Chapter - Six

The Changing Status of Women in Malgudi

Though Narayan writes without any commitment, he seems to be moved by the treatment meted out to the feminine sex in our country. In the Malgudi of his imagination, he creates the picture of the society around him, not necessarily the Southern society, in which women try to come out of the secondary place to which they are pushed and for most of the part succeed in securing for themselves a place of dignity. In a nutshell, Narayan seems to be aware of the changing status of women in India and mirrors it in Malgudi. But when he does that, it is significant to note, that he stands at a safe distance so as to have an over-all view of the problem without developing any personal say in the matter. Like any other artist, he also feels that women deserve a treatment better than the one given to most of them, most of the times, but he never poses himself as the liberator of women.

What Narayan wrote about 'the Dark Room' can be taken to be his candid view in this regard: "I was somehow obsessed with a philosophy of Women as opposed to Man, her constant oppressor... This must have been an early testament of the 'Women's Lib' movement. Man assigned her a secondary place and kept her there with subtlety and cunning that she herself began to lose all notion of her independence, individuality, stature and strength. A wife in an orthodox milieu of Indian society was an ideal victim of such circumstances. My novel (The Dark Room) dealt with this philosophy broadly in the background."

1. cp. His, "My Days" (Serialised in the Illustrated Weekly of India) p.41 (11th August, 1974).
Narayan portrays in his novels the common lot of most of the lower middle class and lower class women of whose lives he has an intimate knowledge. Without being himself a party, he observes closely, the clashes between the husband and the wife and the resulting torment to the wife, which, in its extremity, may bring about temporary or permanent separation between the partners. But that is a good sign because there comes the "woman's realisation of her own debased position in domestic life and her revolt against it."

P.S. Sundaram\(^2\) arrives at two causes for the present state of women: the validity of the old double standards - understanding men as better than women; and the economic helplessness of women. The hero of 'The Painter of Signs' makes this clear: Raman thought that the tragedy of womanhood was that they are treated as utility articles whether in bed or out. Men never viewed them normally until they are past sixty and look shrunken-skinned.\(^3\)

Most of Narayan's women characters are symbols of the Indian tradition: 'Swami's grandmother is representative of thousands of Indian grannies, who uphold the Indian joint-family, guard the family prestige, insist on the observance of caste conventions, and, above all, shape the mental attitudes of the youngsters.'\(^4\) To Chandran, life becomes uninteresting because all the decisions at home are to be taken by the tradition-bound mother in the company of a passive father. Savitri fits in as the best symbol of traditional Indian

3. PS - p.47 (11 Jul 76)
woman.

Traditionally, the female child is thought of as such a liability that the father tries to make use of the earliest opportunity to hand it over. It is then her responsibility to prove to be a dutiful wife and an obedient daughter-in-law. Narayan puts all his power in this statement by Savitri: "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."  

The result is that she is forced to take interest in housekeeping. Men can never think women are suited to anything better than that: House-keeping was a grand affair for Krishna's mother. The essence of her existence consisted in the thrills and pangs and the satisfaction that she derived in running a well-ordered household.  Ramani said that if the cook could not cook properly Savitri should do the work herself. He asked her what better work she had to do than that.  

Vasu and Raman go a step further: Vasu criticised a dish prepared by the wife of and said that modern women were no good either at cooking or for anything else. Raman was so used to his Aunt that he hardly ever noticed how very versatile she was. Everyone who came across her was wonderstruck at the variety of her accomplishments. But Raman was indifferent and could never get over a feeling that she was somewhat bogus.  

It is the inherent diffidence of women to take over the duties which men are supposed to do that brings them to the pass they are forced to face: Janamma says that men, after all, are better trainers of children than women could

1. HR 2. ET  
3. DR 4. MI  
5. PS (4 Jul 76)
be.\(^1\) Ramani ordered Savitri to go and do any work she liked in the kitchen but leave the training of a grown-up boy to him as that was none of a woman's business.\(^2\) The cook said that only once his wife had tried to interfere with him when he was disciplining his children and then he nearly broke her bones. He said that women must be taught their place.\(^3\)

