. She thought:

“How impotent she was, she thought; she
had not the slightest power to do anything at
home, and that after fifteen years of married
life. Babu did look very ill and she was
powerless to keep him in bed; 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.”¹⁸

She was perpetually hurt in the deepest core of her being. It
destroyed her dignity, her pride and her self confidence. A day before the
Navaratri, Savitri squatted down and wiped the dust off the dolls for the
display. Her childhood stirred her. Savitri felt sudden inexplicable self-
pity at the thought of herself as an infant. She remembers her sister who
is grown in a bulky woman now, with a doctor husband and seven
children. She thinks herself as a middle aged house wife with three grown
up children. She is sulky but not without any reason. This time, on the
eve of the Navaratri festival the light of the house goes off because Babu
tried to do electrical decoration in the doll’s pavilion. Finding the whole
house in darkness, Ramani recklessly curses everybody in the house and beats Babu badly. Savitri could not stand this inauspicious cursing on the auspicious day. She was helpless before him and mutely retires to the dark-room. Her husband severely ignores her absence. She refuses food and sulks in the dark-room. Savitri’s friend Janamma handles the situation and advises:

“Men are impetuous…………….As for me, I have never opposed my husband or argued 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 wife’s duty to feel so.”

In a typical manner Ranga, the cook in Savitri’s house also supports Janamma’s view by saying, ‘only once has my wife tried to interfere; and then I nearly broke her bones, she has learnt to leave me alone now. Women must be taught their place.’ Mari would be another supporting person to add: ‘they ought to be kept under proper control and then all would be well.’ Even an old priest also believes that, ‘if she won’t let you rest thrash her; that is the way to keep women sane. In these days you fellows are impotent mugs, and let your women ride about.’
These all are the representatives of the classical Indian concept of wifely functions and duties. According to S. R. Ramteke:

“Savitri’s predicament is primarily because of the fact that she lacks the moral courage to assert herself owing to the religious taboos, which have far reaching effect on the women folk in the Hindu society.”

Women occupy a position of subordination and subservience to man. Janamma went on in this strain for an hour, recounting instances of the patience of wives. She remembers that her own grandmother who slaved cheerfully for her husband who had three concubines at home; her aunt who was beaten everyday by her husband and had never uttered a word of protest for fifty years. Another friend of her mother’s who was prepared to jump into a well if her husband so directed her and so on, till Savitri gradually began to feel very foolish at the thought of her own resentment, which now seemed very insignificant. Savitri began to hate herself for her selfish gloom as she was spoiling the happiness of the two girls. Savitri’s friend Janamma is elderly, rotund lady who places men on a high pedestal and expected Savitri to be traditional stereotypes of sacrificing women. And it is peculiar to note here that woman like Janamma is satisfied in their limited role of a housewife and even she
advises Savitri to be an amiable, ordinary housewife. In a typical contrast to this R. K. Narayan brilliantly portrays the character of Gangu, who is an interesting character. She is religious, visiting temple regularly. She is not immoral. Narayan further adds:

“Savitri found Gangu fascinating. She had a humour, abundant frivolity, and picaresque ambition...........It was her ambition to become a film-star, though she lacked any striking figure or features or acting ability; she wanted to be a professional musician, though she had no voice; 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 become a Congress leader.”

Gangu is an ambitious lady, who spends her days in preparing to fulfil one or another ambition. For example, to serve in a public body she thought, she ought to have good knowledge of English. So, she reads fairy tales and also had a tutor, who made her to go through Scott’s novels and trained her in communicative skills in English. To prepare for her film career, she attends two Tamil pictures a week. She tries to look
glamorous by wearing crepe saris and wearing flower in her hair ‘in an eccentric manner.’ She talked irresponsibly and this makes her unpopular among the elderly society of South Extension. She is a wife of a school teacher and had four children. Her husband believed himself ‘a champion of women’s freedom’. He never interferes to his wife’s freedom. Gangu can leave home when she wants and can go without any escorts, where she likes. Savitri tried to maintain subtle balance between these two friends of her, one of them is popular as ‘restless rat’ and another is known to be ‘The temple chariot’. Coaxed by Janamma Savitri comes out of the dark-room.

