

FEMALE CHARACTERS OF R. K. NARAYAN: PROVIDING NEW DIMENSIONS TO WOMEN EMPOWERMENT IN INDIA

Santosh Kanwar Shekhawat¹

Abstract

R. K. Narayan is one of the three pillars of Indian English fiction. Through the female characters in his novels he provides new dimensions to the issue of women empowerment in India. When social evils like female foeticide, female infanticide, low female literacy rate, female exploitation, child marriages, dowry and purdah system were the hallmark of the age, R. K. Narayan dared to choose unconventional female characters from the middle class. These women instead of compromising with the situation, strive and struggle with the odds of life. His heroines break the age old image of Indian women who are supposed to be weak, meek, helpless, submissive and powerless and who are puppets in the hands of male members of the family. He creates a new image of progressive women in the traditional orthodox society. His female characters are educated, confident, self-reliant, independent and empowered and women of radical thinking. They have their individual identity independent of the male members of the family. It is pleasing to see such strong women in the hidebound traditional orthodox society. Rosie in The Guide, Bharti in Waiting for Mahatma and Daisy in The Painter of Signs are strong women who have their individual identity in a male-centered, patriarchal society. They are harbingers of a new dawn of women empowerment who dare to challenge the male constraints forcefully imposed on women.

R. K. Narayan is one of the three pillars of Indian English fiction. Through the female characters in his novels he provides new dimensions to the issue of women empowerment in India. When social evils like female foeticide, female infanticide, low female literacy rate, female exploitation, child marriages, dowry and purdah system were the hallmark of the age, R. K. Narayan dared to choose unconventional female characters from middle class. These women, instead of compromising with the situation, strive and struggle with the odds of life. His heroines break the age-old image of Indian women who are supposed to be weak, meek, helpless, submissive and powerless and who are puppets in the hands of the male members of the family. Thus he creates a new image of progressive women in the traditional orthodox society. His female characters are educated, confident, self-reliant, independent and empowered and women of radical thinking. They have their individual identity independent of the male members of the family.

R. K. Narayan has captured the realistic picture of south India through the canvass of his Malgudi novels. He has dexterously painted the men and women of Malgudi with a fine sense of an artist. He portrays his males and females with equal ease. If his males delight us, his females are not inferior or less pleasing. He has a wide variety of female portraits to his credit and all of them are so realistic and lifelike that we feel as if we know them personally or we often see them in the society. It is interesting to see that his females are not

¹. Assistant Professor, Department of English, Maharaja Ganga Singh University, Bikaner

prototypes. All of them are different from each other and have their individuality. His spectrum is so wide that we find women of every kind here—highly religious and God-fearing women, superstitious women, women of conventional and orthodox thinking, modern and westernized women, simple, homely, domesticated women, devdasis of temples as well as women of iconoclastic and revolutionary ideas. There is a gradual growth and development in the female characters of Narayan as he himself grows as a novelist. The females in his early novels like *Dark Room* (1938) and *The English Teacher* (1945), which were written before the Independence of India (1947), are conventional, traditional, God-fearing, homely and orthodox women who are ready to sacrifice themselves for the sake of their family. The females in his later novels are more rational and daring. They come out of the narrow boundaries of their domestic life and dare to challenge the conventions of society. Finally, there comes a phase when he chooses exceptionally bold females as his protagonist. Novels like *Mr. Sampath* (1948), *The Financial Expert* (1952), *Waiting for the Mahatma* (1955), *The Guide* (1958), *The Man-Eater of Malgudi* (1961), *The Vendor of Sweets* (1967), *The Painter of Signs* (1977), *A Tiger for Malgudi* (1983), and *The World of Nagaraj* (1990) fall under the category of post-Independence novels with bold and strong females.

Narayan is sensitive towards the issues and problems faced by women outside and inside the boundaries of home. In his memoirs *My Days* he talks about emancipation of women and he names it Women's Lib Movement:

I was somehow obsessed with a philosophy of Woman as opposed to Man, her constant oppressor. This must have been an early testament of the "Women's Lib" movement. Man assigned her a secondary place and kept her there with such subtlety and cunning that she herself began to lose all notions of her independence, her individuality, stature and strength. A wife in an orthodox milieu of Indian society was an ideal victim of such circumstances (119).

Rosie is the protagonist of *The Guide*. She is postgraduate in Economics and is a daughter of a *devdasi*. Instead of becoming a *devdasi* herself as was the tradition, she not only completes her masters degree but also chooses to live her life according to her own standards. She frees herself from the age-old shackles of tradition and rewrites her destiny, thus giving a new meaning to her life and existence. She raises her voice against the patriarchic culture of India and dares to break her unhappy marital bond with Marco who fails to understand her sentiments. Unlike other Indian women, she complains whenever she is dissatisfied or unhappy. In spite of her husband's disapproval, she pursues her interest in classical dance. Her separation with Marco and her union with Raju initially brings joy to her life when she rejuvenates her passion for classical dance and fulfills her dream of becoming a dancer. But soon the relationship sours as Raju starts treating her as a money-making machine. Disappointed and dejected, she deserts him too because she refuses to be a puppet in the hands of men. Raju says, "Neither Marco nor I had had any place in her life, which had its own sustaining vitality and which she herself had underestimated" (223).

Daisy is the heroine of *The Painter of Signs*. She is a revolutionary woman of progressive ideas and she takes all decisions herself. She deserts her family and her home to become a social worker. She propagates the message of small families as a family planning activist. She is a woman of iron will, strong self-confidence and firm determination. Daisy dares to challenge the Hindu marital system and refuses to be treated as a doll or a showpiece. She says, "And then they seated me like a doll and I had to wait for the arrival of the eminent personage with his parents." (131). She refuses to marry Raman at the cost of her independence.

Bharti in *The Waiting for the Mahatma* is a strong, cultured and patriotic woman. Narayan's females apart from being empowered, are dedicated towards their duties as mothers, wives and daughters. It is pleasing to see such strong women in the hidebound traditional orthodox society. Rosie in *The Guide*, Bharti in *Waiting for the Mahatma* and Daisy in *The Painter of Signs* are the strong women who have their individual identity in the male centered, patriarchal society. They are harbingers of a new dawn of women empowerment who dare to challenge the male constraints forcefully imposed on women.

Works Cited

Narayan, R. K. *My Days*. Delhi: Orient Paperbacks, 1996.

---. *The Guide*. Mysore: Indian Thought Publications, 1963.

---. *The Painter of Signs*, Mysore: Indian Thought Publications, 1976.

---. *Waiting for the Mahatma*. Mysore: Indian Thought Publications, 1964.