PART - II

NOVELS
R. K. Narayan is a writer with native talent who has been natively nurtured. Of all the writers of Indo-English novels, he is perhaps the major one who sticks to purely Indian atmosphere. Though the vehicle of communication used by him is English, the persons travelling in the vehicle are only Indians, and the vehicle roams mostly within a limited area of Malgudi of South India. His stories are mostly located in this small imaginary town of Malgudi which, according to some critics, is identical with Mysore. His description of the geography of the town is, however, so thorough and consistent in all his novels and stories, that he has succeeded in bringing this imaginary place alive as much as Hardy has done in regard to Wessex.

Narayan provides a glowing example of how well an English literary form can be adapted to develop Indian themes. According to William Walsh:

his writing is a distinctive blend of Western techniques and Eastern material, and he has succeeded in a remarkable way in making an Indian sensibility at home in English art.  

My attempt here is to examine the portrayal of women characters and how they evolve against the changing social scenario. The earlier novels of Narayan having been written in the pre-Independence era, they do not fail to be influenced both by the then obtaining social status of women, and by the social world of the author himself. These novels are Swami and Friends (1935), The Bachelor of Arts (1937), The Dark Room (1938), and The English Teacher (1946). To quote William Walsh again:

One of the themes deftly and thoroughly worked in the early novels is the domestic one. Family life is the ultimate registering
of the Hindu tradition since this tradition, like the Hebrew one, enfolds both the ultimate and the immediate texture of experience, ... (Walsh,41).

The struggle for independence was uplifted by the Mahatma to an all-pervading struggle for the uplift of the people of India in all directions—political, social, economic, cultural, educational and even psychological. The literature created in that period in India, be it in any language, could not but be toned by the influence of this national upsurge. Narayan's literary career starts from 1935, and it would be too much to expect him to avoid completely this influence, though he may be credited with having made conscious efforts to keep his thoughts away from these influences, as far as possible, and so we find hardly any reference to Mahatma in any of these four novels.

In *Swami and Friends* women characters are given minor importance. They mainly remain in the background, providing just a supporting role to the main story which the author wants to communicate. It is therefore no wonder that the first woman character—the granny—appears after twenty pages. Narayan has, however, shown an acute sense of proportion in designing and creating and developing his women characters insofar as they are neither too hazy nor too prominent to distort the other main characters of the novel.

The grandmother is a very old lady who passes most of her time in 'The ill-ventilated dark passage between the front hall and the dining-room.' and who always kept with her a supply of 'Cardamoms, cloves, and areca-nut' (SF,21). As a child, Swami is fond of his grandmother and takes pleasure in telling her about his friends, though the granny hardly remembers anything of what he narrates, which irritates him. Even her memory of the past is hazy and though she takes delight in reminiscing about her dead husband, she often rambles, confusing and mixing up 'various incidents that took place at different times' (SF,22). Her stories include exaggerated glorification of her husband. From the point of view of the child, however, she is 'bothering about
old unnecessary stories’ (SF,22). Naturally his interest mainly is in the palpitating present.

The granny loves the child so much that she cheerfully tolerates his ‘brutal candour’ (SF,37). Indeed the child’s behaviour towards his grandmother is sometimes very rough and even impolite. But she seems unaffected by it.

The incident wherein Swami is in need of only six pies to give them to the coachman who had promised him to convert them in a short time into six annas and after that convert them to six rupees, so that Swami could have his coveted hoop, reflects the pitiable financial dependence of the Indian womenfolk, because neither the grandmother nor the mother has that little amount to spare for Swami. In fact the grandmother ‘almost shed tears that she had no money’ (SF,69). Another incident which corroborates this is when the mother has to ask her husband for some change because ‘the tailor is coming today. He has been pestering me for last four days’ (SF,24). And the husband ‘returned to his bureau, searched for the keys, opened it, took out a purse, and gave her the change’ (SF,24). This also reveals that the boss of the house – the male guardian – kept the money under lock and key. After giving the required amount of money to the wife, the husband locks the bureau again! In contrast to this, however, take the incident in The Bachelor of Arts where Chandran demands a rupee from his mother, and the mother “took out her key bunch and threw it at him. ‘Take it from the drawer. Bring the key back’.” 3 This shows that the mother has an adequate amount of money in her possession, and she has also the liberty to spare a rupee for her son who wants it to go to a cinema. In the light of this, the former incident in Swami and Friends is capable of an alternate interpretation, namely, that financial traditions varied from family to family or in different classes of family. We can hardly attribute the difference in the two incidents to a change in the author’s views, because the two novels in question were written during the same period, one following on the heels of another, - in 1935 and 1937.
The small incident in which Swami feigns illness in order to avoid going to school is a revelation of the victory of sentiments over rational thinking, especially in women full of motherly affection. Neither Swami’s granny nor his mother is prepared to believe in what the thermometer indicates, once they decide that Swami is really ill and should not be forced to go to school! And it is a matter of no small wonder that the father acquiesces in the decision, knowing fully well that the boy has no temperature! The surprise is all the more acute when one recalls an exactly similar incident of *The Dark Room*, in which the mother who wishes that her son should not go to school because he is ill, is ruthlessly overruled in no time by the father, who says to her, “Mind your own business ... Go and do any work you like in the kitchen, but leave the training of a grown-up boy to me. It is none of a woman’s business.”

In *Swami and Friends*, the husband, as revealed by the incident mentioned above, respects his wife’s motherly feelings, though aware that they are misdirected. Taking into account the fact that this is the first novel of Narayan, one can well presume the author’s views on marital relations. In sharp contrast is the incident in *The Dark Room*, where the boy suddenly felt very ill, and Savitri fussed over him and put him to bed. And in bed he stayed till Ramani came in and asked, “What is this?”

“Nothing” said Savitri, and passed into the kitchen. Ramani questioned the patient himself and called “Savitri!” Before she could answer he called her twice again, and asked, “Are you deaf?”

“I was just ....”

“What is the matter with Babu?”

“He is not well.”

“You are too ready with your medical certificate. Babu, get up! Don’t miss your school on any account.”
Babu turned on his mother a look of appeal. She said, "Lie down, Babu. You are not going to school today."

Ramani said, "Mind your own business, do you hear?"

"The boy has fever."

"No, he hasn't. Go and do any work you like in the kitchen, but leave the training of a grown-up boy to me. It is none of a woman's business" (DR,1).