Ramani adds marital unfaithfulness to his dictatorial brutality. Narayan has painted him in the darkest possible colours and Savitri’s sufferings in a limelight. Shanta Krishnaswamy has described him as “Every thing that a husband should not be”. He changes colours like a chameleon against Savitri and Shantabai. Looking at a point of view of Savitri, he is nagging, brow-beating, selfish and aggressive. But for Shantabai he is coaxing, caring lover. Ramani and Savitri (and their three children Balu, Kamala and Sumati) live happily enough till the sudden storm of Shantabai spoiled their domestic harmony. Marital infidelity is intolerable to her. When she becomes aware of her husband’s relationship with Shantabai, she cries:
“Do not touch me. You are impure. Even if I burn my skin, I cannot cleanse my skin; I cannot cleanse myself of the impurity of your touch.”

In the Indian mythology Savitri is an outstanding example. She brings back her husband Satyavan from the clutches of Yama (The God of Death), but in this fiction, Savitri goes directly against the traditional and classical role. She asserts her individuality independent to her husband. Her husband’s extra marital affair compels her to realise her substance. She is now aware of her independent existence. She says that ‘I am human being, you men will never grant that. For you we are playthings when you feel like hugging and slaves at other times.’ She does not remain in her devotional and submissive role throughout the novel. She realises that the fundamental fact in husband-wife’s relation is fidelity. Her husband’s callous behaviour strikes some fire in her and she resembles Ibsen’s Nora when she says:

“Do you think I am going to stay here?

……..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’ll starve and die in the open,
under the sky, a roof for which we need be
oblided no man...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, or her son’s.”

She realises the fact that women are not having dignified status in
the society, not only that but they don’t have fundamental right to live
like a human-being. Her status is of a slave and she depends upon her
husband, father and a son for her livelihood. Harsh experiences of life
have taught her that she is alone and possess nothing. She let herself out
of the house. She reached near the Sarayu River and thinks:

“Am I the same old Savitri? Or am I
someone else? Perhaps this is just a dream. And
I must be someone else posing as Savitri
because I couldn’t have had the courage to talk
back to my husband. I have never done it in my
life. I couldn’t have the courage to walk through
the streets at midnight.”

This is the time when she assesses herself. She thought that a
common definite thing in women’s life is fear. Fear dominates them from
cradle to the funeral pyre and beyond that fear of torture in the other world also. Her self-evaluation helps us to show her true metal. But fear of sin ruled her life, and at this point she tries to drown herself. She was saved by Mari, the lock-smith cum burglar. He takes her to his house, where Narayan is ready with another interesting female character. She is Mari’s wife, Ponni. She is a domineering character. She is a warm hearted amicable woman. She cheerfully welcomes Savitri to her hut. Narayan must have chosen this happy poor couple Ponni and Mari, to present the typical contrast to Savitri and Ramani, an unhappy middle class couple. When Savitri tells Ponni that her husband, whom she enslaved for years, left her for some other woman, Ponni advises her to ‘keep the men under the rod, and they will be all right. Show them that you care for them and they will tie you up and treat like a dog.’ She cannot think that any husband is unmanageable. Ponni counsels Savitri. She is harsh towards her husband but quite sensitive and soft towards Savitri. She lends her helping hand when Savitri does not want to live on charity. The author has thrown light at women’s liberation which was then taking shape in India under the impact of the west. Savitri is a representative of an average Indian woman whose most coveted career is marriage. She is shown as an uneducated woman with a traditional upbringing. She is economically dependent on her husband, while Ponni,
who belongs to the lower class, is earning her livelihood by the sweat of her brow. This is the why Savitri has to undergo terrifying experience of domestic slavery. Ponni is firm in tackling her man; While Savitri is weak and submissive.

The main reason for Savitri’s misery is the entry of Shantabai in her husband’s life. Another minor female character painted with different colours by R. K. Narayan. Shantabai married her gambler and drunkard cousin at the age of twelve. When she was eighteen, she left him as he ill-treated her. She joins Ramani’s Englabia Insurance Company. In employing her as the chief agent is as Ramani felt; ‘women would no way add profit to the company, though they added considerable colour to the office.’ Events of the fiction reach at the climax when Savitri’s favourite piece of furniture is given to her. Ramani is a soothing lover for Shantabai. Ramani loves Shantabai because she is self-possessed and educated woman. She can conquer her moods. She is an early incarnation of Rosie in The guide. Omar Khayyam’s Philosophy appealed her, “Dead is yesterday and unborn tomorrow……What, without asking whither hurried hence.” And she adds Khayyam is the only person in this world who would have understood the secret of her soul. And she quotes:

