CHAPTER - II

WOMEN IN THE EARLY NOVELS AND THEIR CULTURAL AWARENESS

(38-78)
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Among R.K.Narayan's early novels, one is The Dark Room, first published by Macmillan and Company, London, in 1938, re-issued by William Heinemann, London, in 1978, the Indian Reprint being brought out by Indian Thought, Publications, Mysore, in 1992. Counting from 1999, the novel is more than sixty years old, which implies that fiction readers of a couple of generations may have gone through it. The title "The dark Room", if taken literally, refers to the room of Savitri, the heroine of the novel, where she withdraws whenever she is emotionally perturbed, dejected, or frustrated. Metaphorically, The dark room may mean an undefined area in the mind of an individual when his behaviour is unusual, not easily explainable, or mysterious.

Savitri is made to feel how completely dependent she is on Ramani, her erratic husband. Then her fifteen-year-old marriage is put under severe strain when her husband starts taking interest in Mrs. Shanta Bai, a newly-appointed probationer in the branch office of the insurance company of which Ramani is the head. Savitri retreats into the dark room. When matters reach a crisis, Savitri walks out of the house alone, her husband insisting that the children are his because he paid the midwife and the nurse and also for their clothes and teachers. She attempts to drown herself in the river Sarayu, but is rescued by a blacksmith who is also a burglar. She struggles to earn her own food by keeping a village temple
clean. She does some introspection and, realising that she can't live without her husband and children, returns home. But a part of her has died.

**The status of a wife: subordination to an erratic husband**

Savitri is a good mother. She cares for all her three children— a son named Babu and two daughters named Kamala and Sumati, respectively. At school time, Babu felt very ill, and Savitri fussed over him and put him to bed. His father Ramani, asked him to get up and not to miss school on any account. Savitri said:

"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)

Babu dressed and slunk off to school. Savitri gave him a tumbler of milk and saw him off. Her husband had already begun his meal, served by the cook. Ramani complained:

I don't know when I shall have a little decent food to eat. I slave all day in the office for this mouthful. No lack of expenses, money for this, money for that. If the cook can't cook properly, do the work yourself. What have you to do better than that? (DR, 2)

Ramani was eccentric and lawless in his taste. He grumbled at the slightest delay:

I suppose I'll have to apply to my office for leave and wait for this salted cucumber! Never knew people could be so niggardly with cucumber, the cheapest trash in the market. Why not have cut up a few more, instead of trying to feed the whole household on a quarter of it? Fine economy. Wish you'd show the same economy in other matters. (DR, 3)
Savitri never interrupted this running commentary with an explanation, and her silence sometimes infuriated her husband. She would also be sometimes told what her husband thought of her for not attending to buttons or sock-holes, and for not keeping an eye on Ranga, the servant. While going to office, he would stand at the street door and call, "who is there?" which meant, "Savitri, come here and see me off."

**Meals: husband first, wife afterwards**

On Ramani's departure to his office, Savitri went to the worshipping room, lighted wicks and incense, threw on the images on the wooden pedestal handfuls of hibiscus, jasmine & nerium and muttered all the sacred chants she had learnt from her mother years ago. She prostrated herself before the god, rose, picked up a dining-leaf, and sat down in the kitchen. The cook served her with a doleful face. He asked: are the preparations very bad today, madam?"

**The cook: the last to eat**

The cook served Savitri in sullen silence. This happened every day. He was affected acutely both by criticism and by hunger, and criticism hurt him all the more because he lived in a state of protracted hunger, being the last to eat. Other cooks might have eased the situation by snatching a gulp of milk or curd when the mistress was not looking their way, but not he! Savitri locked up these commodities in the kitchen cupboard and served them out herself.

**Savitri's present position as wife and mother**

Savitri thought how impotent she was. She had not the slightest power to do anything at home, and that too after fifteen years of married life. Babu did look very ill, and she was powerless to keep him in bed. She
felt she ought to have asserted himself a little more at the beginning of her married life, and then all would have been well. There were girls nowadays who took charge of their husbands the moment they were married. There was her own friend Gangu who had absolutely tethered up her poor man.

**Feeding children**

During the recess hour of the Extension Elementary School, Savitri's two daughters came home for their midday meals. Savitri went to the kitchen to mix curd and rice for the girls. Kamla, a plump little girl, sat down with her plate before her. She stuffed a few mouthfuls and tried to rise. Savitri pushed Kamla down in her seat and said, "You have got to eat the whole of it. I mixed only a little." Kamala wriggled and protested. Savitri offered her a bribe of three pies to finish it. The bribe worked.

The other daughter, Sumati, complained of being tired of eating nothing but rice morning, noon, and night. Savitri thought:

Was there nothing else for one to do than attend to this miserable business of the stomach from morning till night? (DR, 10)

About two hours later, Savitri issued a few instructions to the cook about the night dinner, adding:

"I am going out. If the children come from the school before I return, give them coffee and tiffin. Babu will come in the evening. He is not quite well. Give him coffee, Don't compel him to take tiffin if he don't want it." She was ready to go out on her afternoon round of visits at three-thirty. She called the cook and told him: "Tell the children I will be back soon. Don't forget about Babu's coffee. (DR, 11)
Entertaining a guest

To Savitri, a guest meant a great deal of messing about with oil and frying -pan and stove and getting some extra dish ready within the shortest possible time. Ramani was never in the habit of announcing in advance the arrival of a guest or of tolerating any poor show in the dining room. Savitri, however, had other methods of dealing with sudden guests. She had a genius for making the existing supply elastic and transforming an ordinary evening course, with a few hurriedly fried trimmings, into a feast.

The preliminaries of love-making

Savitri understood what it meant whenever her husband returned from office in a happy mood. After undressing and changing, Ramani came to the dining hall and asked Savitri whether she has finished her dinner. The answer was "Not yet". Ramani remarked:

"What a dutiful wife: Would rather starve than precede her husband. You are really like some of the women in our ancient books." (DR, 14)

He laughed and patted her on the back. She understood what it meant. He would make love to her—a kind of heavy, boisterous love. Ramani told Savitri she had a lot to learn yet, and that she was still a child, perhaps a precocious child, but a child all the same. Savitri understood that it was the beginning of love-making. She changed the subject, which saved her from his romantic attentions till the two girls came in. Ramani looked at his daughters benevolently and then looked at his wife and said with a wink:

I wonder which of them will grow up like you?..... I rather like the way you have arranged the jasmine in your hair today. (DR, 17)
Savitri's two friends: one opposite the other

Savitri had two real friends in South Extension - Gangu and Janamma. Both of them hated each other. They lead lives different from Savitri's life. All the three women - Gangu, Janamma and Savitri are placed in different circumstances. They also differ in habit, temperament, and in their husbands.

