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Feminine Consciousness In The Novels of R.K. Narayan

by

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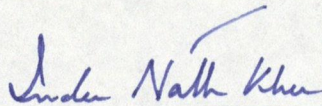
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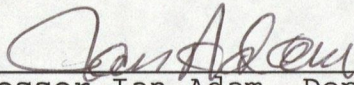


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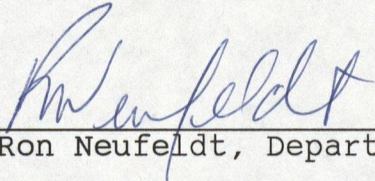
The undersigned certify that they have read, and recommend to the Faculty of Graduate Studies for acceptance, a thesis entitled "Feminine Consciousness In The Novels Of R.K. Narayan" submitted by Uma Rani Selvaraju in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts.



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### Abstract

R.K. Narayan is often viewed as a writer who is uninterested in presenting the social and political realities of his society. However, a close examination of Narayan's novels reveals a well-crafted style of 'detached' criticism of society. Narayan's novels explore the psychological and ethical changes in the lives of Indians that have come about as a result of economic, political and social changes in India. One important aspect of these changes is the change in the status, role and identity of the Indian woman. This thesis aims to explore the theme of woman's consciousness in three of R.K. Narayan's novels: The Dark Room (1938), The Guide (1958) and The Painter of Signs (1976). Each of the novels offers a different image of the Indian woman, as she changes with the times, growing from the traditional, submissive Savitri in The Dark Room, to the Western educated yet strangely traditional Rosie/Nalini in The Guide, and finally to the liberated and independent Daisy in The Painter of Signs. In these novels, Narayan presents the Indian woman's growing consciousness of self. Narayan's female characters reveal the tensions that are created between tradition and modernity, and the conflicting traditional values and social norms that Indian women face. Narayan also examines the changes in man-woman relationships that accompany the changes in the Indian woman.

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For Shadow,  
without whom life in Canada would have been very different,  
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who loyally stayed up with me every night I spent at the  
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who made sure I took a break by lying over my books  
but most of all for just simply being my incredibly clever,  
undeniably handsome, sometimes haughty but always lovable  
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## Introduction

R.K. Narayan is often viewed as an ironic writer who is quite detached from his observations of society<sup>1</sup>. William Walsh describes Narayan's disinterestedness in social criticism:

...Narayan is not a pushing or intrusive novelist. He has no anxiety to be tugging at our sleeve or to be giving us a knowing look. He has no message, no doctrine.<sup>2</sup>

Walsh sees Narayan as an ironist who accepts the human condition, with its variety, weaknesses, absurdities and pretensions. Suresh Narayan also remarks that "since the ironic mode calls for the spirit of acceptance, Narayan accepts the reality ungrudgingly. He sees no point in attempting to criticise or correct things."<sup>3</sup>

Other critics also view Narayan as a mere storyteller who writes social-comedy.<sup>4</sup> He is therefore criticised for not being serious enough about his society and for not representing the social and political realities of his country. Gobinda Prasad Sarma remarks that "there is generally no criticism or exposition of any Indian social problem."<sup>5</sup> Harsharan S. Ahluwalia criticises the lack of depth in Narayan's novels:

Narayan's peculiar genius as a comic entertainer has helped him win a large audience in the English-speaking world...He has got along prosperously with one little



spot called Malgudi to the complete exclusion of any concern with socio-political forces at work in the country.<sup>6</sup>

To a certain extent I have to agree with Walsh that Narayan is not a polemicist or a dogmatic writer. Narayan is miles apart from Mulk Raj Anand whose novels reveal the writer's Marxist political agenda such as the equality and betterment of the underprivileged and the marginalised. In Anand's novels we see the evils of child-labour, prostitution, caste-discrimination, poverty and illiteracy.<sup>7</sup> Narayan, on the other hand, writes mostly about the middle class, and therefore the more privileged section of society that he is most familiar with. However, I have to disagree with Walsh's and Suresh Narayan's view of Narayan as an ironist who makes no criticism whatsoever of society. It is also not true that Narayan does not explore the social and political aspects of Indian society as Ahluwalia claims.

While Narayan may not be an overtly political writer, and his writing style certainly makes him seem quite detached in his observations of society, the subtext of Narayan's novels often reveal a carefully drawn, thoughtful, yet extremely subtle commentary on society. Narayan's commentary on society is often masked by his comic as well as apparently ironic tone. The comical in Narayan's novels often indicate an underlying serious note. Britta Olinder

makes the following insightful comment:

....the implicitness of Narayan's ironic observations makes his awareness of social problems less obvious. In other words, it may be the comic tone that prevents many readers from seeing the incisiveness with which Narayan paints the social scene and social dilemmas of his country. The other factor that softens the impact of his exposition of the wrongs of society is that wider perspective with which he sees the single event or hardship. This means that he is not "just an observer", in fact an extremely acute observer of humanity, but also "an interpreter of life and the world."<sup>8</sup>

A close examination of Narayan's novels reveals a well-crafted style of 'detached' criticism of society. We notice that despite the apparently ironic stance, the narrative has, in fact, other frames that lie outside a strictly authorial irony<sup>9</sup>. It must also be pointed out that the ironic view does not exclude social criticism; the ironic writer simply does not force his point of view as a satirist does.