Here the incident exposes the domineering manner of the husband, so much so that even the genuine illness of his own child keeps him unaffected. It is the master stroke of Narayan that with this very incident the novel The Dark Room begins, thereby making to the reader amply clear what the theme of the novel shall be!

Swami and Friends would have made as excellent a story as it is in its existing form, even if the author had completely dispensed with the two women appearing therein – the mother and the grandmother. However, the author’s introduction of these two characters appears neither manoeuvred nor laboured, and interweaving them in the story is so natural that the story thereby seems to assume a neatly woven texture.

If Swami and Friends is a narration mainly of a primary school student’s life, The Bachelor of Arts deals with the college life of an adolescent and his trials and tribulations after he leaves college and before he settles down to a steady routine life of a married earning man. In fact, if one reads the two novels one after the other one feels a continuum, as if the story of Chandran in The Bachelor of Arts is only a continuation of the story of Swami of Swami and Friends. While Swami and Friends is totally devoid of romance, The Bachelor of Arts necessarily introduces romance as it deals with the life of a young man. However, it is to the credit of the author that he has dealt with romance throughout the novel without directly introducing the heroines, namely Malathi and Susila. The first is one with whom, Chandran believes, he fell in love at first sight. His manoeuvres to get acquainted with her, to persuade his parents to arrange marriage with her, all fail. He could not marry
her on the flimsy ground of their horoscopes not matching, and the blow of the failure is so severely felt by him that he leaves home and then becomes a sanyasi. His renunciation is, however, short-lived and he returns to the family-fold after eight months.

The only woman character which emerges on the surface in the novel is the mother of Chandran. Like every housewife in an Indian middle-class family, she is ‘the earliest riser in the house’ (BA,18). Her mornings are occupied by a variety of work, typical in all middle-class families, e.g. ‘tackling the milkman, the vegetable seller, the oil-monger, and other trades people; directing the work of the cook and the servants, gathering flowers for the daily worship; and attending to all the eccentricities and wants of her husband and children’ (BA,18). She is not the meek and humble wife one usually comes across in an Indian scenario. She is self-assertive and has an authoritative nature. This is obvious from her firm refusal to have wire-fencing round her house in spite of both her husband and her son recommending it. ‘I won’t have it,’ Mother said decisively; ‘Something else has got to be done’” (BA,22).

Chandran’s father is an entirely different personality from the husband of Savitri in The Dark Room. It is this difference which permits the individuality of Chandran’s mother to have a free play, so much so that she can even taunt her husband without fear. The following incident gives ample evidence of it:

He said: “If you get up at four-thirty, do wake me up also. I want to wait and catch the scoundrel who steals the flowers in the morning.”

Mother’s voice came from the hall: “So, after all, you are doing something!”

“Hardly my fault that,” Father shouted back. “I offered to put up wire-fencing over the wall.”

“Why, do you want to give the thief some wire in addition to the flowers?”
Father was greatly affected by this taunt.

Mother added fuel to it by remarking, “Twenty-five rupees on the garden and not a single petal of any flower for the gods in the Puja room.”

Father was very indignant. He behaved like a medieval warrior goaded by his ladylove into slaying a dragon. Father dropped a hint that the flower thief would be placed at her feet next day, alive or dead (BA,40-41).

Narayan has also thrown light on the prevailing dowry-system in the Indian society in this novel, through the character of the mother. Chandran, as the person who is very much in love with Malathi, is naturally opposed to any dowry being extracted from her parents. The mother plays a hypocrite on this issue. On the one hand she says before the Sastrigal, “What I would personally care for most in any alliance would be character and integrity” (BA,77). On the other, she reveals her greed for dowry in her talk with Chandran:

Chandran sat biting his nails: “But, mother, you won’t create difficulties over the dowry?”

“We shall see. We must not be too exacting, nor can we cheapen ourselves.”

“But suppose you haggle too much?”

“Don’t you worry about anything, boy. If they won’t give you the girl on reasonable conditions, I shall get you other girls a thousand times more suitable.”

“Don’t talk like that, Mother. I shall never forgive you if this marriage does not take place through your bickerings over the dowry and the presents.”

“We have a status and a prestige to keep. We can’t lower ourselves unduly” (BA,84).

All the dark shades of her character come to the fore when Chandran’s mother deals with his desire to marry Malathi. Her very first
reaction is of opposition to the idea on several considerations. "A Head Clerk's daughter was not what she had hoped to get for her son" (BA,69). In fact her desire was that Chandran should select any one 'of the dozens of girls' (BA,69) that had been proposed to him, who were according to her, 'richer and more beautiful' (BA,69). She rebukes her son for rejecting all those proposals ab initio, and asks him sarcastically, "Do you think marriage is a child's game?" (BA,69). She passes judgement on Malathi's parents without rhyme or reason, at various stages of the episode. She starts with "They can't be all right if they have kept the girl unmarried till sixteen" (BA,69). Then, when they are expecting a proposal to come from Malathi's parents and it is delayed, she bursts out: "They seem to be thorough rogues... They expect Chandran to go to them, touch their feet, and beg them for their girl" (BA,72-73). And when she receives the blow of negation of the proposal by the girl's parents on the ground that the horoscopes do not match, she becomes quite irrational and alleges:

If there is any flaw in the horoscope it must be in the girl's, not in the boy's ... They want a cheap bridegroom, somebody who will be content with a dowry of one hundred rupees ... I have always disliked this proposal to tack Chandran on to a hefty, middle-aged girl..." (BA,86-87).

And, at last, when, even after rechecking of the horoscopes, the girl's father expresses his inability to agree to the marriage, in the most polite and humble manner, Chandran's mother 'raved', "...This is what we get for trying to pick up something from the gutter" (BA,90).

Her inclination towards observing the customs is so strong that it gets an upper hand even over the mother in her. While she cares so much for her son's physical health that even the mention of a headache by her son makes her recommend that he should stay at home for the whole day, she is capable of disregarding his feelings for the sake of 'keeping a face in the town' (BA,70). "Whatever happened, they would not take the initiative ... for they belonged to the bridegroom's side" (BA,70). "I shall drown myself in
Sarayu before I allow any proposal to go from here,” the mother says! (BA,73). At one stage, Chandran himself has to burst out to his mother, “You care more for your status than for the happiness of your son” (BA,84).