Gangu, Savitri found Gangu fascinating. She had humour, abundant frivolity, and pictures one ambitions. She was the wife of a school teacher and had four children. It was her ambition to become a film star, though she lacked any striking feature of features or acting ability. She wanted to be a professional musician, though she had no voice. She hoped to be sent some day as Malgudi delegate to the All-India Women's conference. She wanted to be elected to various municipal and legislative bodies. She also wanted to become a congress leader. She spent her days preparing for the fulfilment of one ambition or another. For serving public bodies, she felt she ought to know a little more English. She engaged a tutor who made her go through Scott's novels and trained her in English conversation.

Gangu prepared for her film career by attending two Tamil pictures a week and picking up several screen songs, in addition to wearing flimsy crepe saris and wearing her hair and flowers in an eccentric manner. She talked irresponsibly and enjoyed being unpopular in the elderly society of South Extension. She left home when she pleased and went where she liked. She moved about without an escort, stared back at people, and talked loudly.
Gangu's husband never interfered with her. He let her go her own way. He believed himself to be a champion of woman's freedom. He believed himself to be a champion of woman's freedom. He believed he was serving the women's cause by constantly talking about votes and divorce. Gangu was tolerated in the Extension. She was interesting. With all her talk, she was very religious, visiting the temple regularly.

Janamma, Savitri's other friend, Janamma, was a different type altogether. She was rotund, elderly and rich. Her husband was a public prosecutor. She never moved very freely among people. Savitri had a great regard for her, and consulted her whenever she was seriously worried.

**The common themes of women's talk**

Once Savitri found herself in a difficult situation when both of them met in her house. Neither was willing to be the first to leave. Savitri kept on talking as best as she could of that day's menu for breakfast, the price of vegetable, scarcity of good vegetables, the independence and avarice of some vegetable-vendors, the difficulties of going to the market every day, all the bother with servants and cooks.

**Ramani: "women are exasperating"**

One day Ramani came home early. Savitri was in Janamma's house. Her heart began to beat fast with anxiety. Was her husband terribly ill? Or had anything happened to him or to the house? Why had he not gone to the Club? When he returned home, Ramani informed her he was taking her to the cinema, leaving the children behind: "Are you coming out at all or shall I go alone?.... Go and dress quickly". He shouted a moment later: "Savitri, I will count sixty. You must dress and come out before that."
Savitri's two friends: one opposite the other

Instead of counting sixty, he went on talking:

Women are exasperating. Only a fool would have anything to do with them. Hours and hours of dressing! Why can't they put on decent clothes and look presentable at home instead of starting their make-up just when you are in hurry to be off? Stacks of costly saris, all folded and kept inside, to be worn only when going out. Only silly-looking rags to gladden our sights at home. Our business stops with paying the bill. It is only the outsider who has the privilege of seeing a pretty dress. (DR, 26)

The Navaratri festival

Celebration of festivals in the customary manner is also a part of culture. Savitri had no need to buy new dolls. There were three casks full of dolls and toys in the house. A day before the festival, the casks were brought into the hall from an obscure storing-place in the house. Ranga, the servant, unwrapped the dolls and toys. Most of them had been given to Savitri by her mother, and the rest bought by her at various times. There they were—dolls, images, and toys of all colours, sizes, and shapes; soldiers, guards, and fat merchants; birds and beasts, gods and demons; fruits and cooking utensils; everything of clay, metal, wood, and cloth. They were over five hundred, all in a jumble, like the creations of an eccentric god who had not yet created a world. (DR, 37)

Babu constructed graduated step-like platforms. He brought in bamboo poles and built a pavilion round the platform. He cut up strips of coloured paper and pasted them round the bamboo poles and covered their nakedness. He filled the whole pavilion with resplendent hangings and decorations. In a couple of hours, a gorgeous setting was ready for the dolls: a world inhabited by all God's creations that the human mind
had counted. Here and there, out of the company of animals and vegetables and mortals, emerged the gods - the great indigo-blue Rama, holding his mighty bow in one hand, and with his spouse, Seeta, by his side, their serenity unaffected by the company about them. There stood the great Krishna trampling to death the demon serpent Kalinga, undistracted by the leer of a teddy bear which could beat a drum. (DR, 39-40)

It was all very well then, but the trouble would be in putting them all back in their casks after nine days.

Babu thought the light was defective. He invited his friend Chandru and asked him to fix up a festoon of ornamental coloured bulbs under the pavilion arch. Chandru worked wonders with a piece of wire and a spanner. He created a new circuit with an independent switch. A festoon of coloured bulbs twinkled in the archway and two powerful bulbs flooded all the dolls with a bluish light. Sumati and Kamala were delighted. They remarked that their pavilion would beat the pavilion in the Police Inspector's house.

At five-thirty, nearly a dozen visitors had already arrived, everyone wore bright silks, and sat gazing at the dolls. Babu rushed to the switch. He rattled it, but nothing happened. Not only were the pavilion lights not on, but the usual hall bulbs had also gone out. At about seven-thirty, there was no light in the house. Visitors were received in the pale light of a hurricane lantern, and the pavilion was lit by flickering oil-lamps transferred from the puja room. The atmosphere was dim and gloomy.

Ramani was in a terrible temper. He asked whether everybody in the house was dead. Angered by this, Savitri said:

What a thing to say on a day like this, and at this hour! I have seen very few who will swear and curse at auspicious time as you do. (DR, 45)
Ramani twisted Babu's ear for interfering with the switch. He also slapped Babu on the cheek. At this point, Savitri dashed forward to protect Babu. She felt faint with anger. "Why did you beat him?" was all that she could ask, and then she burst out crying.

Savitri went to the dark room next to the store, and threw herself on the floor. Later, the cook tracked her down there and requested her to take her food, but she refused. The children came to her one by one and tried to coax her. She turned her face to the wall and shut her eyes.

**The cook's ideas of a son's upbringing**

According to the cook, when the master and the mistress quarrel it is the servants who suffer. He adds:

> It is no business of a wife to butt in when the father is dealing with his son. It is a bad habit. Only a battered son will grow into a sound man. (DR, 50)

**Message to the dark room**

Ramani came in for food at his usual hour, before going to the office. He decided to ignore severely his wife's absence. He was going to show her that sulking would not pay. He demonstrated his calm indifference by humming a little song and whistling loudly. He asked his daughters what sweets they were distributing that evening to their friends.