Narayan's criticism of society is one that does not compromise his artistic vision and integrity. S.C. Harrex remarks that "Narayan has only treated the great socio-political issues, indirectly, incidentally [and] anti-polemically.... Narayan's presentation of the Indian scene

is subservient to his innate sense of art."<sup>10</sup> To a certain extent, I agree with this assessment of Narayan's writing. Harrex's remark is true in the sense that Narayan makes no explicit criticism of society. Narayan is not a propagandist; he is first and foremost an artist. Narayan's aesthetic sensibility supersedes his social and political motivations. But his novels are not totally devoid of critical commentary on society. It is not true that Narayan is uninterested in presenting the social and political realities of his society, for his novels do reflect and explore the psychological and ethical changes in the lives of Indians that have come about as a result of economic, political and social changes in India. The situations and circumstances that his characters find themselves in reveal the writer's own involvement and analysis of these changes and his attitude towards them.

One important aspect of Narayan's examination of the social and political change in Indian society is the change in status, role and identity of the Indian woman. Throughout his writing career, Narayan has shown interest in and explored the Indian woman's consciousness, starting with The Dark Room in 1938, where he shows the perceived victimisation and entrapment of the Hindu woman in a patriarchal society. Despite the fact that almost all the novels that followed are mainly about the growth and maturity of male protagonists, novels such as The Financial

Expert (1952), Waiting for the Mahatma (1955), The Guide (1958), and The Painter of Signs (1976) explore in greater detail the changing face of the Indian woman's consciousness.

This thesis aims to explore the theme of woman's consciousness in three of R.K. Narayan's novels: The Dark Room (1938), The Guide (1958) and The Painter of Signs (1976). The novels show Narayan's sustained interest in the Indian woman's consciousness over a period of forty years. Each of the novels offers a different image of the Indian woman, as she changes with the times, growing from the traditional, submissive Savitri in The Dark Room, to the Western educated yet strangely traditional Rosie/Nalini in The Guide, and finally to the liberated and independent Daisy in The Painter of Signs. In these novels, Narayan presents the Indian woman's growing consciousness of self, ranging from a docile, passive and self-sacrificing traditional image of woman as the mother-figure to independent, active and self-fulfilling womanhood. Narayan's female characters reflect the way in which Indian society has changed in a period of forty years. They reveal the tensions that are created between tradition and modernity, caused by modern education and Western influences in Indian society and the conflicting traditional, Hindu ethics and social norms that Indian women face. I plan to show Narayan's examination of the changes in man-woman

relationships that accompany the awakening of the Indian woman's consciousness against the background of a society which is still traditional in many ways. Narayan's artistic development and maturity in his treatment and handling of feminine consciousness will be examined in light of the three novels, each written at roughly twenty year intervals.

The question of woman's consciousness involves the issue of female self-identity, an identity that is beyond that of a woman's sense of self based on biological determinants that make her a daughter and sociological definitions of her as wife and mother. For centuries, the socially circumscribed roles that define woman's whole identity have assigned woman to a limited identity. In feminist discourse, the issue of feminine consciousness implies the notion of woman as subject, rather than object. In Indian fiction, we can see the shift from woman as idealized object in the classical literature of India towards woman as subject in modern fiction. In the classical literatures, woman was the romanticised or idealised stereotype with all the classical ideals of the Hindu woman as embodied in the famous sloka: "Grihini, sachivah, sakhi, mitah priya-shishyalalite kala vidhu."<sup>11</sup> The treatment of woman as subject involves the presentation of woman with weaknesses and strengths, in realistic circumstances. It involves the stripping away of the myths of feminine mystique that is perpetuated by the treatment of

woman as object or the Other, as Simone de Beauvoir puts it.<sup>12</sup> This is what Narayan progressively achieves in The Dark Room, The Guide and The Painter of Signs. Through his fiction, Narayan shows the modern Indian woman's effort to grapple with life in her quest for self-fulfillment as a human being, enabling her to take a stand against her own destiny.

In showing the changes in the Indian woman's consciousness, and the various means and levels of personal self-fulfillment, the options of 'divine' motherhood, sexual and artistic emancipation with or without marriage, and total personal independence are portrayed by Narayan through the three women in The Dark Room, The Guide and The Painter of Signs. The Indian woman's consciousness is complex because of the 'gymnast struggle' or the tension between traditions of the past and the modern views of individualism that Indian women of this century imbibe.

Before we can evaluate Narayan's presentation of woman's consciousness, we must first look at the kind of traditional and cultural heritage that the modern-day women of India have to contend with in their struggle for independence and subjectivity since this plays an important part in the cultural inculcation and patterns of dependence that shape the Indian women's consciousness.

In "Status and Role of Women in India", Roma Chaudhury outlines various ages in Indian history, examining



the status of women in each.<sup>13</sup> The Vedic Age of the Upanishads, and the Epic Age of the Ramayana and the Mahabharata were times when the status of women was socially and politically equal to that of men, with many outstanding female warriors, educators, philosophers and Vedic seers or 'Nari-rishis'.<sup>14</sup> Yet, it seems that only a small proportion of Indian women enjoyed this privileged position.

Furthermore, it is the image of docile, submissive and long-suffering women such as Sita, Kannaki and Nalayani<sup>15</sup> that come to the average Indian's mind, rather than the image of strong, independent women like the 'Nari-rishis' and the female warriors.

In the Puranic and the Smritic Age, the status of women began to diminish. The social ills against women began in the form of child-marriage, widow-burning and polygamy, all of which have remained till this century.<sup>16</sup> The term "Nari-Sudras", which was used to group women and the pariah into one category was evolved during this time. It had the effect of marginalising women together with the outcasts of society. This period of Hindu India's history clearly sowed the seeds of patriarchal society that India has become, while Muslim influence in the latter part of Indian history also contributed to the concept of the 'purdah',<sup>17</sup> and segregation based on gender.