“Into this Universe and why not knowing, etcetera. I am as wind along the waste.”25
Narayan emerges as one of the most important novelist in presenting the realities of the women’s lives. Using the form of a fiction, he probed onto women’s search of her identity in the Indian socio-cultural milieu. In spite of being rooted in material experiences, Narayan’s women are able to move out of confinement in search of a better independent life. Savitri’s journey in search of her independent identity begins with her arrival at Sukkur village, where she is employed by the village priest. But soon she grew home-sick and she compares the comfort, security and togetherness of her home to her present predicament. She realizes her position of utter helplessness and isolation. She was furious with herself at this:

“What despicable creation 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…”

Nostalgia for children, home, and accustomed comforts seized her. She prefers previous condition than the present one and returns to her children. A passage in the novel, where she is fussy and over anxious about her husband and home reflects her Indian habit of acceptance. Here Narayan remains the detached observer, neither in favour of male chauvinism nor in defence of feminism. Men have placed women on a
pedestal visualising them as sacrificing them for the weal of men. All the scriptures sing the glory of sacrificing women. Ramani also thinks in the same manner:

“Of course, he granted, there was some sense in the Women’s Movement: let them by all the means read English novels, play tennis, have their All-India conference, and go to pictures occasionally; but that should not blind them to their primary duties of being wives and mothers.”

He thinks that India owed its spiritual eminence due to the fact that people here realise that a woman’s primary duty is being a wife and a mother. What woman retained her right of being called a wife who disobey her husband? All the ancient epics give us the stories of the women blindly following their husbands like a shadow following the substance. Savitri’s defeat is a blow to the women’s liberation movement, but perhaps R. K. Narayan intends to design her so. Narayan tries to explore the theme of economic independence through the relationship between Ramani and Shantabai in this novel. Savitri’s dependence, slavish status and question of her identity are compensated by Shantabai’s
economic independence. It is the reason why such relations are not openly discussed in the society. P.S. Sundaram rightly remarks;

“It is the sort of relationship that takes place in every society where the old double standards are still valid, and the women are economically so helpless that they just have to lump what they do not like.”

28

In typical contrast to marital disharmony of Ramani and Savitri, the novelist tried to present the couple Krishna and Susila enjoying marital paradise in matured Indian sensibility in the next novel. The English Teacher was published in 1945, seven years after Narayan’s previous novel. “More than any other book,” says Narayan.

“The English Teacher is autobiographical in its content, very little part of it being fiction. “The English Teacher” of the novel, Krishna, is a fictional character in the fictional city of Malgudi; but he goes through the same experience I had gone through, and he calls his wife Susila, and the child is Leela instead of Hema. The toll that typhoid took and all the desolation that followed, with a child to look
after, and the psychic adjustments, are based on my own experience. The dedication of the book to the memory of my wife (Rajam) should to some extent give the reader a clue that the book may not be all fiction.”29

Privately Narayan said that but for the second half he would not have written the novel at all. If we regard this novel as a sequel to *The Bachelor of Arts* with the same hero we won’t be wrong. The story begins as a picture of the domestic bliss of traditionally arranged marriage. Description of ‘Sahadharmacharini’, *partner in a married life*, in Indian mythology perfectly suits Susila, the hero Krishna’s wife.

“She took sides with me in all my discussions and partisanship, and hated everyone I hated and respected everyone I respected…She was my cash-keeper…All went very well as long as she was reigning supreme in the kitchen.”30

Husband’s love for wife is brilliantly portrayed in this novel. The thrills of romantic love can be seen scattered everywhere in this novel. That’s why Krishna calls Susila ‘a divine creature’, and in parody of Wordsworth’s poem on her, calling her ‘a phantom of delight’. Susila is deeply religious by nature. And this novel also deals with attaining
spiritual maturity. She daily worships lord. She has a small pedestal in the corner of the house, where she worships the images of the God. She stands there offering flowers; lightening two lamps in the morning. Closing her eyes she prays with her lips moving tightly. Krishnan often mildly jokes about her muttering by telling her Yogi. She treated that reference with utmost indifference, as if she is the master of universal secrets.

