

## **Marital Discord in R.K. Narayan's *The Dark Room***

**Dr. Vinita Shukla**

Lecturer in English  
Government Arts College, Kota

### **Abstract**

R.K. Narayan is among the best known and most widely read Indian novelists who wrote in English. In his fiction most of which are set in the fictitious South Indian town of Malgudi he portrays the peculiarities of human relationships and the ironies of Indian daily life, in which modern urban existence clashes with ancient tradition. In one of his early marvelous novel *The Dark Room* (1938) which can be considered as a novel of domestic disharmony the writer has tried to present the marital life of a man who is very domineering and arrogant and a woman who typifies traditional Indian woman and exhibits qualities of loyalty, honesty and devotion. It paints a very grim picture of a disturbed household plagued with domestic conflict. Through their relationship Narayan has thrown a discursive and critical light on the tale of so many Indian women who live under the dominance of the patriarchal system and are the victims of domestic abuse, sexual harassment and materialistic greed. The present paper focuses upon R. K. Narayan's views on marriage and man -woman relationship within the conjugal bond.

**Keywords:** Conjugal Bond, Patriarchy, Masculinity, Femininity Accord, Discord

The reputation of Rashipuram Krishnaswamy Narayan a leading author of early Indian literature in English has today been acknowledged the world over. While H.M. Williams considers him as "one of the finest and the most popular of Indian writers in the English medium,"(1) Warren French goes even further and acclaims Narayan as one of "the internationally significant novelists writing in English."(ix) R. K. Narayan has explored and depicted several basic values of life in his fiction but throughout he has been concerned with the one most vital aspect of human life, namely the man-woman relationship. One of his early novels *The Dark Room* (1938) which is considered as "a lament on the disharmony of domestic life"(Singh 59) focusses upon both the marital and the extra-marital relationships. In this paper the focus is only on the relationships within the wedlock.

In the past few decades a tremendous impact of the Western culture and the modern age has been felt upon the Indian culture and a significant change is witnessed

in the structure and pattern of Indian society and families as well. However, there still remain areas of Indian life and living where its impact is not abiding and one such area is the institution of marriage. Marriage and marital relationships have a far deeper meaning and significance to us than the westerns. Narayan also points out in an article "English in India" that the western society is based on "a totally different conception of man-woman relationship from ours." In Indian marriage there are distinct masculine and feminine roles and a well-established code of conduct for both man and woman. It is the duty and the responsibility of the man who is also the dominating partner to provide social and economic security to woman. Whereas, woman is relegated to home and her domestic role as house-keepers and mothers is glorified. She is a mere sex-object, lulled into passive role and has no identity of her own. Husband is her profession, her career and her means of livelihood. He is like a sheltering tree against whom wife does not rage; at whom she cannot laugh. The code demands tenderness, gentleness, affection, sweetness and a comforting and non-demanding demeanor from her. The ancient prescription for marital accord prescribes order and authority to man and slavish submission and innocence to women. Despite all progress and modernization the same equation of dominance and submission still continues.

In *The Dark Room* through the traditional marital life of Ramani and Savitri which is of dominance and sufferance and their ultimate fate Narayan has questioned the time honoured concept of marital accord. He felt that as the Indian social and cultural scenario was gradually changing under the impact of the modern age there was a great need for the reformulation of man-woman equations. Ramani is the head of his family consisting of his simple, submissive and hard-working wife, Savitri and three school going children. He is a snob and a rake. He is a self-made man and this has inculcated in him a sense of dominance. He "needed no advice from others and least at all from wife."<sup>(5)</sup> He reserves for himself the right of fulfilling his whims on his own ways. His sense of individuality and status which he maintains through car and club, suffers a setback when he looks at his shabbily dressed and somewhat unattractive wife. She is good for occasional car drives and cinema shows but is not suited for clubs as romantic drives in moonlit nights. He is critical of her tastes and selections and never receives any aesthetic pleasures from her. Even her sulking into the dark room in her moments of depression and irritation is considered by him as old-fashioned. He holds up modern outlook with regard to taste and external refinement.

Hence, when he comes in contact with Shanta Bai the independent educated woman he is easily drawn towards her. She makes up for her wife's deficiencies. He considers her to be a perfect woman "with an understanding heart and cultured outlook."<sup>(142)</sup> Her perfect etiquettes meet his notion of a self-maintained and well-behaved cultured woman. Gradually with the passage of time the physical and the

mental incompatibility of Ramani and Savitri widens the gulf between them and makes Ramani more indifferent towards his family.

Narayan highlights that Ramani loved Savitri but loved her as his captive, his possession or commodity. After Savitri has left the house he reflects, “all the kindness and considerations entirely wasted. How could she forget the six sovereign necklace he had bought for her at the beginning of his career... When he had not a bank account and was subsisting on insurance canvassing...”(141) Ramani had given physical comforts to Savitri but had failed to realize that for a lasting marital bond material comforts does not matter much but the founding pillars for the sound and happy conjugal life are mutual respect and selfless love. The union between man and woman is of both the body as well as the soul. He provides her material comforts but fails to understand the demands of her inner self and hence there is a breach in their bond.