Without knowledge of the Hindu cultural norms determining the position of women in family and society,

the role expectations which the modern Indian woman faces cannot be understood, nor can we comprehend the immense burden of the past that weighs down on her quest for self-identity. The Indian woman's status and role within the family and in society in the first half of the twentieth century can be attributed to the writings of the Puranic and the Smritic stage. The major work that outlines the Dharma Shashtra or Hindu Law, written during the Smritic Age, is The Manusmriti or The Ordinances of Manu.<sup>18</sup> Manu explains the role of the Hindu woman as confined to "bear children, to take care of them when born, and to oversee personally the ordinary affairs of life" (Manu IX, 27).

The status of woman in Hindu Law is made clear in Manusmriti: "Day and night women should be kept by the male members of the family in a state of dependence. In pursuits to which they are too devoted they should be restrained under the husband's power" (Manu IX, 2). The hierarchy of the patriarchal system and its power over the Hindu woman is apparent in: "The father guards them in childhood, the husband guards them in youth, in old age the sons guard them. A woman ought not to be in a state of independence" (Manu IX, 3). The power politics inherent in the type of relationship between men and women that is encouraged in Hindu culture is similar to that which is seen in all patriarchal societies. In The Second Sex, Simone de Beauvoir explains the historical background for the

patriarchal treatment of women in any society:

History has shown us that men have always kept in their hands all concrete powers; since the earliest days of the patriarchate they have thought best to keep woman in a state of dependence; their codes of law have been set up against her; and hence she has been definitely established as the Other. This arrangement suited the economic interests of the males; but it conformed also to their ontological and moral pretensions.<sup>19</sup>

Furthermore, the low status of woman and the restrictions placed upon her independence are explained away by the belief that women are the morally weaker sex: "No religious ceremony for women should be accompanied by mantras -with these words the rule of right is fixed; for women being weak creatures and having no share in the mantras, are falsehood itself. So stands the law" (Manu IX,18). The following passage highlights the low status of women in Hindu culture:

By running after men, by their fickleness of mind, by their natural lack of firm affection, these women, although carefully guarded prove false to their husbands. The husband, then, knowing the natural disposition of these women, as it was originally formed by the creation of Prajapathi, should take the greatest pain in guarding them. The bed, the seat, the adornment, desire, wrath, deceitfulness, proneness to

injure and bad morals Manu<sup>20</sup> ordained for women (Manu IX, 13-17).

Women are therefore viewed with suspicion and mistrust.

The major role that woman plays in the Hindu life is that of mother in procreation, more specifically, the procreation of a son for her husband's spiritual salvation; for only in a son does a man continue his lifeline. The patriarchal framework of Hinduism is obvious in the idea that woman is merely a vehicle for procreation and a means to "the attainment of heaven for the husband's ancestors and for himself" (Manu IX, 28). "The husband entering into the wife and becoming an embryo, is born again on earth; for this is the wifeship of the wife (jaya), in that the husband is born (jaya-te) again in her" (Manu IX,8). The husband repays the debt to the manes when a son is born.<sup>21</sup> It is indeed ironical that although the wife plays a great role in a Hindu man's salvation, Hindu law keeps her in a low status. While the salvation of a Hindu man comes from many other sacraments apart from the marriage, a Hindu woman acquires spiritual gains only through marriage.<sup>22</sup>

However, the motherhood aspect for Indian woman is a redemptive factor. While most male-female relationships are based on culturally-perpetuated patterns of domination and subordination, the relationship between mother and son is one of intensely reciprocated love. In The Speaking Tree, Richard Lannoy points out that Manu draws

a distinction between woman as sexual partner and woman as mother; the latter is accorded very high status.<sup>23</sup> Lannoy comments that the dual status of woman is clear in Indian society; as a wife she seduces the husband away from his spiritual duties, but as a mother she is revered; the commonest sublimation of this reverence of woman as mother is intense mother-goddess worship and worship of womanhood in the abstract.<sup>24</sup>

These traditional roles, expectations and status of women in Hindu culture have a deeprooted and indelible effect on Indians even today. The andocentric ideology of Pativratiya prevalent across Indian society, promotes Sita-like qualities of submissiveness and self-sacrificing behaviour on the part of women towards their husbands. Husband is considered God and the woman's well-being is of little importance.

Against the patriarchal background of India, a writer like Narayan in writing about women has the task of presenting the social, political and psychological reality of the Indian woman. However, Narayan's presentation of the Indian woman is more than a realistic piece of Indian gendering. He raises certain issues of political contention in relation to the status of Indian women in a patriarchal framework. Yet, he remains creative in terms of the aesthetic or literary aspects of fiction. The awakening of woman's consciousness establishes a new set of values in the

fiction that has come out of India in the recent times.

"Novel after novel, when it treats of the Indian woman's consciousness turns into a novel of dissent. The age of the novel of consent has become extinct in India".<sup>25</sup> And this may be said to be the case for Narayan's treatment of feminine consciousness in The Dark Room, The Guide and The Painter of Signs.

However, in his treatment of the issue of woman's consciousness, as mentioned earlier, Narayan is not dogmatic or propagandist. Therefore he does not have an overt, easily apparent feminist agenda in his treatment of feminine consciousness. Instead, he raises feminist issues indirectly through the use of subversion or inversion within the text. In other words, Narayan's presentation of feminine consciousness is not primarily in terms of her psychological, economic, social or political realities; it is essentially literary which allows for the inclusion or juxtaposition of all of these modes. His treatment and handling of feminine consciousness is not overtly political. One cannot call Narayan a committed feminist writer, because his vision of life encompasses more than feminist politics. Yet there are many instances of feminist discourse and an underlying interest in the political aspects of feminine consciousness in his novels.