> "Don't worry, I will buy sweets for two rupees". He raised his voice while saying it, which was a message to the dark room: "Don't imagine that the festival can spoil by your sulking." (DR, 53-54)
"No one was indispensable"

The cook had prepared the meal very well because he had the run of the kitchen cupboard. He had made unstinting use of rarities liked pure ghee and parched coconut, while Savitri would have allowed him to use only gingelly oil and no coconut. Ramani ate his food with thorough enjoyment. He shouted suddenly to his daughters whether they had eaten plenty of the potato and onion stuff. He then asked, "Aren't the sauce and the plantain chips excellent?" This was meant to convey to Savitri that she was not indispensable.

The cook was very happy, which was due not only to his master's compliments but also to the fact that the freedom of the kitchen cupboard had enabled him to quench his ten-thirty hunger with a gulp or two of curd.

The wife's duty to feel that her husband is always right

Sumati brought Janamma to persuade Savitri to stop sulking and come out of the dark room. Janamma reasoned with Savitri:

You should either let your words out or feel that everything your husband does is right. As for me I have never opposed my husband or argued with him at any time of 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)

Men: better trainers of children

On the question of beating the child savagely, Janamma answered:

Men are impetuous, one moment they will be all temper and the next all kindness. Men have to bear many worries and burdens, and you must overlook it if they are sometimes unreasonable....
After all, they are better trainers of children than we can be. If they appear sometimes harsh, you may rest assured they will suffer for it later. (DR, 60)

**Instances of the patience of wives**

Janamma went on in this strain, recounting instances of the patience of wives. Her own grandmother had slaved for her husband who had three concubines at home. Her aunt was beaten every day by her husband and had never uttered a word of protest for fifty years. Another friend of her mother's was prepared to jump into a well if her husband so directed her. Savitri gradually began to feel very foolish at the thought of her own resentment, which now seemed very insignificant.

**Out of the dark room**

Janamma advised Savitri to get up, bathe, wear her best sari, and take her food. Savitri needed a little more persuasion. When Janamma said, "what a foolish inauspicious thing to do on a Navaratri day!", Savitri felt guilty of a great crime. And then Janamma said:

You are spoiling the happiness of these two girls after all, Navaratri comes once a year. (DR, 61)

Janamma told the girls their mother wanted to bathe and to see if there was hot water. The order was conveyed to the cook, with the remark that Mother was coming out of the dark room.

**The other women**

Savitri comes to know of her husband's interest in Shanata Bai, a newly-appointed woman with a modern touch in the Malgudi branch of
the Engladia Insurance Company, which is headed by Savitri's husband. Ramani remains absent from home on some nights. Savitri suffers in silence, but one day she musters enough courage to confront her husband when the children had gone to bed.

"This sort of thing has to stop, understand?" he was already in bed, with a novel shielding his face. He lowered the novel and scowled at her. "Don't talk. Go and lie on your bed".

"I'm not going to, till you promise to come to your senses". She stood firmly beside his cot. He sat up, understood the terrific force that a woman about to be hysterical could muster, and tried to take her hands and draw her nearer. She pushed away his hand, crying, "Don't touch me." (DR, 109)

Are wives human beings?

Ramani once again tried to hold her hands, but she shook her hands free violently. She said, through her heavy breathing:

"I'm a human being. You men will never grant that. For you, we are plaything 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....."

"Now, will you promise not go near her again?......." (DR, 110)

Empowerment and decision - making

Ramani was irritated by his wife's question and said he did not want her to dictate to him. She repeated her question and he told her not to be "a silly fool." She understood the menace in his tone, drew herself away from him, and said:

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"So you refuse?"
"Yes."

"You won't give up this harlot? ... You are not having me and her at the same time, understand? I go out of this house at this minute."

"You can please yourself. Put out the light. I want to sleep" (DR, 111).

Who is ungrateful - wife or husband?

Ramani heard the banging of the door. He found that she had gone out of the room. Indignation welled up in him. He thought she was trying to nose-lead him with threats of leaving "like a damned servant," Narayan reveals Ramani's thought: the man is more money-minded than loving:

She could please herself, the ingrate. All the kindness and consideration wasted on her. When his bank balance was low, he had somehow bought her that gold-laced sari and jumper because she desired it, and the diamond studs on her nose, the ingrate! (DR, 111)

"Woman, get away, now"

Ramani rose from the bed and went out of the room. He found his wife waking up the children in the hall. They sat rubbing their eyes, their minds in a whirl of confusion. Savitri wanted to take them with her. Ramani tried to take her by the hand lead her to her bed. Moving away from him. She cried:

"Don't touch me! You are dirty, you are impure. Even if a bum my skin. I can't cleanse myself of the impurity of your touch. (DR, 112)
Ramani clenched his teeth and raised his hands. She said, "All right, strike me. I am not afraid. "He lowered his hands and said, "Woman, get away now".

**Women themselves are responsible for their position**

Savitri had made up her mind. She said with firmness:

Do you think I am going to stay here? We are responsible for our position. We accept food, shelter and comforts that you give and are what we are. Do you think that I will stay in your house, breathe the air of your property, drink the water here, and eat food you buy with your money? No, I'll starve and die in the open, under the sky, a roof for which we need be obliged to no man. (DR, 112-113)

Ramani said, "Very well. Take your things and get out this moment".

**Woman's successive dependence on father, husband, and son.**

Savitri said:

"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. So take these too..." She removed her diamond earrings, the diamond studs on her nose, her necklace, gold bangles and rings, and threw them at him. (DR, 115)

**Reasons why children are husband's, not wife's**

Saviti tried to go near the children. Her husband barred her way. "Don't touch them or talk to them. Go yourself, if you want. They are my children." She hesitated for a moment, and then said:

"Yes, you are right. They are your's, absolutely.

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You paid the midwife and the nurse. You pay for their clothes and teachers. You are right. Didn't I say a woman owns nothings. She broke down, staring at their fidgeting forms on the beds. "What will they do without me?"

"They will get on splendidly without you, don't you worry. No one is indispensable in this world."(DR, 113-114)

**Gifts : father no better than husband**

The diamonds and the gold lay at Ramani's feet on the floor. He picked them up. "This ring and this necklace and this stud were not given by me. They are your father's " Savitri shrank from them. " Take them away. They are also a man's gifts ". (DR, 114)

**The mother's concern for her children**

Savitri threw a look at the children, at him, turned round, and walk out. Before she reached the gate, she heard the sound of the bolting of the front door. She saw the light in the front hall put out. "Will the children sleep there in the dark without me?" It was nearly mid night. She walked down the silent street.

