CHAPTER FOUR

THE EXISTENTIAL AGONY OF NARAYAN’S WOMEN

The landscape of contemporary literature has been transformed by the rising tide of globalization; texts are crossing the borders of nation and cultures as newly emerging myriad voices of those once considered the subaltern. The Indian English novels were developed as a subaltern consciousness as a reaction to break away from the colonial literature. Hence post colonial Indian literature witnessed a revolution. The writers started employing the techniques of mixed language, magic realism garnished with the native themes. Thus, from the post colonial period Indian English literature ushered in to the modern and then the post-modern era.

The post colonial Indian English writers have focused on major issues relating to woman such as her awakening to the realization of her individuality, her breaking away with traditional image, her relation with man and her aims and objectives which is still a contemporary issue. They have developed their own perceptions concerning the revival of woman, her urge and needs, her problems and predicaments and her survival tactics in view of their social conditions. But the common denominator in their works is the victimization of woman by patriarchy. The transformation of the idealized woman into an assertive self-willed woman searching and discovering her true self despite existential struggle has been Narayan’s forte.

The primary objective of literature has always been projection of the social situation and reflection of social consciousness. Changes in social conditions and attitudes have a direct bearing on and are reflected in literature. In Indian society, position of women has always been paradoxical. She has been the key mother figure in the family who is to be revered but still has been forced to live life of slavery, suffering subjugation. The image of women is discernible in the works of early writers like Mulk Raj Anand, Bhabani Bhattacharya, R.K.Narayan and many other women writers.
Since ages women under patriarchy are subjected to too much of social ostracism. They have been discriminated on the grounds of sex. The life of the women lived and struggled under the oppressive mechanism of a closed society are reflected in the writings of numerous women writers of the postcolonial India. The last quarter of the century proves to be the milestone for the theoretical upsurge in feminine writings in particular several writers have portrayed varied facets of Indian womanhood, both traditional and modern, and have given voice to their assertion of the rights.

In India, men make fun of a woman if she speaks of freedom. Men appear to think that when a woman becomes aware of her capabilities, she stops being a woman. Here lies their faulty thinking. The word ‘freedom’ is misconceived, misunderstood. Freedom from whom? Freedom from what?? In fact, the Indian woman has chained herself to her own misconceived ideas. She has to break the shackles around her. She has to see things in their true perspectives. She has to recognise her own true self and get rid of the fears in her mind. . Although, R.K.Narayan has portrayed a variety of characters from the South India in his stories and novels yet it is not easy in reality to caste fear of society and its dictates to lead an independent individual life.

He has created a vivid world of life characters describing numerous Indian myths, stories and legends and the process portraying different categories of people.

Narayan’s women traces the progress of social development and women’s position in society. One should recall Lord Krishna’s words to Arjuna:

\[I \text{ have given you knowledge. Now you make the choice. The choice is yours. Do as you desire.}\]

Implicit in this the recognition that a woman’s destiny is ultimately in her own hands.
I believe as Albert Camus says: *that the greatness of an artist is measured by the balance of the writer maintains between the values of creation and values of humanity.*

Critics of R.K. Narayan often contend that he is an acute observer of life and a storyteller, par excellence, but not a social commentator in the sense Mulk Raj Anand, Bhabani Bhattacharya and Kamala Markandaya are. In order to substantiate their thesis these critics and scholars refer to Narayan’s views expressed in The Reluctant Guru, that a novel is about an individual living his life in a world imagined by the author, performing a set of actions (up to a limit) contrived by the author.

T.D. Burton criticizes Narayan for his lack of commitment: He says:

> The work of R.K. Narayan.... presents very different problems. He seems quite lacking in the national self-consciousness as Mr. Rao or the social racialism of Dr. Anand. His work is unpretentious, untheoretical, fluently professional.

But if one observes Narayan's writings, one finds that objectivity and impartiality are the hallmarks of Narayan’s genius. He presents life as it is without taking sides. It is indeed difficult to determine where the novelist’s own sympathies lie. His writings lack commitment in the sense that they are free from ideological prejudices. Narayan depicts with great impartiality characters like Ramani, Raju, Vasu, Sampath, Margayya are not monsters of wickedness but erring mortals who are essentially human beings and as such have much good in them.

It is also a commonplace of criticism that Narayan’s heroines are more attractive, more comprehensive and more lively than his heroes. Savitri, Shantabai, Susila, Rosie, Grace, Bharati and Daisy have no counterparts in the Indian English Literature.