In analysing Narayan's theme of feminine consciousness my thesis shall include a feminist critique of



Narayan's writing. By feminist critique I refer to Elaine Showalter's definition in "Towards a Feminist Poetics". Showalter sees feminist critique as the study of the works of male writers, and it is a "historically grounded inquiry which probes the ideological assumptions of literary phenomena."<sup>26</sup> Hence, my thesis will evaluate Narayan's writing for not only its aesthetics but also the politics that comes across through the aesthetic vision. My approach to Narayan's writing is essentially a Kristevan one which would not accept the binary opposition of aesthetics on the one hand and politics on the other. My reason for examining Narayan's treatment of feminine consciousness both on the basis of aesthetics and politics is best explained in Toril Moi's words in Sexual/Textual Politics:

If aesthetics raises the question of whether (and how) the text works effectively with an audience, it obviously is bound up with the political; without an aesthetic effect there will be no political effect either. And if feminist politics is about among other things, 'experience', then it is already related to the aesthetic.<sup>27</sup>

Since his criticism of patriarchal Indian society is more implicit than explicit, Narayan's indirect commentary on the effects of patriarchy and feminism on the Indian woman's consciousness provides the basis for my argument. This commentary shall be drawn from Narayan's various literary or

aesthetic modes such as characterisation of both men and women, dialogue, narrative technique, sub-text, voice, tone, structure, imagery, and intentionality of the language in each novel. Feminist theory and discourse shall be used to understand Narayan's treatment of feminine consciousness where the text itself facilitates such a reading.

In The Dark Room, Narayan portrays the Indian woman's passive feminine consciousness. In analysing The Dark Room, while giving due attention to the text and examining Narayan's portrayal of the Hindu woman's victimisation in a patriarchal society, I shall discuss the political and psychological subtext that the writer conveys to the reader. This involves an examination of Narayan's method of using Savitri, the subaltern, as a measure of the dominant sexual ideology of India. Narayan's tone and style in his portrayal of Ramani and Savitri shall also be discussed. Narayan's careful rendering of the cultural inculcation of patriarchal values in a traditional Hindu family and its pervasive influence in Indian society as a whole will be examined. Through an examination of male-female relationships in The Dark Room, Narayan reveals the hierarchies inherent in a patriarchal society like India and the vicious cycle of dependence that women like Savitri, Janamma and Shanta Bai are trapped in. The profound effects of cultural conditioning and the belief in Pativrata and resignation that shape the passive consciousness of the

Indian woman is studied in this novel. Narayan also makes clear the price that has to be paid for independence and freedom. Yet, The Dark Room, written very early in Narayan's literary career, has flaws in terms of its artistic achievement.

While The Dark Room dealt with woman as victim in a patriarchal society, The Guide deals with the issue of feminine consciousness on a deeper and more sophisticated level. In The Guide, he examines the awakened but discordant consciousness of the Indian woman. Narayan presents the conflicting issues of woman's freedom and the effects of patriarchal cultural inculcation through Rosie. Narayan shows great flair and maturity in his handling of Rosie. She represents the plight of the modern Indian woman. The few women who have, through education and job opportunities, risen above Savitri's level in The Dark Room find themselves in a constant struggle against social mores and the heavy burden of tradition. And this is the issue that Narayan deals with in The Guide through the character of Rosie. Through Rosie, Narayan examines the effects of cultural conditioning and the influence of karma, dharma and fate in the Indian woman's consciousness. Rosie's conflict between her quest for sexual and artistic self-fulfillment and her traditional frame of mind which induces feelings of guilt for having betrayed her husband forms the basis of Narayan's examination of the psyche of the modern Indian

woman. It is apparent that, through Rosie, Narayan presents the ambivalent attitude of modern Indian women toward tradition and culture. Rosie's caste adds a further dimension to Narayan's portrayal of the conflict between the old and new. Within Rosie/Nalini we see the polarity and conflict between the life of passion and artistic independence and the need for social acceptance and respectability.

In The Painter of Signs, Narayan presents the active feminine consciousness of the Indian woman in his portrayal of the economically and emotionally independent Indian woman in the character of Daisy. Narayan shows us that the new woman is of her own making, free from all cultural conditioning. Her career as a social worker for the Family Planning Centre promoting birth control is clearly Narayan's attempt to show the political power of the new woman. This positive picture of the growth of woman's consciousness in the Narayan novels is accompanied by a reduction in the image of the male protagonist. This aspect shall be examined in light of Narayan's feminist aesthetics, indicating clear subversion of the traditionally patriarchal man-woman relationship in Indian society.

As much as Narayan presents an admirable picture of independence and vitality of the modern feminist in Daisy, the sub-text within the novel raises certain critical questions about woman's choice and feminine consciousness.

I shall also show how his criticism of patriarchy is tempered by his criticism of dogmatic feminism which he sees as being capable of robbing a woman of her humanity. Yet, the subtext could be read differently too. Narayan may be taking a feminist stand in subverting the traditional notion of femininity. This shall be examined with close reference to the text.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>M.K. Naik, The Ironic Vision: A Study of the Fiction of R.K. Narayan (New Delhi: Sterling, 1968). Naik offers a detailed study of the use of irony in Narayan's novels.

<sup>2</sup>William Walsh, "R.K. Narayan: The Unobtrusive Novelist," Review of National Literature 10 (1979) 67.

<sup>3</sup>Suresh Narayan, "The Ironic Mode of R.K. Narayan," Indian Writing in English. ed. Krishna Nandan Sinha (New Delhi: Heritage, 1979) 169.

<sup>4</sup>See Uma Parameswaran, "Native Genius: R.K. Narayan," A Study of Representative Indo-English Novelists (New Delhi: Vikas, 1976) 42-84. Also see Lakshmi Holmstrom, The Novels of R.K. Narayan (Calcutta: Writers Workshop, 1973) and S.C. Harrex, The Fire and the Offering: The English Language Novel of India 1935-1970 (Calcutta: Writers Workshop, 1978).

