

Daisy and Bharati : Emancipated Women of R. K. Narayan

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Abstract

Throughout the ages, India has been a male dominated society, where women are expected to carry the divine qualities of the mythological characters. Although not a feminist, R. K. Narayan shows a keen interest in the women's problems in his novels. Novels of his later periods carry bold heroines who are uncompromising in their attitude and symbols of woman empowerment. Daisy and Bharati bear the qualities of a woman who is bold, energetic and holds unrestricted modern outlook. Both are free from any bondage of familial relationship. Both are determined to offer their share of patriotic devotion. Daisy, being a family planning officer, aims to decrease India's population at least five percent annually. While Bharati, an ardent follower of Mahatma and his ideology, is resolute to make India free from the dominance of the British. No personal or emotional relationship can refrain them from pursuing their respective goals. They are influenced by the western philosophy and they deny to live a subjugated life. Fulfilling the desired goal is the utmost and ultimate concern of their life. Narayan has shown the trace of modernity in the characters of Daisy and Bharati, who are determined to assert their individuality and unique identity in a male dominated society.

Key Words: Feminist, Empowerment, ideology, Modern, Individuality, Identity.

In a male dominated society, women are compelled to live a life of humiliation and suppression. A woman is considered as spineless creature, who cannot think properly. She is the unimportant and undignified dweller of the society. She has to live a life of slavery by the name of domestication. The fantasy of marriage and the myth of love cause a great effect upon the lives of most women which also mould the way of how they live. She is shackled by the predefined norms of patriarchy and she has submitted to this form silently. But, the growing consciousness among women made them realize their actual position in the society. They began to question the validity and importance of these norms and revolt against it. Simone de Beauvoir raises the most important point of feminism as she says:

With reference to man and not he with reference to her,
she is the incidental the inessential as opposed to the
essential. He is the subject, he is the Absolute -----she

is the Other. (Beauvoir XVI)

Feminist thoughts came to India along with the western education and ideas. Traditionally, Indian women are considered merely as a shadow of her male counterpart. An Indian woman's identity is shaped by her relation with her father, brother, husband or son. She is expected to be adorned with the goddess like qualities of the women from the Hindu mythology and be meek, submissive, devoted and sacrificing. Ensuring well-being of her husband and his family should be the ultimate duty of a married woman. In this regard Sunita Sinha says:

Indian woman negotiate survival through an array of oppressive patriarchal family structures: age, ordinal states, relationship to men through family of origin, marriage and procreation as well as patriarchal attributes..... (Sinha 105)

R. K. Narayan (1907-2001) is one of the most remarkable Indian English writers of India. Covering a literary period of more than sixty years, he has enriched Indian English literature with his creative power. Taking an imaginary town, named Malgudi as the background, he created a realistic world where ordinary south Indian men-women try to adjust themselves in a slowly changing middle class world. As a realistic novelist, he had a keen interest on the sad plight of the Indian middle class women. He expresses his concern for women in his autobiographical book *My Days*, "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." (Narayan 119) Narayan is not considered a feminist by the critics and he has never claimed to be one. But, while going through his novels, he is seen giving much space and concern to women characters than his contemporary Indian English writers. Narayan's subject matters always move around a traditional society where old Indian heritage is given much respect. The female characters of his early novels are bearers and protectors of the Hindu customs and traditions. Savitri and Sushila are god-fearing, superstitious, meek and submissive. But, the heroines of his later novels are much bold, practical, independent, shrewd and far-sighted. To mark a space in the male dominated society is their aim of life. They are not ready to live an insignificant life, rather they want to walk forward while pursuing their dreams. The advent of the western education and ideas brought a change of life style and thoughts to the Indian scenario which made a huge impact upon the lives of Indian women too. As Narayan was aware of it, Narayan made his heroines of his post independence period believers of modern concepts and ideals. Daisy from *The Painter of Signs* (1976) and Bharati from *Waiting for the Mahatma* (1955) are modern, assertive, bold and courageous. About the creation of the character of Daisy Narayan says:

I suppose, I have moved along with times. This girl in my new novel, Daisy in *The Painter of Signs* is quite different; not only is she not dependent on man, she actually has no use of them as an integral part

of her life. (Krishnan 127)