**Fear : from the cradle to the funeral pyre**

Savitri walked all the way to the north end of the town and reached the river Sarayu and hour later. She sat on the last step, with her feet in the dark moving water. She released that one lives in fear throughout one's life.
One thing definite 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 a husband's displeasures, and of the discomforts that might be caused to him, morning to night and all night too. How many night have I slept on the bed on one side, growing numb by the unchanged position, afraid lest any slight moment should disturbed his sleep and caused him discomfort. afraid of one's father, teachers and everybody in 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 Yarna to be held down in a cauldron of boiling oil. (DR, 116)

One gets the husband one deserves

Savitri recalls the past and comes to the fatalistic conclusion that one gets the husband and deserves.

She now thought of her husband. Poor man, she said; not so bad by himself, only poisoned in mind now by that slut (Shanta Bai). Was she (Shanta Bai) such a heavenly creature that one should lose all one's senses?

Hadn't he said when they talked to each other for the first time, on the fifth day of marriage, up in the lonely upstairs room, that the moment he saw her he decided to marry her, and that he would have taken his life if he hadn't got her? How he had written to her in all the early letters that he hadn't met anyone with a skin as fair as hers, or with her eyes or hair or cheeks. (DR, 118)

Attempt at suicide by drowning

It was three. In an hour, it would be four, and then five. People would come and drag her away. She rose and stepped down. There was still one step, the very last. Water reached up to her hips and, as she went
further down, to her breasts. She stood in water and prayed to her God on the hill to protect the children." In Yama's world, the cauldron must be ready for me for the sin of talking back to a husband and disobeying him, but what could I do? What could I do ..., no, no, I can't die. I must go back home. I won't. I won't." The last sensation that she felt was a sharp sting as the water shop up her nostrils, and something took hold up her feet and toppled her over.

**Rescue, self-respect, lowly employment, homesickness, return home**

Savitri was saved by Mari, the locksmith, umbrella repairer, blacksmith and burglar, all rolled into one. His wife Ponni forced Savitri to go to her hovel in Sukkur, a village of about a hundred houses, but Savitri refused to accept food which she had not earned. At Mari and Ponni's insistence, the old priest of a temple engages Savitri to keep the temple tidy, on half a measure of rice and the quarter of an anna a day. The priest is very strict in demanding work, and Savitri works assiduously. After a few days, she grows homesick. A nostalgia for children, home, and accustomed comforts seizes her. She takes leave of the priest and, helped by Ponni, returns home.

**Husband hesitates, wife trembles**

It was over an hour since Savitri had arrived. The children's excitement had subsided. Ramani's car sounded its horn out side. Kamala and Sumati run to the gate to announce, "Mother has come!" Ramani went inside the house. He hesitated for a fraction of a second on the doormat and then passed on to his room. Savitri sat in the passage of the dining room, trembling. What would he do now? Would he come and turn her out of the house?
Acceptance with indifference

An hour later, Ramani came towards his wife. She started up. He threw a brief look at her, noted her ragged appearance, and went into the dining-room. He asked the cook to hurry up as he had to be at the office. He started eating. She stepped into the dining room and stood before him, watching his leaf. She noticed a space in a corner of the leaf. She asked him whether she should call for some more beans. Without looking up, Ramani said "No"
"curd?" Savitri asked.
"yes".
Savitri went to the cupboard and took hold of the curd vessel. (DR, 206)

Granting the wife the privilege to laugh and joke

Ramani returned from office at eight-thirty in the evening. He paused on the doormat and threw a genial look around. The children giggled when he asked them, "what does your mother say?". He went in to change and, later, he asked savitri:
"Children finished their dinner?"
"Yes", said savitri.
"Haven't you finished yours?"
"No".
"Waiting for me?"
"yes".
"What a dutiful wife you are!" he remarked and laughed. He was granting her the privilege to laugh and joke and be happy.
"Oh, I should have bought some jasmine for you" he said, looking at her mischievously.
She tried to smile. (DR, 207)
The wife: "a part of me is dead"

Ramani watched his wife while she was eating. He exclaimed:

"Oh, how poorly you eat! Have a little more ghee. Eat well, my girl, and grow fat. Don't fear you will make me a bankrupt by eating."

She attempted to laugh, and muttered through it, "If I grow too fat, people may not recognise me." She knew it was a miserable joke. "A part of me is dead," she reflected.

He said "I came home early entirely for your sake, and now you won't talk to me properly. What is the matter with you?"

"I don't know. I am all right. I am tired and want to sleep."

He pleaded with her, later: "Just a pretty half an hour. You can go to bed at ten-thirty. Just a little talk. I came home early for your sake."

"I can't even stand. I am very tired. I must sleep."

"Please yourself," he said, and went away to his room. (DR, 208).

Comments

At the end of the novel, the husband-wife relationship has changed. On her return home, the initial reception accorded by the husband to his wife is cold, and her response to her husband is also equally cold. The role of Savitri still remains the limited role of "a dutiful wife." We are not told what happened to the Ramani-Shanta Bai relationship, which hurt the "dutiful wife" so much as to cause the death of a part of her self.

Narayan seems to remind us that men and women - the man may be Ramani and the women may be Savitri or Shanta Bai - are products of the particular culture in which they have been born and brought up, and
that any deviation from their cultural environments causes fissures in the life of the affected individual and, indirectly, in the lives of those who constitute the family: the fissure in the case of some may be permanent and, at the same time, in the case of some others it may be temporary.

**The English Teacher**

Let us now investigate cultural awareness in *The English Teacher*, first published in London by Eyre and Spottiswoode in 1946. The first Indian edition was brought out by Indian Thought Publications, Mysore in 1955. Since then it has run into its 15th reprint in 1998, which shows that the novel has had its readers in India and elsewhere for over four decades since 1955. Narayan dedicates this novel to his wife, Rajam, which may tempt one to see some kind of nexus between Rajam and Susila, wife of Krishna, the English teacher.

Krishna teaches at the Albert Mission College, Malgudi. His wife Susila and daughter live with his parents-in-law, some distance away. Wife and daughter come to live with Krishna in a small rented house in Malgudi. They enjoy a life of marital bliss, but the paradise is short-lived. Narayan is successful in creating the atmosphere, texture, and elusiveness of happiness.

**Setting up a family**

Krishna, Krishnan, or Kittu received a letter from his father, which brought back to him not only the air of the village and all his childhood, but also the facts - home, coconut-garden, harvest, revenue demand. There was a paragraph with a faint suggestion that Krishna's mother was not
looking after herself quite properly, still keeping late hours for food, the last to eat in the house, and reluctant to swallow the medicines given to her.