<sup>5</sup>Gobinda Prasad Sarma, Nationalism in Indo-Anglian Fiction (New Delhi: Sterling, 1978) 282. Read pp 282-286 for Sarma's perspective on Narayan's sense of detachment.

<sup>6</sup>Harsharan S. Ahluwalia, "Narayan's Sense of Audience," ARIEL 15 (Jan 1984) 64.

<sup>7</sup>The novels by Mulk Raj Anand that I refer to are Untouchable (1935), Coolie (1936) and Gauri (1960).



<sup>8</sup>Britta Olinder, "The World of Malgudi: Indian Society in the Work of R.K. Narayan," Papers on Language and Literature: Presented to Alvar Ellgard and Erik Fryman. ed. Sven Backman & Goran Kjellmer (Goteborg: ACTA UNIV. Gorthoburgensis, 1985) 311.

<sup>9</sup>The comment made on Narayan's writing is partly paraphrased from Gayatri Spivak's remark about another Indian writer, Mahasweta Devi and her story "Breast-Giver". Although the contexts are different, I feel that Spivak's comment about Devi's narrative technique is apt in describing some aspects of Narayan's indirect criticism of society. See Spivak's In Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics (New York & London: Methuen, 1987) 266.

<sup>10</sup>S.C. Harrex, "R.K.Narayan and the Temple of Indian Fiction," Meanjin Quarterly 31 (1972) 400.

<sup>11</sup>Quoted in Shanta Krishnaswamy, The Woman in Indian Fiction in English (New Delhi: Ashish, 1984) 105. This classical concept defines woman as an ideal wife, counsellor, playmate, partner, guide, beloved, disciple and artist all at once.

<sup>12</sup>Simone de Beauvoir, The Second Sex, trans. H.M. Parshley (New York: Bantam, 1961) 152.

<sup>13</sup>Roma Chaudhury, "The Status and Role of Women in India," Role and Status of Women in India. ed. Renuka Ray (Calcutta: Firma KLM, 1978) 8-35.

<sup>14</sup>Chaudhury gives examples of various outstanding women including the female Vedic seers, Vac, Ghosa, Visvabara, Apala, Surya and many others. Women during the Upanishadic Age who were great philosophers include Maitreyi and Gargi. For a complete list of female mathematicians, poets, warriors and politicians see Roma Chaudhury, "Status and Role of Women" 13-16.

<sup>15</sup>Sita, Rama's wife in the Hindu epic, the Ramayana, represents the feminine virtues of wifely submissiveness and chastity. After her abduction by Ravana, a rival king, Sita returns to her kingdom untouched by Ravana and proves her chastity to the suspicious citizens by walking on fire. Kannaki's tale is told in the Tamil epic Silappathikaram. Kannaki's husband, Kovalan leaves her for Madhavi, a Devadasi or temple dancer. After fourteen years, Kovalan returns penniless to an accepting and forgiving wife whose love for him has hardly diminished. The tale of Nalayani is told in the Mahabharata. Nalayani's devotion to her husband is so complete that she carries the lecherous man in a basket to look for a prostitute to fulfil his carnal desire.

<sup>16</sup>Roma Chaudhury, "The Status and Role of Women" 31-35.

<sup>17</sup>Islamic purdah customs include living in segregated quarters and wearing garments which conceal every part of the body except the eyes. Refer to Richard Lannoy, The Speaking Tree 104-106.

<sup>18</sup>Manu, Manusmriti: The Ordinances of Manu. Trans. & ed. Edward W. Hopkins (New Delhi: Oriental, 1971). The sources of the Dharma Shastra were supposed to be Hindu religious texts (the Vedas and Smritis), approved customs and good conscience. The Vedas were religious hymns, perhaps 3000 years old, and the Smritis were collections of rules of conduct and explanatory principles based on the Vedas. The Smritis comprised texts such as the Manusmriti or The Ordinances of Manu (written between 300B.C. and 400 A.D.) and later commentaries and digests. An important digest was the Dayabhaga (12th Century) and an important commentary was the Mitakshara (11th Century). See Jana Matson Everett, Women and Social Change in India (New York: St. Martin's, 1979) 142-143.

<sup>19</sup>Simone de Beauvoir, The Second Sex 129.

<sup>20</sup>The footnotes in the Manusmriti indicate that the Manu referred to here is not the law giver but the original creator, Prajapathi, mentioned in verse 16. Apparently, according to Hindu beliefs, women were created by God as the morally weaker sex.

<sup>21</sup>Maria Mies, Indian Women and Patriarchy (New Delhi: Concept, 1980) 41.

<sup>22</sup>Maria Mies, Indian Women and Patriarchy 50. In the Mahabharata we find the story of Shubru, a religious woman who remains chaste until her deathbed only to discover that she may never make it to heaven unless her body is

consecrated by the sacrament of marriage. The importance that Hindus place on marriage as a necessity for a woman's salvation is also indicated by the Hindu practice of performing a marriage ritual on an unmarried woman's dead body as part of the funeral ritual.

<sup>23</sup>Richard Lannoy, The Speaking Tree (London: Oxford U, 1971) 103.

<sup>24</sup>Richard Lannoy, The Speaking Tree 107. In the phenomenon of "mother-worship", a deep-seated ambivalence of the Hindus towards women becomes evident. The cult of Devi is in contrast with the ostracisation of women from the Hindu temple during menstruation. With its blood sacrifice and magic, the cult of Devi is abhorred by the Brahmins and women are blamed for this impurity of sexuality and menstrual blood. This ambivalence between horror of women as embodiment of impurity and mother-worship seem to have been derived from the patriarchal Aryans. The Aryans' worship of male gods created a psychological imbalance in Hinduism, causing a need for a feminine principle in Hinduism. Further details are in Maria Mies, Indian Women and Patriarchy.