Sundaram says: 'Bullying husbands like Ramani and patient wives like Savitri are among the commonest features in our unhappy country. How is a girl like Savitri to fight? With what weapons?'\(^4\) It is this weakness of hers that 'reconciles herself to the spouse by coming out of the self-imposed isolation' as Savitri does, and 'ceremonially accepts the husband as her fate.'\(^5\)

Women in India are, by nature, parasites! Srinivas enquired of his wife why she did not go and do the shopping herself. His wife replied that the best thing would be to do that if someone escorted her.\(^6\) Hearing from Raju that Rosie has come with him all alone to Malgudi Raju's mother wondered at the courage of modern girls. She recalled that in their days they would not go to the street corner without an escort. She remembered that she had been to the market only once in her life when her husband was alive.\(^7\) Raju's mother was standing in the doorway of the court. She had never seen the inside of a court hall and was overwhelmed with a feeling of her own daring.\(^8\)

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1. DR - p.55  
2. DR - p.6  
3. DR - p.48  
6. MS - p.39  
7. TG - p.125  
8. TG - p.207
Savitri appears to say in her own words what Nanu stated: that women did not deserve freedom; that they are chattels; that they should depend upon father, husband and son. Savitri was terrified at the prospect of being alone though in a temple. She wondered what despicable creations of god must women be that they could not exist without a support. She felt she was like a bamboo pole which could not stand without a wall to support it.¹ Savitri wondered what possession could a woman call her own except her body. Everything else that she had was her father's, her husband's or her son's.²

It is this fundamental weakness that makes men - like Ramani - to shape their philosophy: Savitri was angry that men would never grant that women were human beings. Women were playthings when men felt like hugging and slaves at other times.³ Ramani believed that firmness was the secret of success with women. He was certain Savitri would return and apologize when her madness passed. After all, where could she go?⁴

This feeling of superiority upsets men when women disobey or displease them: Srimram observed a lantern burning in Bharathi's cottage and guessed that women being cowardly anyway, they might be sleeping with lights on.⁵ Ravi's father exclaimed that brazenness had come over our women so that they needed no permission from their husbands to leave the town and travel. He was angry because Ravi was being taken for being exorcised, without his knowledge or consent.⁶ The temple-priest at Sukkur recommended thrashing as the way to keep women sane. He called modern men mugs as they let their women ride them about.⁷

1. DR - p.161  2. DR - p.99
3. DR - p.97  4. DR - p.124
7. DR - p.144
Narayan's male characters know that their female counterparts have an infinite capacity to suffer and sacrifice. Their uncomplaining submission is taken undue advantage of by men: When Shanta Bai thought Ramani would perhaps not wish to be seen with her in public as Savitri would object Ramani said his wife was not the sort to question him or dictate to him.\(^1\) Ramani ordered Savitri that she must dress and come out before he would count sixty as he wanted to take her to the cinema.\(^2\) Savitri sympathised intensely with Kuchela's wife, the unfortunate woman in the cinema. Ramani asked her to note how patient that woman was and how uncomplaining.\(^3\) Janamma told Savitri that she had never opposed her husband or argued with him at any time in her life because it was a wife's duty to feel that what he did was right. Janamma recounts instances of patient wives: Her own grandmother who slaved cheerfully with three concubines at home; her aunt who was beaten everyday by her husband and had never uttered a word of protest for fifty years; another friend of her mother's who was prepared to jump into a well if her husband so directed her.\(^5\)

Men, however, are not without realisation that what they are doing is wrong: To Ramani the account of Shanta Bai's life with her harsh husband was really moving.\(^6\) Srinivas looked at the lined face of Ravi's mother and reflected how much she must have stood from him for forty years and admired her fortitude.\(^7\)

Occasionally at least their behaviour is palatable to women: Ramani had the good manners not to sit down when a lady was standing.\(^8\) Ramani enjoyed his role of husband so much that he showed Savitri a lot of courtesy constantly.