He can be compared to William Shakespeare, who is much interested in the creation of wonderful and marvellous women characters, full of vigour and
vitality. Juliet, Cleopatra, Lady Macbeth Desdemona and Miranda too have no counterparts in English literature.

But the basic difference between the two writers is that Shakespeare’s heroines act as follies to their heroes. On the other hand Narayan’s heroines have voiced strongly and enthusiastically for their rights as well as their prestige. Narayan’s heroines are conscious about their existence in orthodox and traditional society which does not allow described freedom for them. The concept of freedom is not just confined to the realms of social and economic freedom. It is the freedom of mental makeup and emotional attitude. They desire self-fulfillment; they demand the rightful place, recognition, regard which are prompted by an inner urge to make her existence a meaningful one.

An Indian woman is ruled by social customs and conventions because they are linked at some point of with religion. In India a married son is not expected to touch the feet of his mother but his wife is bound to do so. Mothers willingly sacrifice their own comforts to look after their children. Narayan draws his characters from a storehouse of myths and legends from the Indian literature. Savitri is compared to Sita from the epic The Ramayana. Sita, who is the embodiment of virtues has to be emulated by every woman who stands for her purity, chastity, unselfishness, gentleness and faithfulness.

His first heroine before independence and during the freedom struggle was Savitri. This was a period when remarkable changes occurred not only in Indian society but also in women’s priorities and choices.

Their approach to cultures, traditions, customs and social norms were totally different. Though we find R.K.Narayan’s contradictory attitude towards tradition and modernity, we must remember that his upbringing has been traditional. According to him Indian tradition is the symbol of Indianness which can never be eliminated. He throws light on the reality that the suppression upon women is not really from the western culture but really from the oppressive factors of their own tradition. So in his fictions one can notice that his women are those who have the courage to show contempt to their
tradition and start a new life. They are those ‘new women’ who face the ups and downs in life with fortitude.

There are three types of new women on the basis of assertion that takes place in the postcolonial Indian English literature.

1) Those, who assert for their self, challenge their victimization and in search for their identity.
2) Those, who are extra ambitious and reject the traditional value system of the Indian society.
3) Those, who assert without blowing their own trumpets or without offending any.

R.K. Narayan has dealt with two types of women. The main focus is that the women should be heard. The women should possess a profound inner strength which allows them to find freedom through realization of their individual truth. Indian women do not want discard their social values and realize their limitations and try to seek their identity which is vital for their survival unlike their counterparts of the West. Indian women is caught in the flux of tradition and modernity. On one hand there is a burden of the traditional past chasing her like a shadow and on the other hand she has certain aspirations of future to look forward to. Some of his women in his novels at one point of time do face existential crisis but have taken decisions and have made a choice independently to lead a meaningful life. The existential struggle to establish one’s identity, to assert one’s individuality and the desperate fight to exist as a separate entity is the foremost desire of the women in some of his novels. It is rightly said that Narayan holds the key of the Indian soul. His characters embody the Indian psyche with all its accompanying hopes and anxieties.

In four of his novels: *The Dark Room*, *The English Teacher*, *The Guide* and *The Vendor of Sweets*, he presents the husband-wife relationship or the relationship between the beloved. The relationship between Ramani and Savitri in *The Dark Room*, Marco and Rosie in *The Guide* clearly present a platonic relationship where there is no respect for each other and no peace of
mind in marital relationship. The husbands like Ramani and Marco are not able to fulfill the desires of their respective wives-Savitri and Rosie. The relationship between Krishna and Sushila or Jagan and Ambika bring hopes, happiness and peace to them.

In the novel *The Dark Room*, Narayan has not only highlighted the predicaments faced by Savitri but also the Other woman in Ramani’s life. Shantabai, who is the cause of marital disharmony in Ramani’s life too has faced difficulties in her life. His technique of juxtaposing both the types is commendable, the meek and the liberated.

R.K. Narayan, asserts that he does not give any social or political messages on her behalf. He accepts her sensibly, gracefully and whimsically. Having learned acceptance, he does not seek to escape life or to evade it. He lays down the chips fairly enough. He does not show any bias towards either the passive or the active feminine. Both, Savitri and Shantabai have their own perceptions to live their lives. His portrayal of these heroines contains varying levels of meaning. The gesture of independence on the part of the female is difficult to evaluate. He regrets that the woman is unable to achieve a valuable kind of independence--- to be complete human being.

The first step before actualization is the realization of one’s predicament. Narayan has himself admitted that he was obsessed with the philosophy of woman as opposed to man, her constant oppressor. This must have been an early testament of the women’s liberation movement.