<sup>25</sup>Shanta Krishnaswamy, The Woman in Indian Fiction 3.

<sup>26</sup>Elaine Showalter, "Towards A Feminist Poetics," quoted by Toril Moi in Sexual/Textual Politics (London & New York: Methuen, 1985) 25.

<sup>27</sup>Toril Moi, Sexual/Textual Politics 85.

## Chapter 1: The Dark Room

The ideology of Pativratty, by incorporating the basic Hindu values of self-realisation, helps perpetuate the patriarchal structure by making the personal goals of a woman fit the structural needs...In this context a woman is convinced that she should live through others and for others (Vanaja Dhruvarajan, Hindu Women and the Power of Ideology).<sup>1</sup>

In his autobiography, My Days: A Memoir (1974), Narayan explains his reasons for writing The Dark Room (1938):

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 notion of her independence, her individuality, stature, and strength. A wife in an orthodox milieu is victim of such circumstances. My novel dealt with her, with this philosophy broadly in the background.<sup>2</sup>

This feminist comment reveals Narayan's interest in the Indian woman's consciousness at a very early stage in his

writing career. Readers who see Narayan as a traditional writer whose stories are explorations of only male protagonists' initiation, development and maturity, would be perplexed by The Dark Room. The novel is an exception in the Narayan canon in that the protagonist, Savitri, is a female and in that it is written almost entirely from the woman's point of view. The metaphorical title of the novel itself suggests that Narayan's handling of it is different from most of his other novels such as Swami and Friends (1935), The Bachelor of Arts (1937), The English Teacher (1945), The Financial Expert (1952) and The Vendor of Sweets (1967) where the titles simply refer to the protagonists of the story. Critics who view Narayan as a detached comic-ironic writer who is not concerned with social issues often dismiss The Dark Room as a mistake, a flaw in the Narayan canon that can be explained away by his immaturity as a writer.<sup>3</sup> Yet, The Dark Room is Narayan's first major attempt at examining woman's consciousness; in subsequent novels though the writer examines various male protagonists, the question of woman's status, role and identity in Indian society continue to be an important subject.

Although Narayan had portrayed various female characters in his previous novels,<sup>4</sup> it is in The Dark Room that he examines the consciousness of the Indian woman as she is with all her ambiguity, complexity and flaws. Savitri represents the passive state of woman's

consciousness; in The Dark Room, Narayan attempts to gain psychological insight into the plight of the unfortunate Indian woman who does not have the strength of will or the economic and educational opportunities to free herself from unfair male dominance. Narayan portrays the inauthentic life that Savitri's socially circumscribed roles condemn her to lead. The implication is clear that a woman's self-identity involves more than being a wife and a mother. Although other Indian novels such as Bhabani Battacharya's Music for Mohini (1952) and Mulk Raj Anand's Gauri (1960) have been written on such contentious issues as the arranged marriage and female emancipation, Narayan has to be given credit for writing one of the first few novels on the modern Indian woman.

Savitri's victimisation within the context of an unhappy marriage is shown through her relationship with Ramani. As Lakshmi Holmstrom points out, Savitri is also placed carefully within the novel to be contrasted with a number of minor portraits of women such as Janamma, Gangu and Ponni to provide us with a fairly complete picture of an Indian woman's consciousness within an orthodox milieu of Indian society.<sup>5</sup> In portraying the marital relationship between Savitri and Ramani, Narayan impels us towards a discussion of the Hindu values regarding proper relationship between the partners in married life. Thus Narayan provides a framework of four sets of man-woman relationships within

the text. Ramani and Savitri, Janamma and her husband, Gangu and her husband as well as Ponni and Mari are representations of the varied contexts of matrimony and they serve to illustrate the various levels of relationship between men and women in Indian society. Despite his apparently feminist statement about The Dark Room, the novel remains a detached, observation of the Indian woman. Nowhere does Narayan openly criticise Indian orthodoxy or patriarchy; his social criticism is indirect and subtle.

Savitri, the mythic name of the heroine of The Dark Room seems to have been chosen to place the present contentiously against the history and mythology of the past, raising the thought-provoking issue of tradition versus modernity as a complex mode of living for the modern woman of the twentieth century. O.P. Mathur comments that "R.K. Narayan is often regarded as firmly rooted in the soil of tradition. But even in one of his earliest novels, The Dark Room, he has touched on the fundamental problem of the juxtaposition of the past and the present."<sup>6</sup> Mathur further adds that while the story of the epic, Savitri and Satyavan is suggested by the name of Narayan's heroine in The Dark Room, the story of Sita in the Ramayana is suggested by the heroine's exile and return.<sup>6</sup> K.R.S. Iyengar remarks that in the story of Savitri's passive endurance, Narayan seems to be enacting the ancient Tamil Bardic story of Silappathikaram with its love triangle between Kovalan,



Kannaki and Madhavi.<sup>7</sup> Yet, by naming his heroine (who leaves her husband) after an epic heroine who refuses to leave her husband even in death, Narayan employs certain mythic patterns as a form of counter-discourse to show that the old stereotypes of the classical, ideal Indian woman are no longer appropriate. Narayan seems to suggest that the modern Indian woman needs to create her own mythology to fulfil her physical and spiritual needs.