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1. DR - p.81  
2. DR - pp.26-27  
3. DR - p.29  
4. DR - pp.54-55  
5. DR - p.59  
6. DR - p.73  
7. MS - p.211  
8. DR - p.72
inquiring if her chair was comfortable, if she could see the
screen properly and if she liked to have a sweet drink.¹
Ramani declared that Savitri was really like some of the women
in our ancient books, hearing that she had not finished her
dinner before he did.² As Savitri sat beside Ramani in the
car after the show she felt grateful to him and loved him
very much.³

And even in the traditional Malgudi the wheel of
time turns, though very slowly, in favour of women; Ponni
advised Savitri to remember that men are good creatures. But
women must never give way to them. If women were firm, men
would behave.⁴

Women demonstrate that they can even go to the
the extent of revolting: Savitri declares that women them-
selves were responsible for their position. They accept the
food, shelter and comforts that men gave. Instead of that
she would starve and die in the open under the sky, a roof for
which they need be obliged to no man.⁵ Savitri confessed to
Ponni that she was resolved never to accept food or shelter
which she had not earned.⁶

Narayan seems to show that modern Indian women
refuse to shut the lives in the dark room. That is because
neither the woman has remained helpless nor the Hindu society
rigid. A married woman can hope to lead a life of dignity
and independence even in the absence of support from her hus-
band: After Mari saved Savitri from drowning to death, Savi-
stri reflected that she would never go to Ramani unless he
abandoned Shanta Bai and begged for pardon. She was indivi-
dual with pride and with a soul and was not going to submit

1. DR = p.28  2. DR = p.16
3. DR = p.30  4. DR = p.164
5. DR = p.99  6. DR = p.136
The wife of Srinivas could put up with a great deal except imperiousness or an authoritarian tone in others. The one or two occasions when Srinivas had seemed to give her orders his domestic life nearly seemed to have come to an end and needed a lot of readjustment on his part.\textsuperscript{2} The Head Master's wife asked her husband whether she was a paid watch-keeper for the house and whether he thought she was made of stone.\textsuperscript{3} Even after fifteen years of married life how impotent she was, Savitri thought. She felt she ought to have asserted a little more at the beginning of her married life. There were girls now-a-days 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.\textsuperscript{4} Gangu, the wife of a school teacher, talked irresponsibly and enjoyed being unpopular in the elderly society of South Extension. She left home when she pleased and went where she liked, moved about without an escort, stared back at people and talked loudly. Her husband never interfered with her but let her go her own way and believed himself to be a champion of women's freedom.\textsuperscript{5}

Narayan's women of the lower class and middle class start gaining ascendancy over their husbands: Ponni ordered Mari to beg for the sake of Savitri. He resented the idea. He felt this was the result of allowing too much liberty to women; he felt they ought to be kept under proper control and then all would be well. Mari felt irritated with himself at his own helplessness before his wife.\textsuperscript{6} Gangu advised her husband to fill his stomach in a hotel after his school. If he did not bring a packet for her and the children she would drive him out once again.\textsuperscript{7}

\begin{itemize}
\item[1.] DR - pp.116-117
\item[2.] MS - p.95
\item[3.] ET - p.163
\item[4.] DR - p.9
\item[5.] DR - p.21
\item[6.] DR - pp.138-139
\item[7.] DR - p.87
\end{itemize}
'Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar foresaw that the future of women lay in their being educated. The rapid strides that education has taken during the last twenty-five years have a great significance for Indian womanhood. Education has helped women to emancipate themselves economically and has brightened the prospects of a suitable partner. This has been realised by men in Malgudi: Ramani thought Savitri knew only a crude sulking in the dark room. She never made an effort to conquer her moods. That was why he felt women must be educated.

Though Savitri is uneducated she knows that her life has been futile and wants to make amends to it thus: She felt that no one who could not live by herself should be allowed to exist. She thought that she was unfit to earn a handful of rice except by begging. She felt that if she had gone to a college and studied she might have become a teacher or something. She realised it was very foolish of her not to have gone on with her education. So she decided that Sumati and Kamala must study up to the BA and not depend for their salvation on marriage.

Educated women come to be admired: Learning that Rosie was an MA, Raju's mother said that she lacked nothing in the world, as she was not like them, uneducated women. She enquired whether Rosie would join Government Service and earn.