The mother’s sticking to the customs and traditions is so firmly rooted in her character that even when Chandran is prepared to marry the girl of her choice, namely Susila, and suggests immediate communication of their willingness to the girl’s parents, the mother advises him to be patient on the ground that unless the girl’s parents come and ask them, they cannot proceed further in the matter, according to custom.

The general condition of women in India in the matter of marriage, as it emerges from the novel, was that girls were married away at a very early age of about fourteen. When Chandran mentions that Malathi ‘is getting on for sixteen’ (BA,69), his mother’s reaction is of great shock. “Sixteen!” she screams, and comments about the girl’s parents, “They can’t be all right if they have kept the girl unmarried till sixteen” (BA,69). Also, when Chandran agrees to marry Susila, her age is about fifteen. Another fact considered vital was that the boy’s side never proposed first. It was the obligation of the girl’s parents to take the initiative in the matter, as if it was they only who were interested, and the boy’s side would give their consent as if they were obliging the girl’s parents by condescending to take her into their family. That too, they would not do without adequate monetary gain in the shape of a handsome dowry!

Even though Narayan has pointed out several shortcomings of Chandran’s mother, he could not help eulogizing mothers in general through the mouth of Kailas, a mere side-character in the novel, who says:

Mother is a sacred object. It is a commodity whose value we don’t realize as long as it is with us. One must lose it to know what a precious possession it is. ... Mother is a rare commodity (BA,98-99).

Chronologically, the novel which followed The Bachelor of Arts is The Dark Room. However, the novel written thereafter, namely, The English
"Teacher" is more in the nature of a sequel to the earlier two novels. The hero of *The English Teacher*, though his name is changed to Krishnan, seems to be the same Chandran of *The Bachelor of Arts*. His wife's name remains unchanged, and Susila whom we left at the end of *The Bachelor of Arts*, suffering from cold, is a forerunner of the Susila who appears in *The English Teacher*.

The first woman character emerging in this novel, only for a brief period, is that of Krishnan's mother. She appears just to set up the house of the hero, who is staying in the hostel of the college where he is serving as a lecturer. He has to shift to a private house as his wife is to return after a long sojourn at her parent's home for the purpose of her first delivery. The mother arrives to put the house in a running condition before the arrival of the wife. But though of a brief stay, the mother's character is fully described in the novel as an efficient housekeeper. She has her own philosophy of housekeeping. Her very first comment on arrival from the village is about the narrowness of the kitchen and the dining-room. "Housekeeping was a grand affair for her. The essence of her existence consisted in the thrills and pangs and the satisfaction that she derived in running a well-ordered household."  

According to her a woman's only function is to manage the house well, which is apparent from her utterance, "If a woman can't take charge of a house and run it sensibly, she must be made to get into man's dress and go out in a procession..." (ET,29). This echoes woman's position in the Indian society where she is considered good for nothing except for running the household.

The story of *The English Teacher* which begins as a picture of the domestic bliss of a happy conventionally arranged marriage, later develops into a psychic experience of the hero wherein we witness the union of a living soul with one departed. According to Srinivasa Iyenger:

The story of their wedded life is a prose lyric on which Narayan has lavished his best gifts as a writer ... and Narayan is an adept at giving form and meaning to this glory of holy wedded love. Quotation is difficult because the perfume is nowhere concentrated but fills the entire atmosphere (Krishnaswamy,103).
The husband's love for the wife is manifested even before her arrival, as is described in the several precautions he takes on the platform of Malgudi railway station to ensure the safe landing of her and the child from the train. As the novel is written in the first person narration by the hero, the author has not, it seems, been able to give full justice in describing the hero's feelings for his wife, but he has been quite successful in drawing up the heroine, Susila's feelings for the hero. Description of her love lies scattered on several pages of the novel.

In the first half of the novel Susila is projected as the charming girl-wife who, though inexperienced, tries to run the household within the available budget - her husband's pay was only one hundred rupees a month, but "In her hands, a hundred rupees seemed to do the work of two hundred" (ET,37). Even at this early age, she thinks far ahead about the future, planning for a house of their own and even for her daughter's marriage, though she is still a child. In the words of Shantha Krishnaswamy:

She is the picture of a warm, appealing woman who epitomizes the best in Indian womanhood. Krishnan, her husband, grows along with her in love and understanding and learns life anew with her, his partner in life, 'Sahadharmini' (Krishnaswamy,104).

The following words from the novel also corroborate the fact that Susila is a perfect wife: "She took sides with me in all my discussions and partisianships, and hated everyone I hated and respected everyone I respected" (ET,37). The little family of Krishnan – the husband, the wife and the little daughter, and for a period Krishnan's mother – make up a picture of mutual love and understanding so rare in real life as well as in any other novel of Narayan. Narayan's emphasis in this novel seems to focus on traditional marital set-up, his intention being to show that under favourable conditions and with the two partners understanding each other well, such marriages are very successful and bring joy and happiness to the family.
An aspect of Susila's character worth noting is her sense of restricted family. She scolds even her husband when he jocularly suggests bringing forth some more daughters and sons. "I often reiterated and confirmed our solemn pact that Leela should be our only child. And anything I said otherwise, even in jest, worried her very much" (ET,44). Another proof of her belief is supplied by her own words when she says to the old lady at the temple, who suggests that God will bless her with many children and all of them may be sons: "We have one and we are satisfied with one..." (ET,63).

Taking into account the fact that this novel was written in 1946, when the ideal of family planning had not taken any roots in India, and when, on the contrary, it was usual to confer on married women the blessing, according to the Sanskrit saying "May you be the mother of a hundred sons", Susila's views sound much advanced, especially when she was blessed with a daughter only. India, no doubt, has made much progress in its programme of family planning which is part of the National Plan, but despite whatever has been done during the past few decades, the problem is getting more and more acute, as the population growth follows geometrical progression. India is indeed in dire need of more and more Susilas!

Shantha Krishnaswamy is rather too eloquent about Susila’s post-death role in the life of her husband when she writes:

Suseela, after death, in confirming to this classical concept, loses her appealing human warmth; the loss perhaps is the result of bowing down to the exigencies of the plot. In a matter of hours, she turns into what S. C. Harrex calls ‘an animated philosophical treatise’ and Shirley Chew, ‘pedantry in the spirit’.

She takes Krishnan’s spiritual development in her hand, teaches him about the psychic medium of existence, enables him to have spiritual sight and guides him towards the higher knowledge of the soul. At novel’s end, thanks to her help, he learns to accept the inevitable dissolution of human ties and the souls beyond the physical realm. In the process, like any other
classical spiritual heroine she becomes remote. The psychic experience is intensely personal and Suseela, in the spirit, is too perfect, devoid of any appealing human flaw (Krishnaswamy, 105).