Walsh adds:

*A woman in an orthodox milieu of Indian society was an ideal victim of such circumstances. R.K. Narayan’s novels dealt with woman and with this philosophy at the back of his mind.*

**Savitri** in *The Dark Room* symbolizes the Indian wife who has the capacity for endurance. Her husband is a tyrant and occasionally pampers her. She is a tradition bound woman who compromises her own comforts for the sake
of the family. She is upset when her husband beats up their son or when her daughter does not eat well. She is also anxious about the health of her husband and children and tries to keep them happy.

Savitri tolerates everything silently but the relationship between her husband Ramani and Shantabai shocks her beyond grief. He gets infatuated by Shantabai, a colleague of his and brushes aside Savitri’s protests. Shanta Krishnaswamy retorts:

Ramani is everything that a husband should not be--- he is a cruder Helmer to a gentler Nora. The fact that he provides for the household he feels makes him the Lord and master of all he surveys at home.\

Ramani believes in separate codes for men and women, separate codes for wife and mistress as:

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

Like Isben’s Nora, she refuses to be treated like a doll or a pet dog, she in a depressed state decides to leave home, her husband and her family. She doesn’t want to take anything with her, believing that woman can possess nothing in this man’s world. She wails:
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.\textsuperscript{vi}

It is an echo of the emotional and psychological oppression faced by women and her dependence on the father, husband or son for her existence. She also is not able to believe that she back answered her husband, which she had never ever done in her life. Savitri is an ideal Indian wife. In a fit of mental agony, she walks out of her house and she attempts to commit suicide but is saved by Mari.

A.Hariprasana writes in this connection:

\textit{There is conflict within her between the traditional values of ideal womanhood where it is a sin even to talk back to one’s husband and disobey him and thus and her new found individuality.} \textsuperscript{vii}

Human life is a journey from childhood to old age and the span is punctuated by joys and sufferings. When Savitri is confounded with her new individuality, she realizes her situation is worse than her previous life at home. Her loneliness at the temple, stillness in the atmosphere makes her feel terrible. Her mental agony makes her feel pity for woman, who do not support or live without any support.

She laments:

\textit{What despicable creations of God are we that we can’t exist without a support.}

\textit{I am like a bamboo pole which cannot stand without a wall to support it.} \textsuperscript{viii}

The innerself of Savitri becomes conscious and rebellious of the traditional values of wifehood. Although she is not educated glamorous or romantic in her outlook, she has the courage to revolt against her husband for self-respect and search for identity and individuality. She discovers herself. She
protests the authority of the husband. She believes no more in traditions. She resolves not to accept food or shelter which she has not earned herself.

She decides to sort out her existential predicament herself. She is not able to suppress her maternal affections and emotions. Her emotional sentiments towards her children do not permit her to keep herself from her children. She returns home for her children and not for her husband Ramani. Her return cannot be called submission or surrender. She voices her rights, dignity and identity in an appropriate manner.

**Shantabai** is the office colleague of Ramani who hails from Mangalore and has her share of grievances. She was married to her cousin who was a drunkard and a gambler. She tried changing him but when he did not change himself, she decided to leave him. Her parents too did not support her decision and hence had to leave home. She decided to be on her own during this difficult part of her life’s journey. Narayan has thrown light on the existential issues faced by Shantabai. She was a courageous woman who decided to face her struggle with fortitude and managed to complete her graduation with the help of an aunt. During the interview, when Ramani asked Shantabai some details about herself, she says:

> I passed my B.A. three years ago. Since then I have been drifting about. I have odd teaching jobs and I have also been a companion to a few rich children. On the whole it has been a very great struggle.\(^ix\)

Critics have regarded her as a proverbial butterfly, the type of woman who imitates her western counterpart. In Shantabai, we find all the characteristics of a ‘coquette’ in Indo English literature. Narayan, skillfully portrays her every action and in his ironic, subtle fashion puts across the artificially behind it. He shows how she compresses her lips and ‘jerked her head in the perfect Garbo manner’.

Narayan portrays two women, whose existential anxieties differ. The traditional woman Savitri’s trauma, when she comes to know about the torrid affair between her husband and his office colleague and the modern woman
Shantabai’s concern, who has a disturbed past and at work place not able to fulfill her duties. Though, Savitri is not educated, glamorous and romantic in her outlook, she has the courage to revolt against her husband for self-respect, self-identity and individuality.