As a result, the inevitable modernisation of Malgudi is in the offing: In the New Year the England Insurance Co., decided to take a few women probationers into its

2. DR - p.79
3. DR - p.105
4. TG - p.126
branches who were to be trained in office and field work...  

'A woman confined to the home often lived the life of a domestic servant or was merely a child-bearer to her husband. But when women began to seek extra-domestic work it has been an event of tremendous social significance. Narayan sees Malgudi participate in this: Out of the thirty or forty Ramani interviewed everyday, some were educated up to Matriculation, or Intermediate, some were widows, some were prostitutes.3

It is indeed a tragedy that in Malgudi are imported women like Shanta Bai. 'She is the representative of the lost generation of young women whose rootlessness is irreparable which not only denotes her personal pathos but proves to be the bane of Savitri's hearth and home.'4

And there is the clear indication that tradition frowns upon the tendency of women to work: Kantaiangar, the accountant, asked Pereira if the management of Engladia Insurance Co., wanted to convert the Company into a brothel by taking women probationers.5

With the extensive spread of education even among women, unemployment raises its ugly head and poses a pessimistic view of life even to the educated women: Shanta Bai was twelve when she was married to a cousin who drank and gambled. She left him when she was eighteen as he did not change. She had to leave home as her parents disapproved of this. She continued her education and became a graduate.

1. DR - p.57
3. DR - p.58
5. DR - p.58
For three years she was jobless. So she concluded that it was all nonsense to say that women's salvation lay in education.1

With women like Rosie around, the Malgudi men folk realised the potentiality of women: Rosie succeeded in scraping up a bail-bond for Rs.10,000/- in favour of Raju to get him released from police custody. Raju realised that, with that, the mastery of the house passed to her though he fretted inwardly at the thought of that.2 Raju saw that everything went to prove that Rosie could get on excellently without him. He knew he was growing jealous of her self-reliance. Neither her husband nor Raju had any place in her life which had its own sustaining vitality and which she herself had underestimated all along.3

It is but natural that in the same Malgudi there are men who encouraged female emancipation: Sampath asked his wife why she behaved like an orthodox old crony of seventy-five dodging behind doors and going into parda. He encouraged her to come out and show herself to Srinivas as there was no harm in that.4 Krishna did not like Susila to spend all her time cooking either food or tiffin. He thought she must spend some more time reading or stitching or singing. Man or woman is not born merely to cook and eat.5

Modern scientific thought has clearly shown that there is nothing inherent in the fact of sex which denies woman any privilege. Inferiority of women is socially imposed and cannot be explained on rational or psychological grounds. The modern woman is no longer prepared to accept a code which

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1. DR - p.61
2. TG - pp.194-195
3. TG - p.199
4. MS - p.85
5. ET - p.54
recognises the dominance of the male as binding on her. Both men and women of the present generation in Malgudi feel alike: 'Born in a family of dancing girls Rosie knew who her mother was but not her father. She is given a college education and is an MA in Economics. Her inherited feeling for dance cannot be suppressed and when she gets a chance to perfect the art, she seizes it.' Ramani felt that it was all nonsense to keep men and women separate in watertight compartments; women were as good as men and must be treated accordingly. Sriram took time to digest the sentence of Mahatma Gandhi who advised him to remember that Bharati was his Guru and to think of her with reverence and respect so that both of them would be all right. Daisy advised Raman to allow his Aunt to seek her life's pattern as she liked.

'The Indian National Movement provided a suitable opportunity to assess the work done in the liberation of women.' Narayan echoes this through Gangu who hoped to be sent some day as Malgudi's delegate to the All-India Women's Conference.

Even in respect of marriage, domestic duties etc., Malgudi women shock their menfolk: Daisy told her people that she would not allow anyone to inspect her as a bride; rather, she would do the inspection of the groom.