The letter went on to say:
Your father-in-law has written a letter today. I hear that, by God's grace, your wife Susila and the baby are keeping well. He suggests that you should take her and the baby and set up a family and not live in a hostel any longer. He has my entire concurrence in this matter, as I think in the best interests of yourself you should set up a family. You have been in the Hostel too long and I don't feel you ought to be wasting the best part of your life in the hostel as it will affect your health and outlook. Your mother is also of the same view, since your father-in-law's place is not a very healthy one for an infant. If you have no serious objection to this your father-in-law suggests the 10th of next month as the most suitable and auspicious date.....

To help you set up the family, your mother is quite willing to come and stay with you for a few weeks. I have not the slightest objection.(ET, 19-20)

Child management

On reading his father's letter, Krishna wondered what he would do with a little child of seven months. This somehow terrified him. He had visited his wife's place three or four times since the baby was born. At the first trip, he could hardly take notice of the child, although for his wife's sake he had to pinch its cheeks. He no doubt felt a mild affection for it, but there was nothing compelling or indispensable about it. During the subsequent interviews, he began to feel more interest in the girl and began to feel that it would be nice her about the home, cooling and shouting. But he did not bargain to accept her guardianship so suddenly.

Krishna had seen his sisters' children of that age, seven months
or eight months old, and they started howling and crying night till the family felt that they would not survive whatever was afflicting them. But Krishna's mother was there, and she could take them in hand expertly: a fomentation, a rub with an oil, some decoction down their throats, and they were quietened.

**Wife's jasmine-fragrant letter**

Krishna smelt his wife's letter before opening it. It carried with it the fragrance of her trunk, in which she always kept her stationery - a mild jasmine smell surrounded her and all her possessions over since he had known her. He hurriedly glanced through her letter. In her uniform round hand she had written a good deal about the child which made Krishna want to see her at once.

The baby was really too intelligent for her age, understood everything that was being said and done in the house. There was every indication that she was going to prove the most astonishingly intelligent person in the family. She crawled on her belly all over the place, and kept a spy-like watch on her mother's movements. She was learning to say "Appa" (father), and with every look asking her mother when father proposed to take them home. Susila then requested Krishna to set up a house at the earliest moment possible, Krishna felt he was someone whose plans and determinations were of the utmost importance to others.

**House preference**

Culture also includes housing and the physical and social environment surrounding one's house. One's house preference indicates the nature and value of one's culture. Krishna wanted a house which faces
south for its breeze, kept out the western sun, got in the eastern, and admitted the due measure of light that artists so highly valued. The house must have a room for each one of them and for a guest or two. It must keep them all together, and yet separate them when they would rather not see each other's faces. They must have helpful people and good people near at hand, but obnoxious neighbours ten miles away. It must be within walking distance of college, and yet so far out as to let Krishna enjoy his domestic life free from professional instructions.

**House-keeping and Culture**

Krishna's mother arrived from the village with a sackful of vessels, and helped to make up the house for him. She was stocking the store room and the kitchen, and spent most of her time travelling in a Jutka to the market and coming back with something or the other. She worked far into the night, arranging and re-arranging the kitchen and the store. At night, she sat down with him on the verandah and talked of her housekeeping philosophy. She was completely wrapped up in her duties. 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.

Susila was the last daughter of her family. She was greatly petted by her parents, where she spent most of her time reading, knitting, embroidering, or looking after a garden. In spite of it, after Krishna's marriage, his mother kept Susila in the village and trained her in housekeeping. Susila had picked up many sensible points in cooking and household economy, and her own parents were tremendously impressed with her attainments when she next visited them. They were thrilled beyond words and remarked when Krishna went there:
"We are so happy that Susila has such a fine house for her training. Every girl on earth should be made to pass through your mother's hands." (ET, 29)

Krishna's mother said: "Susila is a modest girl. She is not obstinate." That was the beginning of Krishna's married years. They were in constant touch after that, and with every effort Susila came out better than before. And then came a point when Krishna's mother declared that Susila had learnt how to conduct herself before the guests. At this point, they separated. Now they were meeting again, with Susila having a home of her own to look after, and Krishna's mother ready to teach the obedient pupil her business.

On the first of every month, Krishna came home, with ten-rupee notes bulging in an envelope, his monthly salary, and placed it in Susila's hand. She was his cash-keeper. She seemed to be a ruthless accountant. It was her hands a hundred rupees seemed to do the work of two hundred, and all through the month. She was able to give Krishna money when he asked. She seemed to understand perfectly where every rupee was going or should go.

Krishna bought provisions from the National Provision Stores. Susila found the sugar underweight.

"I wrote for two measure of sugar, and see this; he has billed for two measures and has actually given a measure and a half. I have measure it just now ... This National Provisions man is thief. The sooner your change, the better. (ET, 38-39)

Susila induced her husband to change over to Cooperative Stores. From next month onwards, Krishna went out to Cooperative Store in the Market Road. He returned home three houses later, followed by a coolie carrying various items in paper bags and bundles, stuffed into a large basket. She always waited for them at the door with unconcealed enthusiasm.
moment Krishna was at the gate, she held her hand for the bill, and hurriedly ran her eyes down columns checking the figures and prices.

Susila carried the packages to the store-room, and put each in its container, neatly labelled and ranged along a rack. She always needed her husband's assistance to deal with rice. It was the bulkiest bag. It was Krishna's duty to drag the gunny sack along to the store, life it and empty it into a zinc drum. If any rice scattered accidentally on the floor, she said:

"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." (ET, 41)

Susila watched these container as a sort of barometer, the level of their contents indicating the progress of the month. Each had to be at a particular level on a particular date; and on the last date of the month just enough for another day. She watched these with a keen eye like a technician watching an all-important meter at a power house.

**Father-in-law socially inferior to son-in-law**

Earlier, when Krishna went to the Malgudi railway station to receive his wife and infant daughter, he found them standing beside the trunks piled up on the platform. He gazed on his wife, fresh and beautiful, her hair shining, her dress without a wrinkle on it, and her face fresh, with not a sign of fatigue. She wore her usual indigo-coloured silk sari. His father-in-law went back to the compartment to give a final look round. Krishna asked, "When will she wake up?" pointing at the child, whom he found enchanting, with her pink face and blue shirt. Susila said:

Father is coming down, hinting that he had neglecting him and ought to welcome him with a little more ceremony. I
obeyed her instantly, went up to my father-in-law and said: "I am very happy, sir, you have come." He smiled and said: "Your wife and daughter got comfortable places, they slept well. (ET, 33)

**Ritual of welcoming daughter-in-law**

They arrived at the rented house in a Victoria carriage. Krishna's mother came down and welcomed her daughter-in-law at the get. She had decorated the threshold with a festoon of green mango leaves. The floor and doorway were decorated with designs of white flour.