He also very subtly conveys that Shantabai too is in search of her own identity. Shantabai is not strong enough to bear any more failures. She was given an assignment and she was not able to complete it. She was given two months time and if she does not fulfill the demands, she would be dismissed. That had upset her. She went through her breakdown act and wants Ramani, a male member to console her. She says:

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

Narayan raises the question of woman’s freedom. He himself says: In the Dark room I was concerned with the showing the utter dependence of woman on man in our society.
Contrasted with Savitri are the other women characters in this novel: Gangu, her friend, and Ponni her saviour. Both of them are the companions of their husbands, being on equal footing and sometimes also having an upper hand. They think that no husbands are unmanageable in this world if he is handled properly.

Savitri reminds us of many mythological characters. She resembles Sita. The concept of myth invites our attention. Savitri like Sita is submissive and dedicated but went in to exile not as an act of obedience of her husband but is a revolt against male domination. This reminds us of Nayantara Sahagal’s quote:

   I try to create the virtuous ------the modern Sita if you like. My women are strivers and aspirers, towards freedom, towards goodness, towards compassionate world. Their virtue is a quality of heart and mind and spirit, kind of untouched innocence and integrity.
Savitri’s failure in her revolt against discriminating tradition of Malgudi instead of stopping the movement here comes as a source of inspiration for the future women. She comes back with a realization about what makes them subordinate to men and the reasons why the efforts failed. Narayan’s new woman may not have brought earth shaking changes to India yet she has certainly brought the changes not only in her man but also in the Indian society. It’s a brilliant portrayal of a woman who wants to save her family from crumbling but goes ahead to search her identity and becomes self-reliant. Apparently, the novel ends with a hope. Savitri had returned to fulfill her obligations towards her small children till they grow up and settle down. She hopes that her husband would come back to her. She will face her existential predicaments with fortitude. She has made this choice to lead a meaningful life.

**Rosie** in *The Guide*, has multiple predicaments which are a vicious circle of caste and birth and the stigmas attached to it. She gets herself educated and has a master’s degree in Economics. However, she soon finds out that Indian society shuns women who are not married and does not look at women leading a lifestyle without a companion with a kind eye. Like Shantabai in *The Dark Room*, Rosie too laments:

> That woman like her…… are not considered respectable; we are not considered civilized.\(^{xi}\)

Rosie has her own share of existential issues to tackle. She wants to pursue dancing but is all too aware of the stigma to a dancing girl. Faced with the choice of being a housewife or a dancer, she chooses the former. She is unable to suppress her desire for dancing which she has a natural talent for. But the art of dancing is looked down upon by the respectable conventional people. Rosie’s education does not make it any easier for her to rise out of her background and to enter the world of social responsibility. She answers Marco’s advertisement in the newspaper and gets married to him. She says that the women in her family were impressed by Marco as a man like him had decided to marry a woman of their class. It was rare and hence it was decided that she would give up the traditional art as it was worth the sacrifice.\(^{xii}\)
The relationship between Rosie and her husband Marco was a failure. Marco is not the kind of person who she could be happy with inspite of ‘a big house’, ‘a motor-car’, and his ‘high social standing’. Rosie could have been very happy as she was married to a wealthy and educated person. She herself had read the contents of the advertisement and had hoped a bright future with him. The advertisement was as follows:

\[\text{Wanted: an educated good looking girl to marry a rich bachelor of academic interests. No caste restrictions; good looks and university degree essential.}\]

Her frustrations could be noticed in the following words:

\[\text{I'd preferred any kind of mother-in-law if it had meant one real, live husband.}\]

Marco is a man isolated from the society living with his own lonely pursuits. He is practically insulated from the society and family constrictions. It is possible for him therefore to propose to a woman without a recognized social status and parental bondage. After the initial reveling in her new status, Rosie becomes restless with a man so obsessed with the past. He does not have interest in her passion and is deprived of the companionship of her husband who is deeply engrossed in his archaeological studies and takes her for granted. For Marco, Rosie is nothing more than a convenience. He likes her to be like the butler Joseph ---serve him without intruding on him.

In despair, she reverts back to her first love- dance much to the dislike of her husband. She cannot understand his reverence for sculptured figures on the walls and caves while she herself is a living representation of the sculptured figures which she embodies in her dance. Dance is her life stream and when Marco tries to obstruct it, it changes its direction.