One is inclined to favour M. K. Naik's views in this regard, namely,

_The English Teacher_ ... clearly demarcates the areas of his [Narayan's] strength and weakness, by neatly dividing itself into two halves of equal length ... On the second half the only verdict possible is the one in Pope's well-known epigram, 'On one who made long epitaphs': 'one half will never be believed' ... Narayan's imagination being certainly not of the type which can effortlessly make the supernatural natural, this tame exercise in spiritualism is hardly convincing. 6

Uma Parameswaran's following comment is also relevant here:

_The English Teacher_, despite the beauty and pathos of the total experience, shows in its parts that Narayan is not capable of portraying heights and depths of emotional experience. 7

One, who reads through the psychic experiences of Krishnan and the spiritual teachings he receives from Susila, cannot but be reminded of Dante's _Divine Comedy_, wherein Beatrice takes Dante from the Earthly Paradise, to guide him in his passage through the nine Heavens and at the end she prays to Virgin Mary to intercede for Dante that he may behold God. Beatrice is Dante's muse, ideal and magnet. Beatrice is the type of Divine Philosophy which leads man to revelation, heavenly beatitude and union with God. Beatrice as his guide represents Dante's own personal experience of the immanence of the Creator in the creature. In her he had seen in moments of revelation the eternal Beauty shining through the created beauty. When Beatrice takes over from Virgil the function of guiding Dante through Paradise, Dante implies that Revelation has superseded Reason.
According to what Dante has said in *La Vita Nuova*, when he first saw Beatrice in real life, his soul and intellect began to marvel, and the mere sight of her gracious beauty was to him a revelation, as of something divine walking the earth bodily. Through *Divine Comedy*, Dante desires to convey that in real life Beatrice was the medium of his moral reform and of his religious salvation.

Narayan seems to fall far too short of expectation in his treatment of such a complex subject of psychic experiences, especially when viewed in the light of what Dante achieved in *Divine Comedy*.

Dante’s vision of Beatrice in *Divine Comedy* is so sublime that, in comparison, Narayan’s vision of Susila, as she appears after her death in the novel, is like the Moon before the Sun. According to J. M. Scott, “Beatrice must be considered as one’s own ideal. She is a frame in which every man can fit his perfect love.” By no stretch of imagination can one take Susila as one’s own ideal. Indeed, Shantha Krishnaswamy has made a very correct appraisal of her when she says:

We remember her best as an ordinary young woman ... who learns to cope by trial and error with the common vicissitudes of life. ... To be sure, she is luckier than most girls of her age and class; ... she is thrice blessed indeed for she has the love of her family, her child and her husband (Krishnaswamy, 105).

It is the contributory factors like loving parents and parents-in-law, a darling daughter and an affectionate, accommodative and enlightened husband, and financial stability, which make the character of Susila shine out in a better light than she would on her own and by herself.

Narayan’s descriptions of how Susila acquired her fatal illness, her death, and also the after-life of Susila, are very much similar to what his wife, Rajam, personally experienced in her life. He has described these facts in an interview with Ved Mehta and in his memoir “My Days”. In the interview he revealed:
My father-in-law who was quite well-to-do, wanted to settle a house on Rajam, and one day he came up from Coimbatore and we went round searching for a place. We looked through a number of remodelled houses, and late that afternoon we happened upon one that seemed suitable. It had the solidity of an old house and the bright cleanness of a new one. While my father-in-law and I were canvassing the land, Rajam went into the bathroom, an outhouse, to wash. She did not rejoin us. I got worried and walked back to the bathroom. Rajam was pounding away at the shut door, screaming: “Someone open it; Someone open it;” I gave the door one or two hard kicks and Rajam fell out in my arms. She was convulsed with sobs, and her face was a feverish red. She cried out that it was the dirtiest place she had ever been in. She said a fly had settled on her lips. I took her home, but she wouldn’t eat anything. She kept washing herself, time and time again. By the evening, she had temperature and she remained in bed with typhoid for twenty days. It was 1939, and no one had heard of chloramphenicol. Rajam died. A fly had killed an almost five-year-old marriage. 9

What Narayan has recorded in *My Days* is:

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 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. More than any other book, *The English Teacher* is autobiographical in 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, ... 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 (MD,134-135).

Regarding how far, as a literary artist, Narayan succeeded in recreating his pathetic experience in his novel, Shiv K. Gilra says:

In the entire range of Narayan’s fiction pathos is never so unendurable as here. The reason is obvious it emanates from an intense personal experience.

However, a sedate and detached writer as he is, Narayan perhaps does not succeed entirely in making his experience artistically credible and authentic (Gilra,26).

Another prominent remark on the very point is of Uma Parameswaran:

Seen from the autobiographical side, Susila’s contraction of typhoid virus in a dirty latrine is extremely pathetic; but viewed from the artistic point of view, as a device whereby the heroine feels the touch of Death on her lips, I think it fails. The scene, in the novel, has enough realism to convey a mixture of repugnance and horror, but not enough force or drama to carry us onward without being conscious of the ludicrousness of the experience, ...

It is all the more pity, that the author failed to convert his ‘intense personal experience’ to the best of his advantage in his creative art, in which exercise, in fact, he could be expected to succeed the most.

Of the novels written by Narayan before Independence, The Dark Room, published in 1938, can be singled out as “a wholly serious tale of silent suffering and abject surrender.”

As stated succinctly by William Walsh, The Dark Room “is the closest Narayan comes anywhere to arguing a case” (Walsh,43). In none of his novels, including The Dark Room, Narayan has assumed the role of a preacher or an advocate of any particular ideology or ism. One, however, cannot escape a feeling while reading The Dark Room that an undercurrent of compassion for the heroine is running throughout the novel, and that the underlying motive of
the novelist is to plead, though very much nebulously, for the equality of 
women, which he has achieved splendidly. To my mind, this novel is the most 
gripping and scholarly among all Narayan’s novels. As succinctly put by Shiv 
K. Gilra:

In a way, it forms a class apart as in no other novel has Narayan 
such a marked leaning towards symbolism, satire, melancholy 
and expostulation of purpose (Gilra,19-20).

Gilra also states:

It is among the most carefully conceived and constructed novels 
of Narayan (Gilra,132).