In Susila, we see the depth and strength of a girl from a traditional Indian upbringing. She also possesses the serenity of psyche which is the most powerful part of the Indian sensibility. She is a good combination of mental as well as physical beauty. Susila’s tall-slim stature, dusky complexion and smiling eyes reflect her inner purity. Krishna was struck by her beauty when he meets her at the railway station. Krishna writes a poem in her appreciation:

“She was a phantom of delight
When first she gleamed upon my sight:
A lovely apparition, sent
To be a moment’s ornament.”

It went on for thirty lines ending:

“And yet a spirit still, and bright
With something of an angle-light”31
Susila has a well defined place in Krishna’s life. She is undemonstrative. She is educated and very much interested in reading literature. It can be seen from her library which includes Lamb’s *Short stories from Shakespeare*, Pal grave’s *Golden Treasury* and a book of hymns by some Tamil poet. Before the birth of her daughter Leela, she was reading *Ivanhoe*. But later on her maternal duties hinder her. Susila believes that a small family is a happy family. When she visits the temple of Lord Srinivasa, one old lady blessed her that May God blesses you with numerous children. She laughs and replies, ‘We have one and we are satisfied with one.’ This is the result of her advanced approach in family planning. Now-a-days we need more and more Susilas to demonstrate that the equal rights should be given to the girl child also. Here we talk about equal rights and opportunities not equality.

Susila is an expert in household management. She can make family budget with her sound estimates of the expenses. She has well-ordered and tidy kitchen. She often saves money giving reason that, ‘When we are old we must never trouble others for help. And remember there is a daughter, for whose marriage we must save’. She is the luckiest person on this earth as she has caring parents and in-laws. She lives in a financially stable paradise with her loving husband and darling daughter. R. K. Narayan’s description of her happy married life makes her the
symbol of perfect Indian housewife who is the minister in the household works, mother in the kitchen…

“Karyeshu Manrti, Charaneshu Dasi,
Bhojyeshu Mata, Shayaneshu Rambha,
Dharmanukula, Xamayadharitri, Bharaya
chshhanmavataiya Durlabha.”

She acquires fatal illness in the infected lavatory and she dies. Her life after her death is very much autobiographical. It seems that his personal loss is delineated in a perfect prose. R. K. Narayan has written in *My Days*:

“Within a hundred days of her arrival, Rajam had departed from this world. She caught typhoid in early May and collapsed in the first week of the June, 1939. …….I have described this part of my experience of her sickness and death in *The English Teacher* so fully that I do not and perhaps cannot go over it again.”

The sudden and untimely death of a woman ruins the home. Her husband resolves not to remarry. He brings up the child in a motherly
manner. He tried to survive and attain emotional stability after her death. Living without a woman is quite difficult for the male counterpart, whereas, woman did not have any option in those days. We believe in the immortality of the soul. Even after death she lives in the memories of her husband. Susila, whether alive or dead, continues to live in husband-wife relations portrayed by R. K. Narayan. The physical boundaries of the relationship dissolve in such romantic unity. At the end of the novel, *Ardhangini* the concept of woman conceived by the Indian culture is portrayed by the author in these words:

“We stood at the window, gazing on a slender, red streak over the eastern rim of the earth. A cool breeze lapped our faces. The boundaries of our personalities suddenly dissolved. It was a moment of rare, immutable joy- a moment for which one feels grateful to Life and Death.”

Power of Money and Sex- the two basic drives of human life provide the theme to the author in his novel *Mr. Sampath- The Printer of Malgudi*. In Mr. Sampath Narayan presents the story of the printer of the weekly paper *The Banner*. Looking at the basic raw material of the novel, women characters like Shanti, Kamala, and Srinivasa’s wife are portrayed as a victim in a male dominated society. Here we also find
superbly portrayed contrast between life of an Indian widow and glamorous life of an actress in the character of Shanti.

Shanti is a woman who is in search of her independent identity in the orthodox society. She is born and brought up in Madras. She nurtures ambition of pursuing a career in the films as an actress. So, she applies as an actress in *The Burning of Kama*, a proposed film by Mr. Sampath. Sampath calls her for an interview and resolute in his mind to ‘make a star of her’. Shanti belongs to another caste and community altogether but she was introduced by Sampath as his cousin. ‘Meet my cousin Shanti, who is going to act Parvathi.’ She has bewitching charm and ravishing physical beauty. Looking at her perfect figure in a rosy complexion Srinivasa said to himself:

“It’s all nonsense to say that she does all this only to attract men. That is a self-compliment Man concocts for himself. She spends her day doing all this to herself because she can’t help it, any more than the full moon can help being round and lustrous.”

