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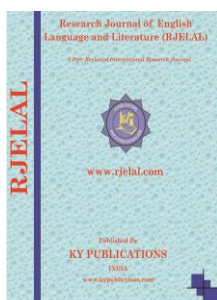
IBSENITE FEMINISM IN R.K. NARAYAN'S *THE DARK ROOM*

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ABSTRACT

R.K. Narayan's 'The Dark Room' is one of his early novels and not as well-known as some of his other novels like *The Guide* or *The English Teacher* or *Mr. Sampath*. Yet the dark room happens to be a unique novel in the whole corpus of R.K. Narayan. Here he adopts an ideological stance, which is very rare in him. Usually he is content to portray his Malgudi miniature on a little canvas but here he delves into a fresco of the feminist movement. The influence of the Norwegian dramatist Henrik Ibsen and his play 'A Doll's House' is apparent in this novel. The Dark Room is an exceptional novel and it is not all a characteristic R.K. Narayan novel. It does not bubble with humour as his other novels do; it is basically ideological in conception as his other novels are not. Here Narayan enters a dark cave of ideology and after coming out of it he never dares to penetrate this genre later on. It is a dark novel, full of gloom and social criticism, where Narayan gets carried away by the Ibsenite feminism.

Key words: Ideological stance, miniature, feminist movement, social criticism

Introduction

The title *The Dark Room* by R.K. Narayan communicates its theme. It reminds us of the Kop Bhavan of Kaikeyi in the Ramayana, and thus the title makes it explicit that the novel deals with wife-husband relationship. Ramani falls in love with a widow named Shantabai, who worked under him. She leaves the house in rage, but when sanity returns she comes home. The names themselves are ironic. Savitri is the mythical heroine who worships and saves her husband. Narayan's Savitri is completely fed up with her husband and is perpetually tortured by him. Shantabai, the other woman, etymologically 'Shanta' means 'peace', is responsible for all 'Ashanti' (discord) in Savitri's life.

Discussion

The Dark Room looks like an Indian version of *A Doll's House*. In this novel R.K. Narayan not only traces the obvious necessity of women's liberation

but also points out the equally discernible difficulties. In a traditional society where mythology is replete with the glorious tales of self-sacrificing women, where women are always seen as sexual objects or in their relation to men, where women are more or less devoid of education and economic independence, where the structure is still patriarchal, women's liberation movement still seems a far cry. This is why Narayan, induced by the social reality of man-woman relationship of the contemporary Indian society, portrays the Ibsenite feminist movement with realism. He could easily have made his Savitri a staunch rebel like Ibsen's Nora but the harsh realities of Indian society compel Narayan to make his heroine surrender to its overwhelming pressures. Although the cause of feminist movement suffers when Savitri decides to return home, it is obviously the triumph of social reality. Narayan's novel is ideological to a large extent, but his approach to feminism is not idealistic

as it is in Ibsen. On the other hand, realistic considerations mould The Dark Room, which are lacking in Ibsen's 'A Doll House'.

'The Dark Room' is influenced, if not inspired, by Ibsen's potent play 'A Doll's House'. Both of them deal with the traditional male attitude towards women, which treats them as dolls, mere play things; and not as human beings. Social commitment is rare in Narayan and the frame work of this novel shows his apprenticeship in the 'ideological novel'. The structure of the novel displays obvious cracks and loopholes because Narayan could not dare to go the full way to women's liberation.

Just like Nora she bangs the door: "he heard the banging of door, turned, and found that she had gone out of the room". When the husband asks her to take her things while going out, she answers,

"Things? I don't possess anything in this world. What possession can a woman call her own except her body? Every thing else that she has is her father's, her husband's or her son's. So take there too"

She leaves her home at midnight as did Nora in 'A Doll's House'.

Ramani, the husband is male chauvinistic and hence his behaviour is dictatorial towards his wife. He believes in the women's "primary duties of being wives and mother". He is a flat character who is always and everywhere 'blossing' whether at home or in office. He behaves differently with Shantabai, but for obvious reasons. At the end of the novel too he is as dictatorial as ever. There is no indication in the novel that he intends to stop his affair or even that he intends to treat his wife well. So in a way the novel ends on the note of male triumph and female surrender, while Ibsen's 'A Doll's House' ends on the note of female triumph.

Weakness of the fair sex in Indian society has been shown in the novel very effectively through the weakness of Savitri. Right from the beginning her helplessness has been highlighted.

"How impotent she was, she thought; she had not the slightest power to do anything at home, and that after fifteen years of married life."

The husband takes all the decisions; she has to be obedient and servile. He decides even the vegetables to be cooked. Savitri is so much fed up with her routine drudgery that she asks herself,

"Was there anything else for one to do than attend to this miserable business of the stomach from morning till night?"

Narayan portrays not only savitri's suffering, but he gives several parallels to stress his point. Even Shantabai narrates her miserable married life, when her husband was alive. He used to torture her before his death. After hearing her story, Ramani comments on the situation,

"That man deserved to be whipped"

Ironically, Shantabai's unseen husband's behaviour is no different from Ramani's torture of Savitri.