Daisy, as the name suggests, has got western education and holds a rather unconventional job --- a family planning official whose aim is to reduce the birth rate of India. She is educated, smart and practical for whom to carry out her duty with missionary zeal is the primary concern of life. She breaks away from her family when her parents try to marry her off at a tender age of thirteen. She has been determined to be a career woman as she says, "I would like to work, rather than be a wife." (Narayan 130) She revolts against the traditional custom of bridal inspection as she questions back at the groom's family members. "I strode up like a soldier....." (Narayan 132) She leaves her house and completes her education in Madras with the help of a missionary organization. Her early life is full of hardships and struggles which she overcomes and opens a family planning centre in Malgudi where she meets Raman, a painter of signboards. Raman is attracted towards Daisy, for her staunch personality and natural beauty. He accompanies Daisy in her missions in the villages. Raman notices that Daisy could adjust herself in any situation, she could eat any food that was available, bath, wash and dry her cloth anywhere and can stay in a lowliest hut. Daisy shows her farsightedness and courage when one night Raman tries to rape her. Realizing the imminent danger she climbs up a tamarind tree and sits there till morning. Next day, she wants him that she would report against him in the police station, which makes Raman very frightened. With her behaviour she cuts him to his size. However, they develop a romantic relationship very soon. But, in their relationship, it is Daisy, who is more powerful and assertive. She is very sharp tongued and straightforward. When Raman asks her whether she was a Marxist, she replies, "What if I am or I am not? Is there a label one should always carry like a dog collar....." (Narayan 58) Raman keeps trying to please her and afraid of losing her. His proposal of marriage is accepted by Daisy in return of two conditions. Raman agrees to her conditions of having no baby in the future and giving it away to somebody if there is one by mischance. He also agrees that he will never ask anything about her job, or else she will leave him there and then. In this context, Raman cites the incident of the Mahabharata where goddess Ganga keeps those conditions before king Shantanu. Marriage and motherhood often become two obstacles in a woman's journey to self-assertion. Daisy is aware of this and wants to be free herself from any burden in her way of achieving her goal. The socially attributed qualities which glorify a woman is meaningless to her. She comes out to be purely unconventional and ultramodern. She does not mind having a physical affair with Raman even before marriage. The general conception of being married to a good man and living happily ever after is not a dream for her like many other girls of her age. On the day of her shifting to Raman's house, she cancels her marriage and leaves for a faraway place to control the urgent situation of alarming increase of population. The threatening and pleading of Raman could not change her decision. She says:

Married life is not for me. I have thought it over. It frightens me.

I am not cut out for the life you imagine. I can't live except alone.

It won't work. (Narayan 178-79)

She represents the new class of women who are outcomes of the women's lib movement. Narayan shows the changing views and ideas of the Indian traditional society through Daisy.

He also shows how the new generation of educated and conscious women denies to follow the already established rigid customs and conventions of the society. The necessity for an upliftment of women's life is suggested by Narayan in this novel. He projects how a woman should be conscious of her rights. To quote Nomita Gokhale, "it is time to seek a new image of Sita ----- one who does not have to return to Earth, but can resolutely claim it." (Gokhale XVII)

So, Narayan creates Daisy as a totally unorthodox and unconservative character who does not think for a minute to throw away the established norms and conventions of the society. She is an extremist for whom having an independent life with a whole hearted dedication to her duty is the supreme value. In her way of achieving her goal, she is determined to overcome any kind of obstacle. She is not afraid of the social taboos, age-old patriarchal norms which make the women impotent. She has reached far ahead of other heroines of Narayan's novels. Narayan has given such an elevated position which Savitri and Sushila can only dream of.

Not only in the sociological space, Narayan shows how women in the changing India participated in the active political field. Bharati from *Waiting for the Mahatma* is another significant woman character created by Narayan. Like Daisy, she too completely overpowers the male protagonist in the novel. An ardent follower of Mahatma Gandhi, Bharati is a die hard fighter for the freedom of India. She is self-dependent, strong and bears an impressive personality. She has an indominant desire to fulfill the aim of making India a free country from the British. Critics opine that Bharati is an ideal example of Narayan's true vision of woman empowerment. She is an example of numerous Indian women who contributed devotedly for the freedom of India along with the men. Bharati is free from any familial relationship, an orphan whose father died during the 1920 movement. She has been brought up in ashram since childhood. Her name, Bharati, meaning daughter of India was given by Mahatma who is also her godfather.