Shanti, a widow of the forest officer wants to join film-line to achieve economic stability. She is victimised by Mr. Sampath. Mr. Sampath has become extremely careful towards Shanti and neglects his
family responsibilities. He is not at all sorry for his deed and justifies his extra-marital affair. When Srinivasa, out of pity for Sampath’s wife and her five children pleads him, he cunningly replies:

“Some people say that every sane man needs two wives- a perfect one for the house and a perfect one outside for social life…. I have the one. Why not the other? I have confidence that I will keep both of them happy and if necessary in separate houses. Is a man’s heart so narrow that it cannot accommodate more than one? I have married according to Vedic rites: let me have one according to the civil marriage law………”^{35}

He feels like ‘doing nothing illegal, to feel apologetic.’ After all religion permits men to marry many wives. He also declares that his wife and children shall lack nothing in life, either in affection or comfort. Without concerning Shanti Sampath has woven to marry her. Male like Srinivasa and Sampath find domestic duties an extra burden. His wife is driven to despair by his habits. Ravi, however, has been in love with a girl resembling Shanti and thinks that Shanti is that girl whom he has seen at Ishwara temple. He cannot bear someone putting his arms around
her except himself. When he sees Sampath-Shiva embracing her, while the film is being shot, he rushes to depart them and kisses her himself. Shocked by the sudden attack Shanti was frightened and denies to continue in the picture. She swears she will never come to studio again.

Shanti is a sufferer and victimised in both the cases, whether he may be Sampath or Ravi. She is blamed as a butterfly type of a woman because of her fascinating beauty. She wants to dismiss pain and sufferings from her life as a widow. She wants to change for better. She is a prey of the male chauvinistic society. She left a note when she left for Madras.

“I am sick of this kind of life and marriage frightens me. I want to go and look after my son, who is growing up with strangers. Please leave me alone and don’t look for me. I want to change my ways of living. You will not find me. If I find you pursuing me, I will shave off my head and fling away my jewellery and wear a white saree. You and people like you run away at the sight of me. I am, after all, a widow and shave my head and disfigure myself, if I
like. If it is the only way out I will do it. I had different ideas of film life.”

Film line is an illusory and unreal world. She left a note in which she clarified that her dreams are shattered by the harsh realities. When she refers that ‘you and people like you’, she emphasises the fact that men underestimate all the qualities and virtues of women. Beauty is the most important factor for them. But when she loses her beauty people like Sampath will not have any interest in her. She must be passing through the cyclic order of experience. She is unhappy with the treatment she has received as the prospective heroine of the film; and at last she frees herself from all these entanglements. R. K. Narayan presents all these characters in a unique method. They hardly appear directly in the important incidents of the novel. It is other character who constructs the whole portrait. M. K. Naik remarks with reference to Shanti:

“Even Shanti, infatuation for whom drives Ravi almost mad, appears to be an extremely sketchy figure. It is highly significant that we seldom meet her face to face throughout the entire narrative and what she does is mostly reported, even in the crucial episode where she runs away from Sampath.”
Narayan has tried his hand on a much wider canvass in portraying female characters of this novel. In an obvious contrast to beautiful actress Shanti, Kamala is a frail person of about thirty-five, neither very good-looking nor ugly. She is very short and wears faded sari full of smoke and kitchen grime. Kamala is hesitant, bashful and reserved in her behaviour for strangers. When Mr. Sampath introduces her to Srinivas, she stands behind the door and does not come out. At that time Mr. Sampath sketches her in his words:

“What is the matter with you, behaving like an orthodox old crony of seventy-five, dodging behind doors and going into Purdha? Come on, come here, there is no harm in showing yourself.”

Woman’s misery is at its worst when her husband is having an extra-marital affair. Kamala is a timid character. She does not have courage to tell her husband Mr. Sampath that the reason of her misery is his insensitive behaviour towards her. She is dying to grab his attention but he is a woman hunter even after fathering five children. Four of them are daughters and the youngest one is a son. Mrs. Kamala Sampath has heavy responsibility of rearing a big family but her views, attitudes and emotions do not have any place in her husband’s life. She does not have
courage to rebuke her husband like Savitri in *The Dark room*. Here R. K. Narayan presents helpless condition of pitiable Indian wife:

“His wife occasionally, waiting on him for his mood, asked him and all that he replied was: ‘You get what you need for the month.’………..You will be happy as long as you don’t expect more.”