_The Dark Room_ is the story of Savitri, who being a perfect model 
of an Indian traditional wife and mother, and whose world is confined to her 
husband and children, is yet totally mistreated by her husband, and who 
silently endures all her suffering till her capacity to endure reaches its limit at 
the entry of another woman in her husband’s life. Not provoked sufficiently by 
the husband’s bad behaviour to herself, Savitri’s provocation crosses the 
bound at her husband’s marital infidelity, which makes her shout:

Don’t touch me! ... You are dirty, you are impure. Even if I 
burn my skin I can’t cleanse myself of the impurity of your touch 
(DR,112).

This leads her to a step which can be considered revolutionary for a woman of 
her milieu. She leaves her home, which means leaving her husband and 
children and trying to establish an independent life of her own. The immediate 
impact of the shock of her own step is a mixed sense of repentance, of the 
utter futility of her own action, of sheer helplessness, and this leads her to the 
vague thought of ending her life, which makes her drag herself forward into 
the water of Sarayu.

She is, however, saved by a villager, Mari, who is a locksmith, 
umbrella-repairer, blacksmith and burglar — all rolled into one. He takes her to 
his hut in village Sukkur, a couple of miles away from the other bank of the 
river. There her charge is taken over by his wife Ponni. Her very brief stay
with them, during which she also undergoes the sour experience of employment with the priest of the village temple, however, is more than what she can bear, and she returns home, pocketing her self-respect, thoroughly crest-fallen and humiliated, ready to reoccupy the dark room of the house and to sulk therein.

That *The Dark Room* is a feminist novel is very well stated by Narayan himself when he talks of what motivated him to write it, in the following words:

I was somehow obsessed with a philosophy of Woman 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 notion of her independence, her 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 (MD,119).

Even William Walsh has commented:

*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 (Walsh,43).

Walsh here very appropriately emphasizes the historical aspect of the novel, so that it can be better appreciated in its historical perspective.

To take the same social code as the background and yet to create two diametrically opposite stories— one showing an ideal happy couple in *The English Teacher* and the other showing a total failure of marital happiness in *The Dark Room* — is no doubt a daring feat of penmanship achieved by Narayan. In the former, Susila never experiences humiliation as a wife; in the latter Savitri never experiences anything else.
Right from the start of the novel, Savitri is shown as a cowed down, unhappy and frustrated wife, ever ready to please her husband, though perhaps she knows that it is next to impossible to do so. Several of her attempts to keep her husband pleased prove futile. For example, serving him cucumber would annoy him one time, and not serving him with cucumber at another. She also realizes that even after fifteen years of married life, “she had not the slightest power to do anything at home” (DR,6). She is a representative of the average Indian women, whose most coveted career is marriage, and most of whom find themselves caught in the whirlpool of the pangs and tangles of marital life.

Like all traditional Indian women, Savitri too is bashful in responding to the romantic advances of her husband who is undoubtedly romantic. Perhaps this is one of the reasons, as it usually is in such cases, for Ramani being drawn to Shanta Bai, who is an adept at encouraging romanticism in men. The novel contains instances wherein Savitri either spurns or avoids the romantic advances of Ramani. She believes in decorum, is a stickler for propriety laid down by the standards of polite society, which makes her hesitate even in responding to the demonstrative romance of her husband, let alone indulging in it herself.

Savitri has not been trained, or is not by nature suited, to face with quiet fortitude any unusual situation. Anything which seems to her out of the ordinary, or any fear of such happening upsets her. For example, when she is in Janamma’s house and Kamala, her daughter, comes and informs her, “father wants you to come home immediately,” the matter “was very unusual” to her and her “heart beat fast,” and she starts thinking “Was he terribly ill? Or had anything happened to him or to the house?” ... (DR,23).

Savitri’s power to take any decision or to assert her views in any matter has been destroyed by her husband’s bullying nature. She is not allowed to decide whether her son should remain at home because he is ill, or to take Kamala to the cinema with her. The only decision she takes, and that
too a major one, namely, to leave the house, is impulsive and is taken without realizing her lack of capacity to carry it to fruition.

The novel nowhere clarifies Savitri's educational qualification, except that she had not been to a college. Her lack of enough education has not been shown in the novel as a direct or indirect cause or proximate or remote cause of her marital unhappiness. Neither Ramani’s lack of interest in Savitri nor his interest in Shanta Bai is based on considerations of education. Even when Savitri tries to sort out the reasons for her husband’s amour with Shanta Bai, she does not go beyond youth and beauty. Witness her statement before Gangu: “I am middle-aged, old fashioned, plain. ... She must be young and pretty...” (DR,101). Savitri herself feels her lack of enough education only when she faces the problem of financial independence:

What can I do by myself? Unfit to earn a handful of rice except by begging. If I had gone to a college and studied, I might have become a teacher or something. It was very foolish of me not to have gone on with my education. Sumati and Kamala must study up to the B.A. and not depend for their salvation on marriage (DR,119-120).

It is a pity that education for women is even today thought of mainly as a means more of getting the right type of bridegroom or of financial independence rather than of their overall development.

Though Savitri is shown as an almost illiterate woman with a traditional upbringing under the Hindu social order, some of her utterances and thoughts recorded in the novel are very revealing about her views on the plight of women:

I’m a human being. You men will never grant that. For you we are playthings when you feel like hugging, and slaves at other times. Don’t think that you can fondle us when you like and kick us when you choose (DR,110).
Also: “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” (DR,113).

Or again:

“One definite thing in life is Fear. Fear, from the cradle to the funeral pyre, and even beyond that, fear of torture in the other world. ... Afraid of one’s father, teachers and everybody in the early life, afraid of one’s husband, children, and neighbours in later life – fear, fear, in one’s heart till the funeral pyre was lit, and then fear of being sentenced by Yama to be held down in a cauldron of boiling oil. ...” (DR,116).

And lastly, the most revolutionary of them all:

“No one who could not live by herself should be allowed to exist. ... What can I do by myself? Unfit to earn a handful of rice except by begging. ... What is the difference between a prostitute and a married woman? – the prostitute changes her men, but a married woman doesn’t; that’s all, but both earn their food and shelter in the same manner. ...” (DR,119-120).

