PART - I

INTRODUCTION
CHAPTER - 1

TRYST WITH TRADITION

When her mother told her not to play with boys, she was only seven and she just wondered. As she started growing up she received advice from all and sundry, all too often, about do's and don'ts and she began to realize that she was not just a human being but also a woman, quite different from men. Who is 'she'? 'She' may be anyone of the millions of women all over India who pass through such traumatic experiences throughout their lives. She is a representative of the Indian woman.

God created human beings and divided them into man and woman, with a few basic differences in body and mind, and introduced an element of irresistible attraction between the two sexes to help the process of procreation and survival of the species. The question of man-woman relationship did not exist in the barbaric age. It was only with the dawn of civilization, when men began to live in groups, and latter formed families, first matriarchal and then patriarchal, that the question arose, primarily to determine the fatherhood of every newborn baby. It was the invention of the institution of marriage that sowed the seed of slavery for women. Manu, the law-giver, sanctified this slavery when he ruled in Manusmruti न स्त्रिया स्वातंत्र्यं अहंकति. (Woman is not entitled to freedom).

While the transition from barbarism to social life had its advantages, it also compelled the individual to repress his instinctual behaviour and thereby to minimize the chances of making his life pleasurable. Such repression is all the more severe in the rigid, tradition-bound society of India. The resultant suffering is also shared more by women in India, because
the social norms and moral codes of India are particularly disadvantageous to women.

Manu’s ruling was centuries ago in prehistoric times and the slave-status of woman continued unabated for hundreds of years, nay, it assumed aggravated dimensions. So much so that the famous poet Vidyapati sang in despair in the early fifteenth century:

Let no one be born,
But if one must
Let no one be a girl.
If one must be a girl
Then may she never fall in love,
If she must fall in love,
Free her from her family.  

It is easy and convenient to blame Manu to initiate the subjugation of women, but presumably the process of loss of women’s freedom must have started earlier than Manu’s time so as to induce him to codify such subjugation. The process must also have been global, wherever men underwent the transition from primitive to civilized tribes; only in India its codification took place first. But the process, encouraged by Manu’s law, accelerated in India. Some of the worst consequences of the steady erosion of the social status of women were marrying off girls at a very tender age, barring women from religious rituals, and prohibiting widow-remarriage.

The next big blow to women in India came in the shape of invasions. So long as the invaders planned only to plunder and ravage and go away, they could not create any lasting influence on the mode of living of the Indian society. But when the Moghuls came, not merely as invaders, but also as conquerors and rulers of India, their settlement automatically brought the Muslim system here, one of which was the Pardah system, which must have taken the form of the Ghunghat system among the Hindus. Whatever the historical or other reasons for the introduction and enforcement of the Pardah or Ghunghat system for women, there is little room for doubt that the system
is cruel to women and has been a major factor in keeping a majority of Indian women illiterate and backward. Any attempt at slackening the system, not to mention its removal, is vehemently opposed by the orthodox people, mostly men, in the name of religious and social order.

The downfall of woman in India steadily continued till at the end of the nineteenth century, women’s position was no better than that of chattel. Under the influence of the British rule and the education system introduced by them, however, the situation started taking a turn for the better. The first impetus for reform appeared in the middle class of Kolkata, which was then the capital of British India. Their main attack was primarily on the customs of child-marriage, Pardah and Sati. The leaders of the movement for reforms included Raja Rammohan Roy, who founded the Brahmo Samaj, a reform sect of Hinduism, and such other men who were genuinely troubled by the wretched condition of women. Women also started acquiring literacy due to their efforts.

The literate middle-class women were in the forefront of women’s participation in the nationalist movement, which appeared at the beginning of the twentieth century. Women’s emancipation was a part of this movement. Women’s organizations also appeared on the scene. It was, however, Mahatma Gandhi who invited the women as a class to participate on a massive scale in his struggle for Independence that he launched as a civil disobedience movement in 1930. Jawaharlal Nehru writes in his Discovery of India:

Most of us menfolk were in prison. And then a remarkable thing happened. Our women came to the front and took charge of the struggle. Women had always been there, of course, but now there was an avalanche of them, which took not only the British Government but their own menfolk by surprise. Here were these women, women of the upper or middle classes, leading sheltered lives in their homes – peasant women, working-class women, rich women – pouring out in their tens of thousands in defiance of government order. ... It was not only that display of courage
and daring, but what was even more surprising was the organizational power they showed.  

Elisabeth Bumiller states:

The women had been in large part inspired by Mahatma Gandhi, who saw women as autonomous, independent people, and also as an important social base for the movement. No man before or since has done so much for women’s rights in India.  

It must, however, be emphasized that despite whatever has been achieved during the past more than a century, and despite 53 years of Independence, women’s plight in India in general is far from satisfactory even today. Child-marriages in hundreds are performed every year, thousands of young girls are married away by their parents against their will, hundreds of brides are burnt alive by their in-laws because they don’t bring enough dowry, and even the custom of Sati raises its ugly head now and then, as the incident of Rupkunvar a few years back shows.