Mr. Sampath is irresponsible, shameless husband and Kamala’s patience knows no limits. A woman having five children and a long time of married life comes to know about her husband’s infidelity, must be very shocking for the poor lady. Clearly speaking women’s liberation in *The Dark Room* dramatically changes in to fiasco in *Mr. Sampath- Printer of Malgudi*. She is a meek, obedient and traditional wife. She is without any trace of individuality.

Srinivas’s wife is another accommodating, docile and unassertive character. Mrs. Srinivas - we don’t have her name throughout the novel, is brought up in a very orthodox manner in her village. She can’t eat without bathe at first and ‘Hotel Food’ is unthinkable and untouchable item for her. She fasts for two days during the journey and reaches Malgudi from her village. Srinivas becomes incoherent because he neglected her letters informing her arrival. His wife is struggling too hard
to look cheerful when she reaches at the printing-press. R. K. Narayan beautifully portrays the pen picture of a neglected wife:

“She looked weary with the journey; her face was begrimed with railway smoke. With considerable difficulty she essayed a smile……..Now his wife burst into a sob as she asked: ‘what is the matter with you? Why do you neglect us in this way? You have not written for months; what have I done that I should be treated like this?’”

Srinivas’s wife is a domestic character. She is religious minded like traditional woman. She worships the image of Natraj daily and lights a lamp and incense stick in front of it. She is educated and keeps herself busy in reading some obscure novels in order to remain awake till the return of her husband Srinivas late at night. She has no importance in her husband’s life. She is driven to despair by his gross negligence of domestic duties:

“It was unnecessary for him to ask “What is the matter?” He knew that it must be the same set of causes over and over again: First and foremost his late coming; secondly, his lack of
interest in home-management; thirdly, his apparent neglect of his child; fourthly, insufficient money; and so on and so on stretching to infinity”

Srinivas is so much busy with his work that sometimes he feels and realises that his wife’s life is ‘lonely, bare life’. He ponders that he does not know the art of family life. There is lot of truth in his wife’s complaint. As a husband he had not the slightest notion how she spends her day. She is justified with her grievances as her husband also feels that ‘I have neglected her lately. It seems ages since I touched her.’ But his wife makes no notice of that and like typical docile wife she takes care of him and her son. She is a loving mother and is deeply concerned with the welfare of her child, Ramu. She waits for him eagerly to return from school and serves him affectionately.

She believes in the efficacy of incantations and rituals in curing Ravi’s madness, which she believes is the malignant influence of an evil spirit. She is very helping by nature. She helps Ravi’s mother in organising the ritual in her own house. Again she reveals her generosity and sympathy when she discloses to her husband Mr. Sampath’s flirtation with Shanti. She urges him to help poor lady, Mr. Sampath’s wife. She is cooperative and considerate towards other housewives depicted in the
novel. Ravi’s mother portrayed as the silent sufferer and tolerant lady as her husband is ‘unreasonable and difficult to manage’.

_The Financial Expert (1952)_ offers fascinating glimpse of Indian social life. It provides the demoralising effect of materialistic civilization. There are two women characters of little importance in the novel, Margayya’s wife, Meenakshi and his daughter-in-law, Brinda. For them low remarks have been done by male character Margayya:

“If women got on smoothly……….! Half of the trouble in this world is due to women who can not tolerate each other.”

Meenakshi is homebound, ordinary and conservative housewife. She is restricted to four walls of the home. She obeys her husband but he has not much regards for her. He did not believe in employing servants at home and so his wife had to do all work. She knew that he viewed money as something to accumulate and not to be spent on increasing in one’s luxury in life. She knew all his idioms before he uttered it. Sometimes, when he saw her sitting at the fireplace, her eyes shrunken and swollen with kitchen smoke, he thinks that she looks ‘plebeian’ with ‘her faded jacket, her patched discoloured saree and her anaemic eyes’. With this R. K. Narayan reveals male dominating society fails to provide nourishing food and enough good clothes to the women. Still Margayya complains:
“How can anyone treat me respectfully when my wife is so indifferent looking?”