Simone De Beauvoir says:

\[\text{I shall place woman in a world of values and give her behaviour a dimension of liberty. I believe that she has the power to choose}\]
between the assertion of her transcendence and her alienation as object; she is not the plaything of contradictory drives; she devises solutions of diverse values in the ethical scale.\textsuperscript{xv}

Narayan seems to portray the imaginary ideal of the past and its living tradition in the present. Rosie is accomplished enough to try the ancient musical notations on the wall and looks for ideas in The Ramayana and The Mahabharata but her husband dismisses these as monkey tricks.

Rosie, when starves of emotional fulfillment turns to Raju for survival and sustenance. She thinks that he will provide sustenance for her emotional and intellectual self but unfortunately is beguiled. Raju was only instrumental in enabling her to achieve her goal. His interest in her art inclines her towards him and their affair starts because he gives her long needed sympathy. Later he admits:

\textit{At that time I was puffed up with the thought of how I had made her. I am now disposed to think that even Marco could not have suppressed her permanently; sometime she was bound to break out and make her way.}\textsuperscript{xvi}

She is filled with a sense of guilt whereas Marco has forgotten her. Narayan tries to win sympathy for Rosie as she is in the orthodox Indian milieu where an illicit relation is disgraceful whatever may be the circumstances. She tries to regain sympathy of Marco but all her efforts fail. She realizes her mistake. The innate feelings for her husband was not dead in her. She is alienated from her husband for some time. She tries to mend fences with Marco and sincerely apologizes to him, but in vain. She confesses that she had committed an enormous sin and her mind is greatly troubled. She didn’t want anything more in life and wanted to make peace with her husband. She also had decided to quit dancing and was totally lost in her emotions.

According to Udaya Trivedi:
In Rosie, Narayan has created a character who is neither like Sita nor like Savitri, the eternal ideals of womanhood. The elevating quality of her art places her above the routine level of mortals. Her art gives her an individuality and distinction which cannot be hidden for long.

Raju’s mother tries to limit her by narrating to her the mythical ideals and how these women through their perseverance and endurance won over their husbands. But all these ideals are for common women. For Rosie herself is capable of creating a myth and halo around herself. Her devotion for her husband is not different from any ideal Hindu wife.

Marco prefers dead out to a living exponent of art. He calls Rosie’s dancing as ‘street acrobatics’. Rosie behaves like all conventional Indian wives. Marco was only enthusiastic about collection and annotation of ancient art. Rosie craves to pursue her passion. She becomes the victim of her husband’s indifference and suffers psychologically as his discontented wife.

She suppresses her desire and talent and accepts the reality of a sterile and unhappy marriage. She then turns to Raju to assist her to reach heights. Rosie’s newfound freedom, her new identity as ‘Nalini’ Raju’s timely help, her sincere efforts, she manages to reach new heights and becomes a public heart-throb.

Raju wanted to live lavishly and thus took the opportunity to make a fortune out of Rosie’s dancing career. Nalini alias Rosie seemed to accept it all with a touch of resignation but she was no longer her old happier self. On seeing the book written by Marco, The Cultural History of South India, she cherishes her fondness for her husband.

Raju was in the lock up for some days. He had forged Rosie’s signature on a legal document. He did not want her to change her attitude towards her husband. She might soften towards him if she knows about his generosity and he may lose her. Very soon Rosie was tired of this circus existence. She
avoided talking to him. She decides to sell off her diamonds, call for a lawyer and settle his scores. She firmly tells Raju:

*If I have to pawn my last possession, I’ll do it to save you from jail. But once it’s over, leave me once and for all; that’s all I ask. Forget me. Leave me to live or die as I choose; that’s all.*

She faces the existential predicament with courage and it’s only after Raju’s arrest that Rosie’s true sense comes in to being. She is able to achieve the status of an independent and self-reliant woman. She used to break down on small issues but the news about Raju left her unperturbed. When he comes to her for help, she merely replies that she has felt that he has not been doing the right things all along and its Karma. She is helpless and nothing can be done. He has to bear the brunt of his actions.

On hearing Rosie’s reply, Raju is dismayed and realizes that Rosie has become a matured woman and does not require his help. Even Raju realizes later that neither Marco nor he had any place in her life which she herself had under-estimated all along.

Rosie discovers herself. The change is a tribute to the emancipated ‘new woman’. Rosie’s decision to move out of Malgudi and settle in Madras reveals her positive thinking. The new woman’s demand for her rightful place, recognition and respect due to her is prompted by an inner urge to make her existence a meaningful one.

Rollo May’s existential psychology is about human existence and the human drama of survival. It helps in overcoming or confronting existential anxieties and living an authentic life.

Narayan’s thoughts are akin to Rollo May’s tenet. Rosie too overcomes her existential anxieties and gets a new lease of life.