The woman, as a member of the family, has been protected by the father when unmarried, by the husband after marriage and by her own sons in old age. Such family system makes a woman’s life apparently safe and smooth, but in reality it makes her totally dependent and slavish. Spread of education among girls has provided an awakening and a craving for independence and self-reliance, which has resulted in a struggle to free themselves from the protectoral shell of men. This has given rise to feminism and movements like Women’s Lib. The hankering for independence has also led to some odd consequences. A section of women, far too zealous than others, look upon even the natural womanly instincts as undesirable, leading to dependence on men. They forget the basic fact that men and women are both mutually dependent on each other. Of course, a woman, as a person, can always aspire to be a free, self-supporting, self-satisfied being. The trouble in our society arises when men refuse to view women as persons and insist on their being women only.
The battle for equality for women with men is long and arduous, and it seems as if it has just begun in earnest in India. Men are bound to try every trick to ensure perpetuation of their age-old superiority and dominance over women. That with a sizable number of eminent women leaders striving hard, for last several years, to get a one-third reservation of seats in Parliament and Assemblies in India for women, they have not yet succeeded in getting even a draft bill introduced in Parliament, is in itself ample proof of men's total unwillingness to permit women's progress towards equality. Women have still to face, to contend with, to be victims of, outdated and outmoded positively anti-women laws and customs regarding marriage, divorce, dowry, inheritance, abortion, rape, etc. While social progress in general and enlightened women's efforts in particular have succeeded in bringing about some desirable changes in such laws and customs, still much remains to be achieved in this direction. It appears women's rights are nowhere in sight in their fullest fulfilment and will not be for at least a few decades more. What they have silently suffered for centuries – the humiliation, the dependence and the resignation to ill-fate – have penetrated the psychology of majority of women, illiterate as well as literate, so deep as to need tremendous spadework from all reformers, before women's emancipation becomes a reality.

Unfortunately in India, women still seem to lack a firm will for independence. Most of them, even educated ones, are quite content to have a home with a good husband and children. They have little attraction for a public career or even for a little economic independence. In fact, we witness hundreds of women in India leaving their public careers for good or kicking their good jobs or professions in order to settle down to a "happy married life". The idea of a self-supporting career is not perhaps in the blood of the Indian woman. "Career" to them is always secondary to "home". It is no wonder, therefore, that in spite of spread of education among women in India, we do not find a proportionate rise in the number of women in public life, in professions, in higher jobs.
Women’s pitiable plight in the Indian family, their inferior social position, their lack of freedom, etc., are topics which have interested me for a long time now. The causes of women’s woe have occupied my thoughts and have kept me wondering. It would seem that as soon as human beings became civilized and formed villages, taking up agriculture, man assumed a superior role. Man became the bread-earner and woman the bread-maker confined to the kitchen. This relegation of women to secondary roles is not confined to India, but is a worldwide phenomenon as societies evolved.

Every action has its reaction and so this repression of women was bound to have sooner or later its reaction in revolution, and we find it in the forms of feminism and Women’s Lib movement. Viewed in worldwide context, the initiative was no doubt taken by the West, but India cannot be said to have lagged far behind. Even in the West feminism did not appear before the last quarter of the nineteenth century. When a society starts taking cognizance of a problem, its literature cannot fail to reflect it. So the Indian English fiction too has not remained unaffected and the Indian writers in English have taken up the task of challenging the age-old superiority of men over women and of asserting women’s equality and freedom. The method may differ from writer to writer. A woman protagonist in a novel may question the accepted values and raise her voice of protest against the existing moral codes or social norms that are prejudicial to women. The heroines in Anita Desai’s novels refuse to toe the line and try to find their own meaning and value of life. The conscience of Indian writers in English has been roused enough to permit the subject of women’s rights to play a role in their literary creations. It is to the credit of R. K. Narayan to be one of the earliest Indian English novelists to portray a dissenting woman in The Dark Room published in 1938. It is this fact that caught my imagination and became instrumental in selecting Narayan for my dissertation. My idea is to examine how Narayan has portrayed the changing social status of women in his novels and stories.

Narayan was, until his demise in 2001, the senior-most and world-renowned Indian English writer of fiction, like Mulk Raj Anand. The literary
fields of both have been, however, widely apart. Anand is mainly a writer of political or sociopolitical themes, concentrating on the lower, underprivileged, down-trodden classes, as in Untouchable and Coolie. Narayan wrote chiefly about middle-class families and their problems, hardly ever touching politics, except in Waiting for the Mahatma and The Vendor of Sweets.

Narayan’s father was a teacher and due to his transferable job, Narayan has spent much of his childhood with his grandmother. This fact perhaps is partly contributory to the creation of the character of grandmother in several of his novels and stories, as in the novels Swami and Friends, Waiting for the Mahatma, Grandmother’s Tale, in the story A Hero, etc.

Narayan’s academic career was not very bright. As admitted by him in his memoir My Days, he failed in the university entrance examination held in the high school, and that too in the subject where he was most confident – English! But as explained by him there, he had a natural aversion to academic education and he liked to be free to read what he pleased and not be examined at all.  