She was standing in the doorway and, as soon as we got down, cried: "Let Susila and the child stay where are". She had a pan of vermillion solution ready at hand and circled it before the young mother and child, allowing them to get down from the carriage. (ET, 34)

**Shrine, Gods, worship**

Susila identified herself completely with her husband. She took sides with him in all his discussions and partisanship, hated everyone he hated, and respected anyone he respected. She was also deeply religious-minded. An alcove at the end of the dining room served for a shrine. There, on a pedestal, Susila kept a few silver images of gods, and covered them with flowers. Two small lamps were lit before them every morning. Krishna often saw her standing there with the light in her face, her eyes closed, and her lips lightly moving. He often asked her what she repeated before her gods. She never answered this question. There hung about this alcove a perpetual smell of burnt camphor and faded flowers.

One day Krishna and Susila went out in search of a suitable house which they wanted to buy. As they were passing into the main road, they
saw a small, newly-built temple. Susila decided to go in and see the god. An old woman, sitting on a gunny bag at the temple, was selling offerings. Susila asked Krishna to buy something for the god. Then she asked the old women what temple it was.

"Srinivasa - the greatest god. You need not visit Thirupathi Hills to see him. If you visit him here, he grants all your boons and blesses all your efforts." She (the old woman) held up a coconut, a packet of camphor, plantain, and betel leaves.

"You are both so young and bright. He will bless you with numerous children and may they all be sons." (ET, 63)

They entered the temple - hall a stone pillared hall, smelling of camphor and flowers, cool and shady. There were two bronze lamps burning in the inner sanctuary, illuminating a tall stone image of Srinivasa. A priest, wrapped in a shawl, sitting at the foot of the image, rose on seeing the two visitors, and held up a plate. The couple placed the offering on it.

Susila found the image of Srinivasa lovely. She brought her palms together and closed her eyes in prayer. Krishna stood watching her. The priest broke the coconut and placed it and the other things at the feet of the image. In the flickering light, the image acquired strange shadows and seemed to stir, and make a movement to bless. Krishna's watched his wife. She opened her eyes for a moment. Her lips were moving in prayer. Krishna felt transported at this sight. H shut his eyes and prayed: "God bless this child and protect her." She received the holy water from the priest and touched her lips and yes, put a vermilion dot on her forehead and tucked the flower offered to the god in her hair. As they descended the temple steps, she said they must make it a point to visit that temple as often as they could.

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Children imitate what they see their elders doing. The child, Leela, was playing with her friend in the next house. She was heaping wet sand on the front step of the next house, and sticking things and sticking twigs flowers on its top.

"This is our temple", she said. The god was a piece of stone embedded in the mud. She reverently prostrated herself before it. "She is the temple man", she pointed to her friend. "She does the puja". Her friend came up with a piece of coconut (a castor seed) and flowers (grass tufts) and offered them to me. (ET, 69)

A benign elder at home

One evening, an old lady stood at the gate, with a small trunk under her arm, and asked: "Is this teacher Krishnan's house?" Krishna opened the gate for her. She looked at Krishna, wrinking her eyes, and said, "Kittu, I have seen you as a baby and a boy. How big have you grown!" She came up to the verandah, peered closely into Susila's face: "You are our daughter-in-law. I am an old friend of Kamu", she said, referring to Krishna's mother's mother by her maiden name. By this time, Leela came out on hearing a new voice. At the sight of her, the old lady cried:

So this is Kamu's grand child!" She picked her up in her arms and fondled her. Susila's heart melted at this sight, and she said: "Come into the house, won't you?"

The old lady went in, sat under the lamp, took out of her sari a crumpled letter, and gave it to Krishna. It was from his mother:
I am sending this letter with an old friend of mine, who was assisting me in household work when you were a baby. She then went away to live with her son. He died last year, and she has absolutely no one to support her. She came to me a few weeks ago in search of work. But I have no need of assistance nowadays. Moreover, your father grows rather irritable if he sees any extra person in the house. So I have given her bus fare and sent her on to you. I have always felt that Susila needed an assistant in the house, the baby demanding all the attention she can give. My friend will cook and look after the child. And you can give her whatever salary you like. (FT, 42)

Man or woman is not born merely to cook and eat. The old lady was engaged on a salary of six rupees a month. In course of time, they found they simply could not do without her. She cooked the food, tended the child, and gave them the necessary courage when the child had fever or stomachache. She knew a lot of tricks about children's health. She grew very fond of the child and took her out and kept her very happy. She established herself as a benign elder at home, and this meant a great deal.

The old lady's devotion to the child enabled Krishna to take his wife twice or thrice a month to a picture, on a walk along the river, or out shopping. Susila grew very fond of her and called her "Granny", and so did Leela. But Susial had to pay a price for this pleasure. She lost supremacy over the kitchen and the store when down in other ways. Then the levels in the containers at the store went down in other ways than Susila calculated. She protested and fought against it for some time, but the old lady had her own way of brushing aside all objections, and Susila adjusted her own outlook in the matter. The old lady wasted provisions worth three rupees per month. It was a small price to pay for the great company and service of the old lady, who lived on one meal a day. Just a handful of
cooked rice and butter-milk. It was a wonder how she found the energy for so much activity.

**Earlier years of married life**

The earlier years of married life are the most memorable but the birth of a child brings about a change. Susila and Krishna often sat together with some book in the single top-floor room in her father's house, and tried to read. The first half hour would be wasted, because of an irresponsible mood coming over her, which made her laugh at everything.

Even the most solemn poem would provoke her, especially such poems as were addressed by a lover. "My true love hath my heart and I have his." She would laugh till she became red in the face. "Why can't each keep his own or her own heart instead of this exchange?" She then put out her hand and searched all my pockets, saying: "In case you should take away mine:

"Hush, listen to the poem," I said, and she would listen to me with suppressed mirth and shake her head in disapproval. And then another line that amused her very much was; "O mistress mine, where are you roaming?" She would not allow me to progress a line beyond, saying; "I shall die of this poem some day. What is the matter with the woman loafing all over the place except where her husband is?" (ET, 43)

But all that stopped after the child was born. When the child left her alone, she had to be in the kitchen.

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Giving wife a pet name

In every culture, as a mark of endearment, the wife is often given a pet name, usually by her husband. One early morning, the pleasant weather, made more pleasant by Susila's presence, made Krishna feel highly elated.