In this context Harish Raizada says that Narayan is a psychological genius:

*Like the various scenes Narayan portrays his characters only with the fewest strokes of the pen. He possess’ a rare psychological insight in*
Here, Narayan places the conventional and unconventional side by side. Raju’s mother represents tradition. For her woman’s salvation lies in being meek, mild, gentle. Conquering the husband not by powder or lipstick but by self-sacrifice is a woman’s primary task. She resents Rosie because the young dancer stood nowhere near her concept of a woman. Rosie is too assertive, independent and self-reliant to be acceptable to the mother. Trouble begins for Rosie because the society is not ready to look sympathetically at an independent woman, seeking her own identity through her personal excellence. It never occurs to Marco that his wife needs his attention. For him it should be enough for a woman to merge her name, identity through her personal excellence. It never occurs to Marco that his wife needs his attention. For him it should be enough for a woman to merge her name, identity and her dream in her husband’s and lives vicariously shining under his glow, Raju shows some understanding of her creative urge but his main motive is to keep her in a citadel as his possession.

Neither Marco nor Raju loves her for her own sake. Rosie shows to the two men that she can discard both. Mapping her success, Raju acknowledges her spirit and though jealous of her self-reliance appreciates her ability to ‘manage’ her life. Even Raju realizes that Rosie did not require either him or Marco in her life. Rosie is not the passive, self-effacing helpless victim of male fancy. She is an awakened woman who paves the way for Daisy in Narayan’s novel The Painter of Signs.

Susila, in The English Teacher is a charming girl, the wife of Krishna who tries to run on a narrow budget, makes plans about their future dreams about a house to be built and her daughter’s marriage. She is a picture of a warm appealing woman who epitomizes the best in Indian womanhood. Krishna her husband grows along with her in love and understanding and learns life anew with her, his partner in life, his ‘Sahadharmini’ as Shanta krishnaswami puts it.
Susila gets a rigorous training from Krishna’s mother. That had made her responsible wife. She is a ruthless accountant who keeps track of all expenses. He often found an autocratic strain in here and unsuspected depths of rage, when it comes to keepings accounts and managing their monthly provisions. This often leads to minor squabbles between the two.

The following words speak about her being very practical and meticulous in whatever she did:

I don’t know when you will learn economic ways. You are so wasteful. On the quantity you throw about another family could comfortably live. xx

She managed the household chores extremely well but gets disturbed when Krishna’s mother sends an old woman from the village to help her in the kitchen so that she can devote more time to the daughter Lila. An additional member in the house means more expenses and wastage, and Sushila grumbles about it. But eventually she accepts the old lady’s presence in the house. She is a firm believer in the adage that they must live within their means and save enough for the child. She also firmly decides to have only one child and does not like it when Krishna jokes about having more children. They also have minor squabbles and they refuse to talk to each other for forty-eight hours. It is Krishna who eventually breaks the ice by taking Susila to a film. They decide not to quarrel in future because such quarrel will affect the child’s health.

Thus, he enjoys the harmony and peace of the domestic life quite necessary for his poetic creativity. Krishna begins to see in Susila the essence and the future possibilities of his being. Sartre’s tenets of existentialism, Existence precedes essence is very appropriate. For the child’s third birthday, Krishna’s father offers him a loan to buy a house in Malgudi. So on a Sunday morning after entrusting the child to the care of the old lady, they set out to inspect the various houses with the teacher cum builder Sastri. Susila looked resplendent and indeed his phantom of delight. There is a perpetual smile in her eyes and exudes the fragrance of jasmine. But unfortunately, Susila has an unpleasant
experience. She contracts typhoid from the filthy lavatory which was situated at the backyard of the house. She is treated by Dr. Shankar of Krishna Medical hall. The child is kept away from her mother. Her parents arrive to take care of her. Sushila’s condition worsens and she dies leaving behind a ‘blind, dumb and dazed’ Krishna, her disconsolate parents and the child. Her untimely death gives a severe blow to his family members.

The agony during the prolonged illness affected the family. However, Susila undergoes a metamorphosis after her death. The believable and charming housewife turns into a spirit and undertakes the task of guiding Krishna through his forced circumstances to ponder fundamental existential questions and to take the responsibility of Leela. In this she fulfils the classical concept of womanhood. In the closing pages, he makes the psychoanalytic dimensions of the distress and he explicitly tells himself of the same.