It would seem as if the novelist has created this character a few decades earlier than it was due to be born. Even today, with so much spread of education among women in India and with a change, though slight, in men’s outlook towards women, very few women will be bold enough to challenge their husbands with such caustic remarks as used by Savitri. If we judge her from her outbursts or thoughts quoted here, she undoubtedly deserves to be considered a revolutionary much ahead of her times! For a meek, obedient, God-fearing wife, to compare marital relationship with the condemnable profession of prostitution would almost be considered sacrilegious even in the present age.

When Savitri leaves home and reaches the river and says to herself “This is the end,” (DR,115) a thought occurs to her: “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 ...” (DR, 115). Actually, however, it is the same Savitri who leaves the house as the one who had been living in it. But the irony of the situation is that it is not the same Savitri who returns home, as the one who had left it! The traumatic experiences through which she passes from the moment of her leaving up to the moment of her return could not but stamp their mark on her soul! Of course, at one stage of that period she did feel exultant and thrilled when she could cook rice earned by her own labour. “She felt triumphant and a great peace descended on her” (DR, 184). On the whole, however, it is an experience full of kicks and insults which make her reminiscences during that period, of her life at home, all the more poignant. The effects of the experience on her are two-fold. On the one hand, she returns with a better awareness about women’s plight in the existing social order, and about at least one remedy for it, namely, education, which, one hopes, she would apply in the case of her daughters to get them well-educated. She is also better equipped to bear what is in store for her at home, with some semblance of courage and fortitude. On the other hand, she has also lost something, perhaps her precious possession of the past, namely, her deep attachment for her husband and her children. Though she returns to the shelter of the same roof, she does not feel the same warmth for the family. When Mari passes by her house, she suppresses her natural instinct to rush out and invite him to reward him for what he had done for her in her time of need: “Why should I call him here? What have I?” And she reflects, “A part of me is dead” (DR, 210).

While M. K. Naik considers that “The Dark Room is by no stretch of imagination an Indian version of The Doll’s House,” Shantha Krishnaswamy, while comparing the characters in the two works, says: “Ramani is everything that a husband should not be – he is a cruder Helmer to a gentler Nora” (Krishnaswamy, 106). She also adds:

Ibsen’s Nora, in a similar situation, when crushed to the core of heart, felt that, in such a context, her marital obligations, as a
wife and mother, ceased. She left to cherish and maintain her equally sacred duty towards herself. Her strength of will, her gumption, is lacking at the final crucial point in Savithri, conditioned and broken down so thoroughly as she is in the rigid Indian setting” (Krishnaswamy, 112).

Agreeing with Krishnaswamy, one may add that Nora, though younger and living in a much earlier decade, shows more maturity, more strength of determination, more rectitude than Savitri. There is much to be praised in Nora, and much to be regretted in Savitri. Though one may pity Savitri, and may sympathize with her, one can hardly praise her for her retreat to the dark room.

One incidental fact worth noting is the significance of the choice of the name of the heroine by Narayan. He has ironically assigned to her the name Savitri, who is the protagonist of the mythology of Satyavan – Savitri. The mythological Savitri is able, through her exceptional love and devotion for her husband, Satyavan, triumphantly to get him back from the hands of Yamaraj, the God of Death, who had taken him away when his death was due. Savitri of The Dark Room, however, herself leaves her husband, only to return, fully vanquished by circumstances.

The character of Ramani, the husband, has been painted by the author in the darkest possible colours, in order to bring to better limelight his oppression of his wife and his wife’s sufferings. Shantha Krishnaswamy has aptly described him as “everything that a husband should not be” (Krishnaswamy, 106). He reveals contrary traits of character, one vis-à-vis Savitri and the opposite vis-à-vis Shanta Bai. As a husband he is demanding, exacting, nagging, brow-beating, aggressive, selfish, callous. That he holds outmoded views on women and wives, like a tradition-bound Indian, is sufficiently demonstrated by his utterances: “Go and do any work you like in the kitchen, but leave the training of a grown up boy to me. It is none of a woman’s business” (DR, 1). Again: “If the cook can’t cook properly, do the work yourself. What have you to do better than that?” (DR, 2). Also, “Women
are exasperating. Only a fool would have anything to do with them” (DR,26).

It is also stated:

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 a wife who disobeyed her husband? Didn’t all the ancient epics and Scriptures enjoin upon 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 (DR,141).

If a major part of the misery of Savitri is on account of the entry of Shanta Bai in the life of Ramani, one would expect Shanta Bai to be a great villain. But one is disappointed, because Narayan has, throughout the novel, kept the character of this woman vague, and has developed it only to provide the necessary thread to the texture of the novel. Here Narayan has exhibited his art of cutting his character to size, at the same time preserving the structure of the novel.

Though minor, another noteworthy woman character is of Janamma, who fits in with the general tone of the novel. Her character is fully revealed in her advice to Savitri, namely:

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 a wife’s duty to feel so” (DR,59).

There is another minor woman character, Gangu, who refuses to cook for the evening and advises her husband ‘to fill your stomach in a hotel’. As for the rest of the family at home, the husband must bring a packet of food for them – otherwise Gangu will drive him out. ‘He knows it’ (DR,98). The author has purposefully introduced in the story two diametrically opposite
minor characters of Janamma and Gangu both of whom, being neighbours, are capable of influencing Savitri’s thoughts and increase her dilemma.

A very interesting and appealing character is that of Ponni. She is a warm-hearted, friendly woman who cheerfully welcomes Savitri to her hut, and who sheds tears when Savitri takes leave of her. The only woman character, in this novel, having the strength of mind and moral is Ponni who, though belonging to a very low stratum of society, is enjoying all the privileges of a wife. Through her lips, Narayan narrates, in simple words, the fundamentals of husband-wife relationship, viz. friendship. “You want us to do all sorts of things for you. Why should we do it? Just for the sake of friendship” (DR,176).

While portraying Mari, Narayan writes:

He was a burglar for various reasons; ... and he did it to please his wife. He was intensely devoted to her, ... Mari cared a great deal for his wife, although he chased her about and threw things at her when he was drunk (DR,122).

Ponni’s portrayal, on the other hand, is in these words:

He [Mari] is a splendid boy, but sometimes he goes out with bad friends, who force him to drink, and then he will come home and try to break all the pots and beat me. But when I know that he has been drinking, the moment he comes home, I trip him up from behind and push him down, and sit on his back for a little while; he will wriggle a little, swear at me, and then sleep, and wake up in the morning quiet as a lamb. I can’t believe any husband is unmanageable in this universe ... (DR,136-137).