Savitri's friend Janamma provides an interesting parallel to the husband -wife relationship:

"As for me, I have never opposed my husband or argued with him at any time in my life. I might have occasionally suggested an alternate, but nothing more. What he does is right. It is a wife's duty to feel so!"

When Savitri leaves her home, she turns a spokeswoman for the whole womenkind:

"I am afraid to go even a hundred yards from the house unescorted; yes afraid, afraid of everything. One definite thing 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 husband's displeasures, and of the discomforts that might be caused to him, morning to night and all night too. How many nights have I slept on the bed on one side, growing numb by the unchanged position, afraid lest any slight movement should disturb his sleep and cause 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."

Savitri also raises a fundamental feminist issue, the economic independence of the woman in order to assert her independent personality, an

issue which has been incidentally raised in Ibsen's "Ghosts."

"What can I do by myself? Unfit to earn a handful of rice except by begging. If I had gone to a college and studied, I might have become a teacher or something. It was very foolish of me not to have gone on with my education. Sumathi and Kamala must study up to the B.A and not depend for their salvation on marriage. 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. Yes Kamala & Sumathi must take their university course and become independent."

The inferior status of women is pinpointed again and again by Savitri, she repents her dependence on male support:

"What despicable creations of God are we, that we can't exist without a support. I am like a bamboo pole which cannot stand without a wall to support it....."

She struggles for independence for individual existence. But she is reminded of the children, thinks of her own inescapable weakness makes her cry and sob.

"This is defeat. I accept it. I am no good for this fight. I am a bamboo pole."

Savitri's defeat is a blow to the women's liberation movement, but perhaps R.K. Narayan intends it that way. Husband often criticize and complain of their wives in Narayan's world, sometimes humorously, sometimes seriously. Ramani also complains,

"women are exasperating. Only a fool would have anything to do with them. Hours and hours of dressing stacks of costly sareel, all folded and kept inside, to be worn only when going out. Only silly – looking rags to gladden our sight at home. Our business stops with paying the bill. It is only the outsider who has the privilege of seeing a pretty dress."

Even Ranga and the cook support Ramani's viewpoint that a wife should not interfere in the husband's affairs. The Cook says,

"Only once has my wife tried to interfere; and then I nearly broke her bones. She has learnt to leave me alone now women must be taught their place."

Mari is another complaining husband,

"This was what came of allowing too much liberty to women; they ought to be kept under proper control and then all would be well."

Even the old priest takes sides with them:

"If she won't let you rest, thrash her; that is the way to keep women sane. In these days you fellows are impotent mugs, and let you women ride you about."

Women's inferior status is partly due to women themselves as Savitri acknowledges:

"We are responsible for our position we accepted food, shelter and comforts that you give and are what we are."

Important verbal shift from 'I' to 'We' is communicating the universalisation of the individual experience. Hence it is proper to consider 'The Dark Room' not as an individual's story, but as the story of women as a whole. In his hatred for Savitri, Ramani uses 'woman' instead of 'Savitri',

"Woman, get away now"

She also uses sexist language,

"Take them away. They are also a man's gift."

Men have placed woman on a pedestal visualized them as sacrificing their all for the weal of men. All the scriptures and myths sing the glory of sacrificing women. Ramani thinks in the same terms:

"Of course, he granted, 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 pictures occasionally; but that should not bind them to their primary duties of being wives and mothers; they mustn't ape the western women, all of whom, according to Ramani's belief, lived in a chaos of promiscuity and divorce....."

..... "He remembered all the heroines of the epics whose one dominant quality was a

blind stubborn following of their husbands,
like the shadow following the substance."²¹

This comes in sharp contrast to Ramani's initial view
of his wife:

"What a dutiful wife! Would rather starve
than precede her husband"

Savitri, according to H.M. Williams,

"Is a woman of strong and deep
character?"

Her desires and potentialities remaining
unexpressed, she first expresses her resentment by
sulking in a dark room for a day or two, doing
nothing and communication with nobody. This is but
the rumbling of a more active revolt which bursts
with the appearance of Shantaibai, a junior
employee in Ramani office, on the scene and the
signs of his sexual attraction towards her. She
displays the terrific force that a woman about to be
hysterical could muster. He tried once again to hold
her hands, and she shook her hands free, violently.

"I am a human being,"

She said through her heavy breathing,

"You men will never grant that. For you we
are playthings 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."

She is determined not to stay any longer in his house
nor take with her anything which is not strictly her
own, not even what her father had given her, for
"they are also a man's gift" and

"What possession can a woman call her
own?"

Conclusion

In spite of such out bursts which the
'feminists' would cherish, Savitri, when she leaves
the house, closes the door behind her "softly". She
is not a Nora. Even when she is on the street, she
thinks of her children whom she has left behind and
even lingers a little till she sees the light in her
husband's room put out. All links with her family do
not appear to have been entirely snapped, and her
leaving her house is perhaps a hasty and emotional
reaction.

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