Barring brief spells as a teacher and a newspaper reporter, Narayan had devoted himself solely to writing. He began writing even before he entered college but, as usual, had a hard time getting his writings published. He wrote his first novel Swami and Friends in 1935, which was rejected by several publishers in England before it could go in print with the help of Graham Greene (MD,115-116). Narayan shot to fame and glory with The Guide published in 1958, which won him the Sahitya Akademy Award in 1961, which was also selected for a film, both in Hindi and in English, by film producer Dev Anand, and which had a stage adaptation in America (MD,171-176). The novels and stories taken into consideration in this thesis are listed under “Primary Sources” mentioned in the Selected Bibliography.

It is proposed to take traditions as the prime criterion to group these novels for convenience of discussion. While these novels follow in general chronological pattern vis-à-vis traditions, the stories do not. On these
considerations, the discussion of the novels will form Part – II, while the stories will go to the Part – III. Novels have been grouped under Tyrannies of Traditions, The Transition and Traditions Trounced, which form the three chapters of Part – II. So chapter – 2 in Part – II will focus on the Tyrannies of Traditions in five of these novels. The three, namely, *Swami and Friends*, *The Bachelor of Arts* and *The English Teacher*, which form an autobiographical trilogy, have a natural claim to be considered together. The fourth, *The Dark Room*, is clubbed together in this chapter for the simple reason that it provides the most glaring example of a tragedy wrought by traditions. Also, all these four novels historically represent the pre-Independence period when retrogression in regard to Indian women’s condition had reached its nadir.

Although *The Man-eater of Malgudi* is published in 1961, it too has to be included in this chapter, because the two very minor women characters in it are representatives of traditional life. I have had to disregard chronology in respect of this novel for this reason.

When traditions start crumbling, the process is neither sudden nor speedy. The journey from a tradition-bound society to a traditionless society is over a bridge of a transition period during which the tyrannical traditions are shed away at the same time trying to salvage good traditions. Destruction once started sooner or later assumes proportions where it fails to discriminate between the good and the bad, and along with the bad some good is also in danger of being lost. Attempts no doubt are made by saner elements to preserve as much good as possible. It is interesting to examine how Narayan has portrayed this in *Mr. Sampath — The Printer of Malgudi*, *The Financial Expert* and *Waiting for the Mahatma* and so these three novels shall be discussed in a separate chapter, i.e. the third chapter. India had the good fortune to have one of its greatest sons, Mahatma Gandhi, during this period, who put his indelible mark not only on the history of this period in general, but also on the history of women’s emancipation in particular during the same era. So, inevitably, the discussion in this chapter shall not be without a mention of the Mahatma.
Needless to say there can never be a traditionless society. If old traditions die, new ones spring up. It is also true that an entire society, especially one as big as India, can never be homogeneous in following traditions. Consequently, the Indian society, permeated though it is today by waves of the winds of modernity, is still distinctly divided into social groups at various rungs of the ladder from the least to the most modern, or from zealous followers of traditions to enthusiastic tradition-breakers. Traditions get trounced only by the boldest sections of the society. Among the women who show such extreme boldness, there are some who are career-oriented and others who are content to play the role of housewives. My next chapter – the fourth – will therefore be sub-divided into two sections, Section-I dealing with Narayan’s career-oriented women characters in the novels *The Guide, The Vendor of Sweets, The Painter of Signs* and *Talkative Man*, and Section-II dealing with characters of housewives in *A Tiger for Malgudi, The World of Nagaraj* and *Grandmother’s Tale*.

In respect of Narayan’s short stories, chronology is not possible, nor is it important. As Narayan himself says in his “Introduction” to *Under the Banyan Tree and other Stories*: “the date of a story is immaterial. ... I have faith in datelessness. A date-stamp may be necessary for a periodical, but not for a story. ...” So the dates of the publication of the three collections of stories are with us, not the date of writing of each story therein. It is therefore found convenient to discuss the stories in Part – III, which forms chapter 5.

Part – IV will contain my concluding chapter – chapter 6 – wherein I propose, inter alia, to give a resume of the journey undertaken through history in Narayan’s novels from a strictly tradition-bound society to one wherein traditions start getting trounced. It will record how Narayan has moved with the time, that the time-travel has been very aptly reflected in his novels.

Traditions are neither good nor bad in themselves. Any tradition is initially established and developed for the good of the people, for social stabilization and cohesion. But every tradition has its utility period beyond
which it not only loses its value but also usually becomes positively harmful. Every society, in order to survive, has to remain always in a flux. A society, which goes static, becomes stagnant and therefore filthy, like still water. But the general human nature is to shy away from the unknown and therefore abhors novelty. It is for this reason that a majority of people in any society stick to traditions, which, according to them, have stood the test of time. They overlook the fact that they become enemies of social progress. Luckily, there arises, sooner or later, in every society an enlightened section which cannot find itself in tune with what is, and explores the causes therefor, detects where the evil lies and advocates and undertakes necessary changes. How Narayan takes us along all these thoughts through the women characters of his novels and stories forms the object of my dissertation.

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Notes


3 Ibid., 19.


Henceforth abbreviated as MD and page numbers are given in parenthesis in the text itself.


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