Narayan has deliberately included this happy lower class poor couple of Mari and Ponni in the novel to bring into limelight in a sharp contrast the unhappiness of the middle class couple of Ramani and Savitri. There is also perhaps a message which he wants to convey, namely, happiness and wealth are not necessarily concomitant. A family in dire want may yet be happy while a family with abundance may in vain be searching for happiness.
The study of the four novels written in the pre-Independence period shows that Narayan's portrayals of women is an attempt to focus on the status of women in their roles as wives and mothers. He has, however, also tried to pin-point the status of a woman as a woman, which is well mirrored in the following significant utterance of Savitri: “I’m a human being. ... You men will never grant that” (DR,110). What Narayan desires to imply thereby is that Savitri exhibits a self-consciousness of being a human being first and anything else thereafter. This latter attempt of Narayan is not, however, as prominent as the former one.

After a close inspection of these four novels, one can say that Narayan has created the traditional womanhood as also a rebel. The mother and grandmother had a better status in the family, whereas the wife was a lesser being in those days, and if she rebelled and left the home she had no place to go, nor had she any place in society. Narayan’s attempt to portray a woman as a rebel was all the more difficult because he had to do it in reference to the pre-Independence era which was more insensitive than the post-Independence era, and during which period the Hindu metaphysics was much more rigid than it is today. In fact it was an age of the tyrannies of traditions which too Narayan has portrayed very efficiently in these novels.

There is a fifth novel of Narayan which he wrote much later after Independence, in 1961, namely, The Man-eater of Malgudi, which, however, logically claims a place in this chapter because of the type of the two women characters depicted therein. Perhaps Narayan has been content to keep these two women characters in the traditional mould under the compulsions of the main theme of the novel, namely, a cruel killer of animals for use in his profession of taxidermy and the people of the town trying to prevent his big kill – the temple elephant – a conflict, in the words of Walsh, between “two different and hostile orders of reality” (Walsh,143), or between “the insulated personality and the open and vulnerable one” (Walsh,145).

The Man-eater of Malgudi is not a story of a tiger as the novel’s title is prone to suggest, being akin to The Man-eaters of Kumaon by Jim
Corbett. The man-eater in this novel is "H. Vasu, M.A., Taxidermist", so described by the story-teller, Nataraj, who has burnt his fingers by offering hospitality to Vasu. Given an inch, Vasu takes a mile!

If I [Nataraj] had cared for a peaceful existence, I should have rejected Vasu on the first day. Now it was like having a middle-aged man-eater in your office and home, with the same uncertainties, possibilities, and potentialities (MM,28).

Vasu, no doubt, is physically very strong and has a bullying nature too, but "He had one virtue, he never hit anyone with his hand, whatever the provocation" (MM,182). Then what is the significance of calling him, or comparing him with, a man-eater? Initially, of course, Nataraj — and through him the author of the novel himself — implies that just as when a tiger is seen lose, people would run helter-skelter and hide themselves to safety, people have a similar feeling to shun Vasu’s presence! But in the climactic development of the story towards the end, Vasu, by killing himself by accident, puts Nataraj to such miserable plight, that people think he has murdered Vasu and Nataraj’s best friend, the Poet, perhaps thinks that Nataraj has embezzled his funds.

In addition to thinking me [Nataraj] a murderer, perhaps he [the Poet] thought I had embezzled his funds and was now playing a prank on him. This was the greatest act of destruction that the man-eater had performed; he had destroyed my name, my friendships, and my world (MM,180).

Narayan here, as a novelist, has shown an excellent stroke of imagination in building up the climax of the story, and has succeeded in an impressive use of imagery. Viewed in this light, the title of the novel becomes quite suggestive.

The story throughout revolves so much round the two major male characters — Vasu and Nataraj — that it leaves little scope for any female characters to participate. There are, however, two minor female characters — one of Rangi, who is a Devdasi and a prostitute, and the other of Nataraj’s wife. The insignificance of these two characters is brought out by the author
by introducing Nataraj’s wife after 28 pages of the novel of 176 pages, and Rangi after 76 pages. They do not play any vital role in the flow of the story.

The main theme of the novel is to protect the temple-elephant from the evil design of Vasu to shoot it. Nataraj’s desire to play a role in foiling Vasu’s design is itself foiled by his wife by her negative role of keeping Nataraj confined to the house during the crucial period – not through force, of course, but through love and service. Rangi too tries to play a minor positive role by planning to drug Vasu through his food, so that he may be fast asleep during the crucial period. Fate however foils her attempt as Vasu does not touch the food brought by her! Thus these two women characters do play a role – one negative, the other positive – but destiny protects the elephant ultimately by providing a grotesque death for Vasu who kills himself when trying to kill a mosquito on his forehead with his mighty fist and superhuman strength.

Nataraj’s wife has no name in the story throughout which, Nataraj, the narrator of the story, refers to her as ‘my wife’. She is a common type of millions of housewives whose world is restricted to their husbands and children and who hardly make any heavy or embarrassing demands on their family. The only big demand she has made during ‘all the years of our wedded life’ (MM,35) is of a gold necklace, which, as usual with women, ‘she fancied only because someone she knew had a similar one’ (MM,35). She is a good cook, as traditionalist women generally are, as can be seen from the compliment Nataraj pays: “I might eat all the buns in the world, but without a handful of rice and the sauce my wife made I could never feel convinced that I had taken any nourishment” (MM,40-41). At times, she also nags, as most wives do: “I’d had enough of nagging from my wife all night, after she had been forced to get up from sleep and feed me at midnight” (MM,46). But she is neither cantankerous nor intractable. She is, of course, not an intellectual companion: “... I [Nataraj] rarely discussed my problems with her” (MM,56). She is a quiet, timid woman, and when Nataraj tells her of Vasu’s threats and advises her not to send Babu, their son, to the press, she gets frightened:
She was in a panic. She kept the front door shut. She was completely demoralized if the boy [Babu] did not come home at six. She behaved as if the monster would be unleashed and come rushing in to swallow up the family if the back door of my press was opened" (MM,81).

She loves and cares for her husband a lot. When Nataraj feels unwell in the crowd at the temple, she (and Babu) ‘rushed to me [Nataraj] with agonized cries’ (MM,140) … ‘My wife burst into tears and remained sobbing’ (MM,141). After taking him home,

…my wife unrolled a mat, spread a soft pillow and insisted upon my lying down to rest, turning a deaf ear to all my pleading that I was in a perfectly normal condition. She went in to make coffee and nourishment for me. She grumbled, ‘Not eating properly, not sleeping, not resting. God knows why you wear yourself out in this way?’ … My wife sat at my side, fanning me. She was very anxious about me. … she considered the temple function a most important one, and it depressed me to see her forgo it (MM,141-142).