The fresh sun, morning light, the breeze, and my wife's presence, who looked so lovely - even an unearthly loveliness her tall form, dusky complexion, and the small diamond ear-rings Jasmine, Jasmine... "I will call you Jasmine, hereafter," I said. "I've long waited to tell you that." (ET, 53)

Mechanical, red-tape methods of successful doctors

Successful doctors in Indian towns have nothing to do with the oath of Hippocrates which every doctor is obliged to take on becoming qualified to practise. They have their own culture, which may be called the culture of making quick money. When Susila fell ill, Krishna felt greatly concerned. He went to Dr. Shankar of Krishna Medical Hall, who had been introduced to him by his colleague Rangappa, the Philosophy teacher. Rangappa had said about Dr. Shankar: "The greatest physician on the earth, easily the most successful practitioner in the town".

Krishna went to the Krishna Medical Hall, and had to wait for the doctor to arrive. A car stopped, and there was agitation in the gathering. The doctor had arrived. Everybody pressed forward to receive him. He looked like a film star being mobbed by admirers. He waved his hand, smiled, and gently pressed all his admirers back to their seats. His assistant placed some slips of papers and bottles before him and the doctor got down to work. He read out the names on the slips and bottles one by one,
examined a throat here, tapped a chest there, listened to the murmurs of hearts through a tube, and wrote prescriptions at feverish speed. Here he whispered into an ear something private, and there pushed someone into a private room and came out wiping his hand on a towel. He might have been a great machine dispensing health, welfare, and happiness.

At last Krishna's turn came. He explained to him his wife's symptoms. The doctor asked a few questions, wrote down a prescription, and put it away.

"Have you brought a bottle?"
"No, I didn't expect....." I began apologetically.
"It is all right," he said, and on my prescriptions made a mark, and turned to the next patient. (ET, 73)

In a quarter of an hour, the smart dispenser who had swept in the prescriptions a few minutes ago, came out with a few paper-wrapped bottles and called: "Mrs. Krishna".

Krishna stood up and took his bottle, and looked at the doctor who was busy writing. The clerk said:
"Is it your bottle?" He held his hand out for it. He looked at the label and read: "A third every four hours before food, and five minutes before each dose one pill. Repeat the mixture for two days, and then see the doctor. Diet - rice and buttermilk. Ten annas please." Krishna was disappointed with the mechanical, red-tape method he found there. He looked at the doctor who was still busy. He paid down the cash, but returned to his seat. He waited for ten minutes in the hope of catching the doctor's eye, but he was far too busy.

**Illness as an escape from mother-in-law's harassment**

Susil swallowed the medicine and pills for about a week more, but her temperature did not go down. Krishna went to the doctor's house and asked him to examine Susila at home. He took half an hour to examine
her, and then said. Nothing to worry about." Susila asked him when she would be able to move to again. He said:

Very soon. But all your life you will be moving about the house doing this and that. Why should you grumble at staying a little while in bed now? Many people take it as an opportunity for a holiday. (ET, 76)

He then narrated his experience at a house where a daughter-in-law fell ill and was in bed for two weeks or so, and put on weight. Her husband came to him privately and said: "Doctor, please keep her in bed for a fortnight more. It is her only chance of being from the harassment her mother-in-law.

**Diagnosis: from malaria to typhoid**

While some physicians of today are unable to make a correct diagnosis, it seems that half a century ago conditions were worse. Susila's blood test showed typhoid. Dr. Shankar seemed cheerful. He said:

I like typhoid. It is the one fever which goes strictly by its own convention and rules. It follows a time-table and shows a great regard for those who understand its ways.

I thought it was malaria - the most erratic and temperamental thing on earth. I wouldn't trust it, but typhoid is the king among fevers. It is the aristocrat who observes the rules of the game. (ET, 77-78)

**No longer wife or mother or Susila, only a patient**

Susila's sick room was converted into a sick ward. She would no longer be known as wife, or mother, or Susila, but only as a patient. The doctor said that, if his reckoning was correct, she was running her second
week. He would see that her fever came down in eleven days, and it was up to Krishna to see that she did not have a relapse.

**Belief in the Evil Eye**

Evil eye is a supposed power to cause harm by a look. Susila's mother was convinced that the Evil Eye had fallen on Susila, and that at the new house a malignant spirit had attacked her. She admonished Krishna:

> You should never step into an unknown house in this manner. You can never be sure. How do you know what happened to the previous tenants or why they left? (ET, 83)

She went out in the evening and visited a nearby temple and prayed to the god for Susila's recovery.

She brought in regularly every evening sacred ash and vermilion and smeared it on Susila's forehead.

**Belief in exorcism**

Krishna's mother-in-law arranged with the help of the cook for an exorcist to visit them. One afternoon, a man came and knocked on the door. Krishna saw a man with his forehead ablaze with sacred ash, and a thick rosary around his neck and matted hair, standing at the door. Krishna's mother-in-law brought him in with great respect. He sat in the chair and watched the patient. He felt her pulse. He uttered some mantras with closed eyes, took a pinch of the sacred ash and rubbed it on her forehead, and tied to her arm a talisman strung in yellow thread.
When he came out of the room, Krishna's mother-in-law seated him on a mat in the hall, gave a tumbler of milk to drink, and placed before him a tray containing a coconut, betel leaves, and a rupee. The Swami got up took his leave, muttering: "May God help you to see the end of your anxieties:"

The famous physician from Madras

Susila's illness grew from bad to worse. Dr. Shankar was losing his cheerfulness and looked helpless. Next morning, he brought in his car another doctor, a famous Madras physician. Even in their wildest dreams they could never have hoped to get this great physician. His reputation was all over the presidency and his monthly income was in the neighbourhood of ten thousand. He had come to Malgudi for another case. Dr. Shankar requested him to see Susila and he agreed. Krishna and his father-in-law rushed out and greeted the great physician effusively, opened the door of the car, and led him in.

The great man spent an hour examining the patient. He tapped her abdomen, scratched a key on it and watched, lifted her arm, flashed a torch into her eyes, and examined the temperature chart. He also asked numerous questions. He said her vitality was not very good, but there were no complications.

The body must on the floor

Some extract from Krishna's diary tell us what happened next.