He thinks that society respects those who have beautiful wife. But he fails to realise that it is not her fault, but it is the result of mal nutrition. Sometimes in a reflective mood, he thinks that if he is having more money, he could give those medicines to his wife and his wife may look like other women. At last his realisation is confined to his acquisition of wealth only. He thinks that daughters are the cause for the ruin of her father’s prosperity. Women were the sufferers in the prevailing dowry system. In this novel too, Margayya’s chief consideration in selecting Brinda for his son is that her father owns a tea-estate in Mempi Hills which yields an annual income of ten thousand rupees. Narayan definitely hints the prevailing social evil- dowry and its impact on the contemporary society and especially on women. Margayya’s first love is money and then his son. His wife owns secondary place in his life. Meenakshi’s general behaviour satisfies his male ego:

“Much of his self assurance was returning in the presence of his wife. All the despair and inferiority that he had been feeling was gradually leaving him. He felt more self-confident and aggressive. He felt, he could hold
out his hand and grab as much of the good things of life as he wanted."

She has no place in moulding her son’s personality. She loves her child but it was difficult for her to manage his childish mischief. She has no comment to offer in anything related to Balu, his son. She has to listen with patience when her husband says that ‘You’ll see what I’ll do to that little monkey, that devil you have begotten.’ When Balu left home, she lost the taste of food. She brooded over her son day and night. Listening to the news of Balu’s death, she fell on the floor and rolled in anguish. But the news was wrong. The effect of home coming of the son is almost magical to her mother. She seemed to have become entirely new person. She looked more youthful with sparkling eyes and tucking jasmine string in her nicely combed hair. Meenakshi is shrewd enough to preserve happiness of her house by keeping pace with her husband and her son. But Balu’s wife Brinda fails to do so.

Brinda comes from a rich family. She is not very comfortable in a joint family. She hardly knows how to boil water or even light the oven. Obviously she does not help her mother-in-law in her household work. And she fails to lead better life with her husband. Brinda suffers silently and fails to inform her in-laws about Balu’s degradation.
She is proven to be timid wife who tries to hide facts like any other Indian woman because she is afraid of her husband. As she says:

“I am afraid of him. …If I speak he threatens me to drive out. …Even now, please don’t tell him that I have said anything.”

She spoke these words when her father-in-law Margayya, with genuine sympathy asked her about Balu’s secret activities as he demands for the share in a property. She burst into tears. Like all other traditional wives she does not retort. She suffers due her husband’s bad habits. Meena Shirwadkar rightly points out:

“Narayan, with remarkable insight, shows the suffering of middle-class wives. Brinda… though just married, has to suffer like her own mother-in-law, for Balu, surrounded by giggling girls, he does not care for her.

Total submission, even when the husband neglects his wife, is an idea ingrained in the women themselves.”

To sum up, after the close reading of these female characters in the early novels of R. K. Narayan, it can be said that our traditional male oriented society does not allow Narayan to achieve required magnitude to
present the rebellious female characters, though he tried to present it in a sublime manner. They neither belong to Utopia nor to the Ivory tower. They evolve against the changing scenario. These female characters from the early novels put a big question mark about the status of the women in the family as well as society. Women’s pitiable plight in the Indian society, their dependent and slavish status in the family, child marriages, lack of freedom and self reliance, and economic independence are some of the issues taken by Narayan in his earlier novels, but with typical contrast to that, he also presented the dawn of women’s awakening and enlightenment, their substance taking definite shape. She is having exceptional individualistic traits and ambitions. She strongly revolts against traditions. The emphasis is on artistic revelation of women and her problems without any tint of feminism in it. With the typical female characters like Grand mother, Mother, Susila, Brinda, Kamala, Malathi, and Shanti; Savitri tries to revive classical Indian concept of self-denying personality of a woman in the early novels of R. K. Narayan.
References and notes:


4. ibid. pg.127

5. Ibid. pg.130

6. Ibid pg.83

7. Ibid pg.117

8. Ibid pg.23


10. Ibid pg.78

11. Ibid pg.70

12. Ibid pg. 98, 99.

13. Ibid pg.80

14. Ibid pg.158

15. Ibid pg. 162, 164.


19. Ibid pg.46


22. Ibid pg.76.

23. Ibid pg.87, 88.

24. Ibid. pg. 90

25. Ibid. pg.117

26. Ibid. pg. 146

27. Ibid. pg. 140-141


31. Ibid. pg.46.
33. Narayan R.K., op. cit, pg.184
35. Ibid. pg. 179.
36. Ibid. pg. 218.
39. Ibid., pg. 138
40. Ibid., pg. 32
41. Ibid., pg. 38
43. Ibid., pg.20
44. Ibid., pg.22
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