**Grace** in *The Vendor of Sweets* has her own existential predicaments. But Narayan does not highlight it directly. He very subtly throws light on Grace’s dilemma. She is a half Korean and half American who met Mali, the son of the protagonist Jagan, during a football game in Michigan and fell in love. Mali plans to marry her but are living together not legally married. Mali brings her to Malgudi so that she gets accustomed to the customs and the place he lives in. In the evenings, only when it is dark, he takes Grace out for a stroll in the direction of the deserted New extension. He has not mentioned about her to his own father Jagan. She also witnesses the gap between the father and son. She also finds Mali’s relationship with his father straining.

Grace narrates her family background to Jagan. Her father was an American soldier in the Far East after the Second World War. She was born in New Jersey. She never saw her father as he was called for the war and never came back. The following words convey her existential predicament:

*He never came home again..........My mother decided to stay in America and I studied at Margaret’s. Have you heard of it?*  

xxi
She had studied Domestic Science at Michigan. She fondly called Mali, ‘Mo’. Grace, at the very outset, tries to build a good rapport with Jagan. She wants him to help them out with their business. She presents him a picnic hamper when she came to India with Mali. She parts the mustard coloured curtain dividing the house in to two sections. She also goes to Jagan’s section and tidies it up. She washes the vessel in the kitchen and arranges them neatly on a shelf. She always has dreamt such a house and she puts in all efforts to bring a feminine touch and orderliness in Jagan’s surroundings. She wants to cook for Jagan but he is under a vow that he will eat only what he can cook with his own hands too. She acts like a catalyst between the two cultures and tries to integrate into the Indian culture. She also learns to put floral designs in front of the house. She wants financial assistance from Jagan who could help him and her to manufacture and sell story writing machines in India in collaboration with an American company to replace stories currently in circulation in India. She also extols the virtues and utility as well the commercial viability of the machine adding that it has been used extensively in America. The project costs fifty- one thousand dollars.

Grace tries her level best to impress Jagan and rope him in their business but it proves futile. The following words reflect the opinion he has of her:

Had she shown all that considerateness only in order that he might invest in their story machine? Now that he had a position clear, the barrier between him and the other two was growing more impregnable than ever and there was absolutely no way of his approaching her and asking for an explanation. xxii

Jagan confronts Grace about her disappearing act. Grace tells him that Mali wants her to go back as there is no work for her in Malgudi and the money that she had brought too has exhausted.

The following words also reveal her feelings of meaninglessness:

Mo has no more use for me and added that the only part of it is there is no child. xxii
She accepts her existential situation and decides to make a choice. She herself is responsible for her predicament. She decides to take up work in a woman’s hostel. It is also informed by Mali that she has been living with her friends for the last few days and tries to dismiss the ‘funny notions’ in her mind about getting married to him when he learns that she has been squealing on him to his father. He also states that it is better to send her back to America and she needs to see a psychiatrist because of the state of mind.

Jagan’s reverence for the traditional concepts of wifehood are looked down upon by Mali and retaliates that such things have happened in their times.

There was no communication between them. With Mali’s liaison, Narayan brings an awareness of the contradictory aspect of things and its consequences.

Shanta Krishnaswamy’s views also resonate:

*Individualism, material benefits, educational opportunities and new ways of living do not ensure marital happiness for Grace and Mali.*

Intimate relationships, human understanding and shared interests together are present in Grace’s life compared to Ambika, Jagan’s wife’s life. Even after her death, Jagan still remembers her, relives the days of his past and intoxicates himself with the love he shared with her.

**Ambika,** too faces existential anxiety when she was taunted by her mother-in-law for not bringing a gold waist belt as a part of her dowry. She was humiliated for ten years for being barren, had to cope with the household duties as a daughter-in-law of a large household and embarrassed at her husband’s ardour. When she begets Mali, the charges of infertility is dropped and she attains a new status of motherhood. We are told that she had a mind of her own and she refused to tolerate criticisms. She had a control of Mali which is lost after her death. She represents a new creed. Her spark of individuality is retained.
Narayan juxtaposes the conventional and unconventional characters to highlight the emerging social trends. These women differ from others in their aspirations and strive to be their true selves. They protest against many aspects. They continue their struggle unmindful of the outcome. They are the women who respect themselves and hence register a vociferous protest against intimidation and humiliation meted out to them. They refused to be cowed down and crushed.