Further, the writer throws a critical glance on the double standard mentality of this modern man through Ramani’s illicit love with Shanta Bai. Being the dominant partner he feels he can flirt with anyone but from his wife Savitri he demands docility, obedience and submission. He comments, “Women can read English novels and play tennis, but they should not forsake their primary duties of being wives and mothers...He remembers all the heroines of the epics whose one dominant quality was a blind stubborn following of their husbands like the shadow following the substance.”(141) And when the weak submissive Savitri who “had not the slightest power to do anything at home”(6) demands an explanation from Ramani about his affair he is taken aback and his male ego gets hurt. He ironically utters, “ what a fine way to talk to a husband...no one has a right to question his friendship with Shanta Bai.”(141)

Ramani carries on with Shanta Bai and remains more indifferent and callous towards Savitri. She confronts her husband who dismisses her objections. Desolate at being taken so entirely for granted the weak and submissive Savitri tries to rebel. She raises her voice and when the situation becomes unbearable for her she decides to leave the house. She violently asserts, I’am a human being...you men will never grant that. For you we are playthings when you feel lik hugging, and slaves at other times. Don’t think you can fondle us when you like and kick us when you choose.”(112) and a little later she again asserts “ Do you think I am going to stay here? Do you think 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...”(113)

Ramani makes no efforts to stop her and he is rude enough to tell her that” no one is indispensable in this world.”(114) He simply waits to bolt the street door and go to bed after she leaves out. Savitri like Ibsen’s Nora walks out of the Dolls house.

She decides that she will never return unless he abandoned the woman whom he flirts with and begged for pardon. She was now an individual with 'pride and soul'. She is disgusted at being at the mercy of the men in her life-father, brother or husband. She strongly decides that now she will not live on the mercy of others. She starts working as a cleaner in a temple.

Further, Narayan highlights that though Savitri has left the house but she could not remain away from it for a long time. She has freed herself physically from Ramani's home but the psychological fetters are still there. Like a conventional Indian Woman her children and her home still haunts her and as it is often seen that majority of women as they are uneducated they don't have any other viable alternative for their survival they surrender before their fate. She too realizes the impracticality of her choice, surrenders and returns back to the same house of Ramani and his children. She accepts her defeat. "This is defeat. I accept it. I'm no good for this fight. I'm a bamboo pole that needs support....(190) After her return her reflection" A part of me is dead" is a clear indication that now she emotionally ceases to be a wife and the thought "what have I here" (210) keeps haunting her. She is helpless and dissatisfied with her husband and by living under the same roof she is keeping up mere appearances, the mutual love and harmony is not there between the two. Ramani is also relieved to find her back, not for her sake but more for the sake of society. He wants to keep up the pretense of being married.

Ramani and Savitri have lived, loved, mated and raised children yet, there is no real happiness between them. Their relationship is of dominance and submission. They lack compatibility and compassionate approach hence miserably fails in their marital life and could not provide personal happiness to each other. Moreover, Ramani's infidelity and dominance leads to the discord. Thus, R. K. Narayan has very explicitly put forward the point that in Indian context the idea of personal fulfilment, howsoever, desirable a goal according to the individualistic ideals of western society has been a source of conflict to Indian marital life, especially when it is achieved at the cost of duty to the family.

The novel also portrays the discordant life of Shanta Bai who is a prototype of modern, independent, educated woman. She has left her husband who is a drunkard and a gambler. She is competent enough to support herself and works as a probationary officer in an insurance company but she too is frustrated and dissatisfied with her lot. She utters, "Life is one continuous boredom.... No one tries to understand me; that is the tragedy of my life... I am as wind along the waste."(151) The lack of family life in Shanta Bai's case leaves her frustrated and her affair with Ramani is just for filling a void in her life.

To conclude, R. K. Narayan has drawn a very realistic and critical picture of man woman relationship within the wedlock in this novel. He puts forward his view

that in the Indian context marriage and successful marital life are of utmost importance. But through the relation of Ramani and Savitri on the one hand and on the other the divorced and frustrated life of Shanta Bai he categorically asserts that the traditional, time-honoured prescription of dominance and submission for marital bliss does not hold good now and for the sustenance of a healthy lasting conjugal bond it has to be looked anew.

**References:**

French, Warren. "Preface" in Atma Ram (ed) *Perspectives on R. K. Narayan*  
Ghaziabad: Vimal Prakashan, 1981

Narayan R.K. *The Dark Age* Mysore: Indian Thought Publications, 1991

Singh, R. S. *Indian Novel in English*. New Delhi: Arnold Heinemann, 1977

Williams, H.M. "Precarious Innocence: Patterns in the Novels of R. K. Narayan" in  
Atma Ram (ed) *Perspectives on R. K. Narayan*

"English in India' The times of India, December 2, 1964