Two hours past midnight ..., Susila lies there under the window, laid out on the floor.
For there is the law that the body, even if it is an Emperors's must rest on the floor, on Mother earth.
We squal on the bare floor around her - her father, mother, and I. We mutter, talk among ourselves, and wall between convulsions of grief, but our bodies are worn out with fatigue. An unearthly chill makes our teeth chatter as we gaze on the inert form and talk about it. Gradually, unknown to ourselves, we recline against the wall and sink into sleep. The dawn finds us all huddled on the cold floor. (ET, 97)

**Priest and corpse-bearers**

Excerpts from Krishna's diary reveal details of the funeral rites as practised in the cultural milieu to which the families of the protagonists belong.

The first thing we do is to send for the priest and bearers. Neighbours, relations and friends arrive, tears and lamentations, more tears, lamentation, more and more of it. The priest roams over the house, asking for one thing or other for performing the rites. The corpse bearer, grim and sub-human, have arrived with their equipment - bamboo and coir ropes near the front step they raise a small fire with cinders and faggots - this is the fire which is to follow us to the cremation ground.

A bamboo stretcher is ready on the ground in front of us. Some friends are hanging about with red eyes. I am blind, dumb, and dazed (ET, 95)

**The last offering**

The parting moment has come. The bearers, after brief and curt preliminaries, walk in lift her casually without fuss, as if she were an empty sack or a box, lay her on the stretcher, and tie her with ropes. Her face looks at the sky, bright with the saffron touched on her face, and the vermilion on the forehead, and a string of jasmine somewhere about her head.
The downward curve of her lips gives her face a repressed smile..... Everyone gathers a handful of rice and puts it between her lips - our last offering (ET, 95)

Putting the stretcher down on the roadside

They shoulder the stretcher. I'm giving a pot containing the fire and we march out, down our street... Passers-by stand and look for a while, but every face looks blurred to me..... We cut across the sands ford the river.... and enter the cremation ground by a small door on its southern wall.

The sun is beating down mercilessly, but I don't feel it. I feel nothing, and see nothing. All sensations are blurred and vague.

They find it necessary to put down the stretcher a couple of times on the roadside. Half a dozen flies are dotting her face. Passers-by stand and look on sadly at the smiling face. A mad man living in Ellamnan Street comes by, looks at her face and breaks down, and follows us on, muttering vile and obscure curses on fate and its ways. (ET, 95-96)

The crematorium

Stretcher on the ground a deep grove of tamarind trees and mangoes, full of shade and quiet - an extremely tranquil place. Two or three smouldering pyres and ranged about, and bamboos and coirs lie scattered, and another funeral group is at the other end of the grove. "This is a sort of cloakroom, a place where you leave your body behind," I reflect as we sit down and wait. Somebody appears carrying a large notebook, and writes down, name, age, and disease; collects a fee, issues a receipt, and goes away.

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The half a dozen flies are still having a ride. After weeks, I see her face in daylight, in the open, and note the devastation of the weeks of fever - this shrivelling heat has baked her face into a peculiar tinge of pale yellow. The purple cotton sari which I bought her on another day is wound round her and going to burn with her.

**Parrot-like repeating after the priest**

In his present condition, Krishna does not know what the priest asks him to repeat and what its meaning is. It is all a part of the funeral rites, a formality, and Krishna does so in order to complete the rituals.

The priest and the carriers are ceaselessly shouting for someone or other. Basket after basket of dry cowdung fuel is brought and dumped... Lively discussion over prices and quality goes on. The trappings of trade do not even leave us here. Some hairy man sits under a tree and asks for alms. I am unable to do anything, but quietly watch in numbness... I'm an imbecile, incapable of doing anything or answering any questions. I'm incapable of doing anything except what our priest orders me to do. Presently I go over, plunge in the river, return, and perform a great many rites and mutter a lot of things which the priest asks me to repeat.

They built up a pyre, place her on it, cover her up with layers of fuel... leaving only the face and a part of her chest out, four layers deep down. I pour ghee on and drop the fire. (ET, 96)

**Flames**

We are on our homeward march, a silent and benumbed gang... I can not resist the impulse to turn and look back. Flames appear over the wall... It leaves a curiously dull pain at heart. There are no more surprises and shocks in life, so that I watch the flame without agitation. For me, the greatest reality is this and nothing else. (ET, 96)
Comments

The rest of the novel is devoted to mysterious experiments in a two-way communication with Susila's spirit. These bizarre attempts sometime fail, but often succeed. A pencil records on paper whatever Susila's spirit communicates. Since this portion of the novel deals with something innovative, we propose to deal with it at some length in Chapter IV.

With each successive novel of Narayan, we become more and more aware of the culture which shapes the lives of his major Characters. In The Dark Room, for example, we learn about the status of a traditional wife which is that of complete subordination to her husband, even if he is erratic, meal custom where the husband eats first, wife afterwards, and servants last of all; the mother's natural concern for feeding the children; how the wife is expected to entertain a guest; what preliminaries of love-making a particular husband adopts; what kind of women friends of a wife cultivates; what the common themes of women's talks among themselves are; how some husbands make generalisations about women keeping their wife in mind; the manner in which the Navaratri festival is celebrated in south India; how a wife sulks when something done by her husband hurts her deeply; how the husband pretends to be indifferent to such sulking; the husband's expectation that it is his wife's duty to feel that he is always right.

As we proceed further, we are made aware of the belief that men are better trainers of children than women; some instances of the patience of wives; what happens to the wife when her husband neglects her and starts taking interest in "The other woman; "how wives are often considered as less than human beings; what happens when a wife asserts her rights; the belief of some women that they themselves are responsible for their own
position; The time-honoured custom of a woman's successive dependence on her father, husband, and son; the fact that one lives in fear of somebody or something throughout one's life; the fatalistic belief that one gets the husband one deserves; the fact that there is no way out for a helpless woman except suicide; and the fact that, when a wife leaves her husband's home and then circumstances force her to return, a part of her is dead.

Similarly, in The English Teacher, we are made aware of the problems encountered in setting up a nuclear family; the problems of child management, husband's reaction on receiving wife's letter; what the house preference of a respectable and educated couple is; economical housekeeping as an index to one's culture; the social inferiority of the father-in-law in comparison with the son-in-law; the ritual of welcoming the daughter-in-law; the value of shrine, gods, and worship in the house and in the temple; the advantages and disadvantages of having a benign elder at home; the earlier years of married life; life; the practice of giving a pet name to wife.

We also learn about the mechanical red-tape methods of successful doctors in towns; daughter-in-law's illness to escape from the harassment of her mother-in-law; making mistakes in diagnosis; belief in the Evil Eye, belief in exorcism; and, finally the funeral rituals like placing the corpse on the floor, the roles of priests and corpse bearers; putting the stretcher down on the roadside a couple of times, the scene at the crematorium, the husband's repetition of what the priest tells him, and the funeral pyre.