Narayan's Savitri is a middle class Brahmin woman, not very educated but brought up in the Hindu way, practiced in the traditional duties of being a devoted wife and mother. Her self-awakening and rebellion against the traditional role of wife and mother does not take place as a result of modern education but perhaps through the influence of sociological changes with regard to woman's place in society. Initially, Savitri is only vaguely aware of the limitations that her patriarchal society has put on her as an individual. Savitri's growing dissatisfaction in the role assigned to her is caused by her husband's tyrannical behaviour towards her. Whenever lunch is served, Ramani is full of complaints about the food and treats Savitri no differently than a servant, insulting her cooking as she waits hand and foot on him. Savitri almost never retaliates or speaks her mind, remaining absolutely silent:

"Why do you torment me with this cucumber for the dozenth time? Do you think I live on it?"...Savitri

never interrupted this running commentary with an explanation, and her silence sometimes infuriated her husband. "Saving up your energy by being silent! Saving it up for what purpose? When a man asks you something you could do worse than honour him with a reply." Sometimes if she offered an explanation, as occasionally happened, she would be told, "Shut up. Words won't mend a piece of foul cooking" (3).

This image of female silence is depicted throughout the novel. Savitri's only response to her husband's bullying is silence and a withdrawal into the dark room. When Janamma enquires about the Navaratri incident which leads to her retreat to the dark room, Savitri's reply is, "There was no quarrel. I never uttered a single word". In The Dark Room, Narayan highlights the notion of woman's lack of self-expression, be it self-denial or suppression of woman's voice by the patriarchal values forced upon her.

Savitri's realisation at her complete lack of power over her life and her children's brings out her feelings of unhappiness and frustration. The opening of the novel brings into focus this feeling of female powerlessness within a marriage based on patriarchal and hierarchical foundations:

At schooltime Babu suddenly felt very ill, and Savitri fussed over him and put him to bed. And in bed he stayed till Ramani came in and asked, "What is

this?"...

Before she could answer, he called her twice again and asked "Are you deaf?"

"I was just...."

"What is the matter with Babu?"

"He is not well."....

Ramani said "Mind your own business, do you hear ?"

"The boy has fever."

"No he hasn't. Go and do any work you like in the kitchen, but leave the training of a grown-up boy to me. It is none of a woman's business" (1).

Narayan draws a sharp picture of the dominant sexual ideology of India through Savitri, the subaltern. Ramani's undermining of Savitri's judgement is based on the simple fact that she is a woman. In a typically chauvinistic fashion, Ramani assigns her to the kitchen, the only place in which he sees her fit to make decisions. Later on, when he is in a better mood, Ramani patronisingly tells Savitri that he is willing to forgive her rebelliousness in allowing Babu to stay at home, "You have a lot to learn yet. You are still a child, perhaps a precocious child, but a child all the same" (12). Although Ramani is jovial, it is apparent that he does not see Savitri as an adult equal to him in intelligence and maturity. Instead, he treats her with condescension and sees her dissent as childish willfulness.

Savitri's awareness of her powerlessness is seen

when she contemplates the incident after Ramani leaves for work:

Her thoughts reverted to Babu. The boy looked unwell, and perhaps at that moment was very ill in his class. 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. Babu did look very ill and she was powerless to keep him in bed; she felt she ought to have asserted herself a little more at the beginning of their married life and then all would have been well (5).

Savitri seems to be vaguely aware that the relationship had fallen into a pattern of domination and subordination because of her own lack of assertiveness. But she seems unaware at this point that she had fallen into this pattern of female submissiveness because of years of indoctrination by her upbringing. Savitri is a product of the patriarchal value system which perpetuates notions of male superiority and female submissiveness to such an extent that women like Savitri deny themselves the right to speak up against male tyranny. Savitri's feeling of powerlessness stems from the unequal relationship between her and her husband.

In Sexual Politics, Kate Millet outlines the relationship between men and women in the patriarchal world as that of a relationship of dominance and subordination. Millet sees the patriarchal social order as one that is

based on the politics of power in which one group rules another, through which a most ingenious form of "interior colonization" has been achieved.<sup>8</sup> From Millet's viewpoint, Savitri's feelings of powerlessness can be attributed to the patriarchal sexual politics inherent in her relationship with Ramani. Savitri's silence despite the onslaught of insult thrown at her can therefore be traced to the interior colonization that has taken place.

Ramani's treatment of his family represents the male-dominated patriarchal family background that Indian society is built on. Narayan's careful rendering of the cultural inculcation of patriarchal values can be seen in the authoritarian way in which Ramani treats both the children and his wife. Ramani's severe control over his family is evident in the way both Savitri and the children cue in to the signals such as the car horn's hooting and the way he walks into the house. He tells them what kind of behaviour is acceptable to him on any one day:

Today the hooting was of a milder kind....they could await his arrival without apprehension. If he was happy he treated everyone tolerantly...Savitri felt relieved; the same relief ran through the children, who were all at their desks in another room, waiting, keyed up (11).

Savitri's crisis of consciousness begins during the Navaratri festival and culminates in her departure from

her home. The disastrous Navaratri Festival and the events preceding the celebrations are pregnant with symbolic implications. Narayan prepares us for the conflict by a flashback scene in which Savitri recalls her childhood:

Savitri squatted down and wiped the dust off the dolls, and odd memories of her childhood stirred in her. Her eyes fell on a wooden rattle with the colour coming away in flakes, with which she had played when she was just a few months old. So her mother had told her... Savitri felt a sudden inexplicable self-pity at the thought of herself as an infant ... Savitri had a sudden longing to be back in her mother's house (27).