The note of dissent of the New Woman in Narayan’s novels of the pre-independence period as well as the post-independence period is very visible. It is rightly quoted by Katharine Graham:

*The thing women must do to rise to power is to redefine their felinity. Once, power was considered a masculine attribute. In fact power has no sex.*

The above lines are powerful enough to discern the very idea, i.e. the need of the hour that women must handle multi-faceted aspects of life. Being modern and new woman they have uphill tasks to perform and to make their mark on the face of the world. All the modern women in these novels like Shantabai, Rosie disregard the marital bond and have their affairs without sanctifying them. They dismiss customs as unnecessary and worthless whereas traditional people it as the gravest possible sin that no woman in Malgudi can commit. Another peculiarity of these women is that none of them hail from Malgudi. Perhaps the soil of Malgudi cannot produce such women.

Narayan wants to emphasize in his indirect subtle way that self-realization is the first step towards self-actualization. In fact to emphasize that all women characters in his novels conform to conventions and traditions does not mean that they are passive and meek. They are inherently passive because they are conditioned to be passive and in embracing the traditional values and upholding them they prove not only wiser but also stronger. The women emerge after the turmoil stronger in spirit and go about their lives with greater knowledge and strength. While Narayan makes them come back and accept
the dictate of the society, the women are no longer the same, docile weak persons that they were at the start.

His novels reflect on his narration. He is detached observer and leaves the interpretation to the reader. In India men make fun of a woman if she speaks of freedom. Men may appear to think that when woman becomes aware of her capabilities, she stops being a woman! Herein lies their faulty thinking.

The word ‘freedom’ is misconceived, misunderstood. Freedom from whom? Freedom from what? In fact the Indian woman has chained to her own misconceived ideas, there are number of shackles around her. But the fact is today these shackles are rusted but she is not aware of the rust. She has to awaken from her slumber. She has to see the things in their true perspective and colours. She has to recognize her own SELF. That can happen only when she discards her fear out of her mind. But in reality is it easy for an Indian woman to cast fear of society and its dictates, to lead independent individual life?

Freedom is certainly the concept when one is reminded about women’s liberation. In his memoir, R.K.Narayan has admitted to the fact of being obsessed with the philosophy of woman as opposed to man, her constant oppressor. This must have been an early testament of the women’s liberation movement. He aptly describes as to how women have always been treated secondary by man, making her lose faith in her herself- independence, individuality, stature and strength. xxvi

R.K.Narayan being a traditionalist lauds the resilience of women who faces all kinds of pressures from different quarters and yet emerges quietly triumphant and all wiser for it.

One also notices a gradual shift in the authorial sensibility towards the woman from a passive to an active feminine principle, from a very timid woman to an aggressive self-reliant woman. Deep within these Indian women make their life and live with the changes. They aspire for self-fulfillment. The beloveds,
wives, mothers, aunts, grandmothers illustrate the passive feminine in his earlier novels and the later novels have brought a change in them. They are not even named but their anonymity speaks volumes. For example: Swami’s mother, Chandran’s mother, the wives of Sampath, Srinivas etc. Together they present a cohesive picture of the women whose impediments to fulfillment passes through different phases in their journey of life and experience the harsh reality of the human condition. They aim to achieve however briefly and broken., the sense of having lived.

Simone De Beauvoir in her novel The Second Sex states:

*The active female does not wish to see herself, to achieve through the eyes of the male, the other.*

The traditional and the modern women’s attempt to come out of the shackles is not exclusive to India : they are a part of the universal phenomena.

Thus, the process of growth in feminine consciousness is seen in Narayan’s women. Savitri, Susila, Rosie, Ambika, Bharathi and Daisy have grown stronger and are ready to endure it. An extraordinary variety of feminine temperaments have been countered in R.K.Narayan. The refusal to be crushed, attempt to fight and protest of these women is highlighted. They find the world around them too hostile and not conducive for the individual to thrive. Their voice of dissent is the cry of the sensitive souls in their existential struggle.

All his women have their own share of existential concern, undergo a transformation in quest for self-fulfillment. Narayan conveys to his reader that life is merely to accept it as it is. Having learned acceptance, his women does not seek to escape life or evade it. He simply says that it requires the balance of power. Through his heroines, Narayan brings about an awareness in the existence fraught with uncertainties and complexities his women face. He throws light on how they retain their tradition and values and become the master of their destiny by taking responsibility of their choices.
i The Bhagvad Gita p.192


vi Ibid, p.-113


x Ibid, p.69


xii Ibid, p.85

xiii Ibid p.85

xiv Ibid, p.85

xv Simone De Beauvoir (1972): The Second Sex, translated by H.M. Parshley.


xvii Udaya Trivedi P.136


xxii Ibid, p.134


xxv Graham Katherine, The Washington Post