3. DR - p.67
4. WM -p.62
5. PS-45<9S> (12 Sept 76)
6. Ibid., in 1 above, p.261.
7. DR - p.20
declared that married life was not for her. It frightened her. She could not live except alone.\textsuperscript{1} Raman asked Daisy whether she could call herself Mrs. Raman. Daisy replied that she would not change her name. Raman did not debate the decision but accepted it silently.\textsuperscript{2} Daisy made it clear that long ago she had broken away from the routine of a woman’s life. There were millions of women who go through it happily. But she was not one of them. She had planned for herself a different kind of life. She had a well-defined purpose from which she would not swerve. So she expected Raman to leave her to her own plans even when she was a wife. She would leave Raman if he questioned her why or how any day.\textsuperscript{3} Daisy had quite often remarked to Raman that she disliked housekeeping and that Raman would be as much a housekeeper as she would be. To her, home was a secondary matter, the primary one was work.\textsuperscript{4} Whereas women of the lower classes - Mari and Ponni - can at a pinch shift for themselves by doing manual work, the Brahmin girl of the middle classes - Savitri is generally completely helpless except as a housewife. All this is changing rapidly, of course, but it will be idle to pretend that Savitri’s story is in the least unusual.\textsuperscript{5}

Narayan is aware of the impact of the occidental civilisation on Malgudi and this, with other factors, has helped to assess the true worth of woman and where necessary, adjust to it: Jagan found that Grace was not at home at night and asked Mali who was at home, where she had gone. Mali replied that nobody could stop her from going where she pleased. He said she was a free person and not like the

\begin{enumerate}
\item PS - p.43 (26 Sept 76)
\item PS - p.37 (19 Sept 76)
\item P.S. - p.37 (19 Sept 76)
\item PS - p.39 (19 Sept 76)
\end{enumerate}
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daughters-in-law of India. Mali said it was an idea of the past generation that a wife must be with her husband.¹ Nataraj consoled the worried adjournment lawyer that modern girls like his who were college-educated and modern-minded refused to be ill-treated by their mothers-in-law.² Aunt asked Raman whether he did not know that he had loved Daisy who had run away from home. But Raman replied that there was no other way for her.³ Gaffur, the taxi-driver, accepted that modern girls were very bold. He confessed he would not let his wife live in a hotel room all by herself if he had to remain on duty on a hill-top.⁴ The Cousin is informed that Grace was going back to America and he exclaimed that the modern girls were indeed very plucky, going thousands of miles to settle business matters.⁵ Dr. Pal played cards with Balu and his wife, Binda.⁶ The garrulous lady told Raman that he could not command his Aunt to stay with him while he could do what he liked with Daisy. She warned him he was mistaken if he thought that women would be slaves of the family all their life-time.⁷

In Narayan's own words one could have an idea of the manner in which the status of women in Malgudi has changed. Here is Ramani's philosophy representing the early view: Ramani granted that there was some sense in the Women's Movement: Let them, by all means, read English novels, play tennis, have their All India Conference and go to the pictures occasionally. But that should not blind them to the primary duties of being wives and mothers. Ramani held that India's spiritual eminence lay in this realisation. And what woman retained the right of being called a wife who disobeyed her husband? Didn't all the ancient scriptures and epics enjoin upon woman the strictest identification with her husband?⁸

1. VS - p.133 2. MM - p.58
3. PS - p.45 (12 Sept 76) 4. TG - p.102
5. VS - p.136 6. FE - p.157
7. PS - p.38 (19 Sept 76) 8. DR - p.123
Holding such view, it was natural for Ramani to ignore her revolt: Ramani decided to severely ignore his wife's absence. He was going to show her that sulking would not pay.¹

But finally comes the awakening: With all his bravado before his wife, Ramani was very much shaken by her manner. Such a thing had never happened to him at any time for fifteen years. She had always been docile and obedient and the fire inside her was a revelation to him now.²

Narayan is firmly rooted in Indian tradition. C.D. Narasimhaiah testifies to it, thus: 'Rosie has always been dignified and noble and the very picture of ideal womanhood inspite of her loss of chastity. There is enough atonement for it and that is what matters... This seems to be true of almost all the women characters of Narayan... But especially in the way he takes care to preserve Rosie from inner taint Narayan seems to be affirming what has been hailed in the tradition as the Feminine Principle in life.'³

However, Narayan's first concern in fiction is objective authenticity. P.S. Sundaram has this to say about it: 'Narayan is not holding up Savitri as an awful warning to women who threaten to run away from their husbands. There is no preaching that the husband is a god or that we must accept what fate has ordained and not kick against the pricks. Here (in The Dark Room) is the sort of thing that happens in thousands of households in our country.'⁴

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1. DR - p.49
2. DR - p.121