Although Gandhi is present only in the beginning and concluding parts of the novel, his presence is felt throughout the novel through Bharati. She is a living embodiment of the teachings of Mahatma. All her decisions, whether political or personal, depends upon Gandhi. She is true to the Gandhian idealism and sticks to it at any point of time in her life. As a true disciple of Gandhi, she is truthful, frank, honest and a devoted patriot. When Sriram meets Bharati in the camp, she clearly tells him that if he wishes to meet her in the future, he will have to meet Mahatma. To quote,

If you wish to meet me come to Bapuji, the only place where
you may see me. Of course if you don't want to see me any
more, go away. (Narayan 61)

She is a strong headed girl for whom personal and emotional aspects are futile before ideology and duties of life. When Sriram embraces her in one meeting, she warns him against this kind of behaviour and decides to write about the incident to Mahatmaji. She believes in truth in every aspect of life as she tells Sriram,

None except absolute, truth-speakers are allowed to come into Mahatma's camp. People who come here must take an oath of absolute truth before going into Mahatma's presence. (Narayan 319-20)

Sriram is quite impressed by her strong personality and authoritative manner and quickly falls in love with her. But, at some points, he is irritated by her truthfulness. When he puts the proposal of marriage, Bharati does not give him immediate consent. She says,

I can't marry without Bapu's sanction..... yes if I marry at all and mark this, If Bapu agrees to it..... I won't marry if he does not sanction it. I can't do it. (Narayan 133-34)

She cannot be moved by any emotion or sentiment. She is disciplined and self-controlled. On Sriram's insistence, she writes to Mahatma for the approval of the marriage. But, as a reply, Mahatma advises her not to marry which makes Sriram depressed. But, Bharati accepts Gandhi's wish without any worry. She inspires Sriram to be a truthful follower of Gandhi and to gain his faith. Gandhi addresses Bharati as the 'Guru' of Sriram and advises him to respect and obey her. Later, she confers him the duties relating to the freedom movement. She also teaches him the art of weaving. She is an expert in it and has even won a khadi competition. Narayan creates Bharati as a very brave character who is never scared to accomplish her mission and faces every problem with courage. For her, to fulfill her duty is the ultimate goal of life. Marriage is never given an important place in her life like in that of an average Indian young woman. When Sriram again asks her about marriage, she says, "I have other things to think of, I am going to jail." (Narayan 137) She can ignore her personal happiness for the greater cause of the nation. She goes to jail on Mahatma's instruction quite easily. She is very caring and loving for the poor and suffering people and never tires of helping and taking care of them --- whether it is the orphan children in the camp, or the people suffering from the riot. Bharati's personality as well as mentoring completely transforms Sriram from a careless young man into a sensible matured person. He becomes aware of various issues of the Indian nation as he follows Bharati and Mahatma to many villages and actively participates in the freedom movement. Bharati's love and her mentoring turn him into the way of perfection. His aimless life finds a new meaning with Bharati. Bharati's larger than life personality totally overpowers Sriram. In this context, M. K. Naik rightly says,

While as for the love story itself, Sriram the weak, timid and empty-headed drifter is hardly a lover whom the whole world can possibly love; and perhaps Freudianism alone can explain why the intelligent, able and domineering Bharati should at all feel drawn to this totally unheroic hero. (Naik 42)

Sriram feels timid before Bharati and wonders whether her personality will be too magnificent for him. Bharati's sharp comments and instructions inspire Sriram to overcome his shortcomings and shape into a better human being.

In many regards, Bharati resembles with Daisy. They both bear the qualities of a New Woman. As Sushan Polis Schultz says,

The new woman arises full of confidence, she speaks eloquently,
and thinks independently, full of strength. She organizes efficiently
and directs proudly. (Schultz 39)

Both Daisy and Bharati are educated, modern, mentally strong, well prepared for any challenge, hard working, confident, self-dependent and consider their duty as the primary goal of life. For them, familial relationships have nothing to do in their lives. Marriage or love is considered as a secondary thing in their lives. In the case of Daisy and Bharati, there is a reversal of roles of a male and female. Both these characters dominate the male protagonist in the novels and the male characters are timid and unassertive. So, Naarayan has reached far away than the time when Ramani exploits and marginalizes his wife Savitri. The new characters created by Narayan are not meek, submissive or devoted. Rather, they are assertive, modern minded and bold women who are determined to fulfill their aims crossing all the barriers before them. They both exceed tradition in the manner that they both consider the identity of the individual more important than the role as a home-maker. But, still there are some differences between the two. Daisy crosses all the limits of the society as she keeps physical relation with Raman without marriage which is considered immoral. But, Bharati guards her character very well and she is free from any moral degradation. Like Daisy, Bharati too considers marriage as a secondary thing before her aim. But, she is not afraid to marry or think of marriage as an evil institution. But, this may be due to the fact that she has never experienced the family life and hence no idea about the institution of marriage. She is ready to marry Sriram upon Mahatma's approval. Narayan's novels show the undeniable presence of women in the society through his realistic portrayal of women characters. Narayan created his female characters keeping in mind the Indian mentality which is full of myth and tradition. Some of these female characters make attempt to go against the existing norms and customs of the society, but cannot disregard them. Whereas the heroines of his later novels are absolutely free from male dominance as they understand the true spirit of freedom.

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