Again, when Nataraj has several visitors, one by one, during his convalescence:

My wife had to prepare coffee again and again. She accepted the situation cheerfully; the important thing was to keep me in good humour at home (MM,144).

Such a wife, though she may strike as slavish to a modernist, ultimately succeeds in ruling the husband, unless he is absolutely domineering. This fact is brought out aptly by the author through the mouth of Muthu, a villager, who comes to see Nataraj at the latter’s house. Seeing the big house he suggests to Nataraj:

There is no harm in making a little money out of the space you really do not need (MM,143).

To which Nataraj’s reply is:
It depends. My wife would never permit me, even if I wanted to.

And Muthu says:

Then you can do nothing about it. It’s best to listen to the advice of one’s wife — because sooner or later that’s what everyone does, even the worst bully. Take my own uncle, such a bully for forty years, but at sixty he became a complete slave to his wife. If people are not slaves before sixty, they become slaves after sixty (MM, 143).

Nataraj’s wife is not free from the very common trait of wives the world over, namely, jealousy of another woman appearing to enter the husband’s life. As Nataraj himself comments: “I knew my wife. Although I had had no occasion to test it, I knew she could be fiercely jealous” (MM, 154). She exhibits the trait when Rangi comes to Nataraj’s house. Rangi’s appearance at once spoils her good mood under which she has prepared a multi-course feast for Nataraj, according to his preferences: “potato and onion mash, rice patties fried in oil, chutney ground with green chilli, sauce with brinjal and grated coconut, cucumber sliced, peppered and salted” (MM, 152). During Rangi’s stay she continues to move about in the house ‘casting sly, sidelong looks at the two of us [Rangi and Nataraj] in the dark passage’ (MM, 156). She also changes her decision to stay at home and prepares to go to the temple, and to Nataraj’s plea, “You wanted me to stay at home, now you are going!”, her rebuff is: “Stay or go, it’s all the same to me” (MM, 157). Her sulking however ends the moment she finds Nataraj facing a crisis on account of Vasu’s death in his press.

Rangi is noticed by Sastri, an employee of Nataraj, going downstairs from Vasu’s room one day. What Nataraj learns from Sastri is:

Rangi was a notorious character of the town [Malgudi]. She lived in the shadows of Abu Lane. She was the daughter of Padma, an old dancer attached to the temple of God Krishna four streets off, our ancient temple. Padma herself had been an exemplary, traditional, dedicated woman of the temple, who could sing and
dance, and who also took one or two wealthy lovers; ... Padma was now retired, being old, fat, and frightening like the harem guards of Ravana, and her daughter Rangi had succeeded her at the temple. Before that she had studied in a school for a while, joined a drama troupe which toured the villages, and come back to the town after seducing all the menfolk she had set eyes on (MM, 84-85).

When Nataraj himself sees her, he notices:

She was dark, squat, seductive, overloaded with jewellery; ... she had big round arms and fat legs ... every inch of her proclaimed her what she was – a perfect female animal. ... Although Rangi was black as cinders and looked rugged, there was an irresistible physical attraction about her, and I was afraid that I might succumb to her charms (MM, 85, 120).

Narayan has, in this description and in the small episode of the first meeting (MM, 119-121) of Nataraj and Rangi, revealed his brilliant power of penmanship in juxtaposing in sharp contrast a snob’s mental degradation on the one hand and, on the other, an elevated mind of a disreputed woman, who approaches him with one purpose only – to protect the temple elephant. “I am also a woman of the temple and I love that elephant. It must not be shot. Sir, you [Nataraj] must somehow see that he [Vasu] doesn’t do it. Please save the elephant” (MM, 120). This is her entreaty to the man who, at the same moment harbours such evil thoughts:

When I saw her nearer, she wasn’t so rugged. The light touched her high cheekbones, and I found myself saying to myself, ‘Not bad, not bad. Her breasts are billowy, like those one sees in temple sculptures. Her hips are also classical.’ I resented the attraction she exuded from a personality so rough. ... My blood tingled with an unholy thrill. I let my mind slide into a wild fantasy of seduction and passion. I was no longer a married man with a child and home, I was an adolescent lost in dreams over a
nude photograph. ... there she was, ready as it seemed to swallow me up wholesale, to dissolve within the embrace of her mighty arms all the monogamous chastity I had practised a whole lifetime. I found her irresistible ... a goddess carved out of cinder ... (MM,120-121).

There could hardly have been a better word-picture of an otherwise good and wise man succumbing to the charms of a woman — good or bad, beautiful or ugly.

But Rangi has her plus points. As this very episode shows, she desires to save the elephant. She also cares for her 'deaf and blind' mother (MM,155) — that is the reason why she obeys Vasu: “If I don't obey his summons he may set fire to my house, with my blind mother not knowing what is happening” (MM,156). And, as mentioned, she herself tries to contribute her mite to a good cause, by planning to drug Vasu to put him asleep when the procession with the elephant is to pass by his room, so that he may not shoot it.

Though no further discussion is necessary to show that Nataraj's wife is a traditional type, Rangi who is neither a mother nor a wife may not appear to fit into the mould. It must, however, be remembered that 'Devdasi' or 'temple-woman' is an old custom or tradition in the South and Rangi herself is, and is a descendent of, a Devdasi. And she performs her 'duties' as a Devdasi, not only without grudge, but also seemingly with pleasure. She degenerates into a woman of easy virtue, as majority of Devdasis do, while continuing to function at the temple. She has, therefore, to be included in the group of traditionalists. It is also obvious that she is a sufferer of the tyranny of traditions, otherwise no woman, given a free choice, would opt for a Devdasi's life.

Viewed as a whole, the women characters in the five novels discussed in this chapter, irrespective of whether they are centrally portrayed or on the periphery, are sharply brought to life. Simultaneously, Narayan has
shown the art of cutting his characters to size, at the same time preserving the structure of the novel.

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Notes


4. R. K. Narayan, *The Dark Room* (1938; Mysore: Indian Thought Publications, 1992) 1. (All subsequent references are to this edition). Henceforth abbreviated as DR and page numbers are given in parenthesis in the text itself.


11 Naik, History 161.


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