The fragility of her consciousness and her psychic shattering are anticipated by the servant's accidental breaking of the elephant that her mother gave her when she was a child. The dolls put up on display for the festival, serve to reveal the hierarchical relationship between Savitri and Ramani:

In an hour a fantastic world was raised; a world inhabited by all god's creations...creatures in all gay colours and absurd proportions and grotesque companies...There were green parrots which stood taller than the elephants beside them;...animals and vegetables, gods and sly foxes, acrobats and bears, warriors and cooking utensils, were all the same here,

in this fantastic universe conjured out of coloured paper, wood and doll maker's clay (31).

While the world of dolls has no sense of proportion in terms of size or of hierarchy in terms of power, the world that Savitri lives in is one based on hierarchies of power.

Ramani's comment to his daughters, "You must not keep them in such a jumble. You must have all the animals in one line all the human beings in another, and so on" speaks volumes about his hierarchical mindset. The image of Rama and Seeta, "their serenity unaffected"(31), in their world of disproportionate company, seems to have been conjured up by Narayan to contrast with the marital disharmony of Ramani and Savitri, as well as to hint at the impending crisis.

The Navaratri festival also highlights the way in which patriarchal values are perpetuated in the Indian family. When Babu decides to help his sisters in setting up the dolls by adding more lights during the Navaratri Festival, he fouls up, leaving the house in total darkness. Ramani's reaction to this is typically tyrannical:

As soon as he sighted Babu he asked, "You blackguard, who asked you to tamper with the electric lights?" Babu stood stunned. Don't try to escape by being silent. Are you following your mother's example?"

"No, Father."

... "Who asked you to go near the dolls' business? Are you a girl? Tell me are you a girl?"

This insistent question was followed by violent twists of the ear... "No, Father, I am not a woman."

...Ramani gave him a few more slaps. At this point Savitri dashed forward to protect Babu. She took him aside glaring at her husband, who said, "Leave him alone, he doesn't need your petting". She felt faint with anger. "Why do you beat him" was all she could ask, and then she burst out crying (37).

This scene once again highlights Ramani's lack of respect for his wife for he clearly sees her as a bad example for his son. His accusation "Don't try to escape by being silent. Are you following your mother's example?" puts Savitri in a bad light and is meant to insult Babu for it is only women who are supposed to remain silent despite insults and accusations in a patriarchal society like India. His chauvinistic attitude is also shown in his question later, "Has that effeminate boy eaten?" (37). His punishment of Babu for getting involved in dolls which are "girls' business" imparts gender-stereotyping as well. While Ramani rebukes his son for remaining silent and not speaking up like a man, he is pleased with his daughter for her silence and docility:

"Don't you know that when you bring a lantern you have to bring a piece of paper to keep under it? When will you learn all this?"

"Very well, Father," Kamala said much intimidated by



his manner.

This submissiveness pleased Ramani. You must be a good girl, otherwise people won't like you"...

Kamala turned to go and took a few steps. "Little girl, don't shuffle your feet while walking ," said Ramani.

"Hereafter I will walk properly , Father."

He was thoroughly pleased with her. He felt he ought to bestow on her some attention...(36).

One can see here the socialization process through which patriarchy perpetuates the notion of "aggression, intelligence, force and efficacy in the male; passivity, ignorance, docility, "virtue" and ineffectuality in the female."<sup>9</sup>

One of Savitri's close friends, Janamma is a perfect representation of the "interior colonization" that has taken place in Indian women. She is the epitome of female subservience. When Savitri refuses to come out of the dark room after her disagreement with her husband during the Navaratri festival, it is Janamma's words of "traditional wisdom" that make Savitri shameful for her rebelliousness:

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 alternative, but nothing

more. What he does is right. It is a wife's duty to feel so.... Men have to bear many worries and burdens, and you must overlook it if they are sometimes unreasonable....After all, they are better trainers of children than we can be. If they sometimes appear harsh, you may rest assured they will suffer for it later. Janamma went on in this strain for over an hour more, recounting instances of the patience of wives: her own grandmother who slaved cheerfully for her husband, who had three concubines at home; her aunt who was beaten everyday by her husband and never uttered a word of protest for years; another friend of her mother's who was prepared to jump into a well if her husband so directed; and so on till Savitri gradually began to feel very foolish at the thought of her resentment, which now seemed very insignificant (46).

Janamma's perception represents the virtues of a 'good' woman and the traditional Hindu wife. Janamma is a product of a culture where Sita and Savitri represent the ideal Hindu women in their unquestioning suffering, unwavering loyalty, docility and submissiveness to their husbands. And it is within this mythic framework that women like Janamma pattern their lives. Her philosophy is that of Pativratty and her sole concern in life is to obey her husband; she believes that women should sacrifice their lives for their husbands. Janamma's consciousness as a

woman is defined by her role as wife and mother. An elderly woman and the wife of a public prosecutor, she is very steeped in the traditions and would never question the authority men have over women in her society. In fact, like many Indian women subjected to centuries of andocentric cultural inculcation, she sees such a hierarchical arrangement as an appropriate and only basis of marriage and of society as a whole. Narayan has very obviously presented Janamma along with Savitri to convey the difficulties involved in the Indian woman's emancipation. Surely, Narayan has also drawn this image of the Indian woman resigned to her fate to highlight the strong Hindu sense of fatalism and belief in karma which have a negative impact on the Indian woman's quest for justice and equality. Janamma believes that women should suffer whatever fate had in store for them, be it drunken, wife-battering or unfaithful husbands. This attitude explains the way in which traditional Hindu women accept injustice and suffering without retaliation, thus perpetuating the vicious cycle of male domination and female subordination, generation after generation. This is further evident in Janamma's passive acceptance of her husband's cruelty to their children. Savitri, on the other hand, being younger, responds to a similar situation with a sense of outrage at the injustice even though, "Why do you beat him..." was all she could manage to say. The difference between Savitri and Janamma

is clear. Although Savitri does not argue with her husband whenever he insults her, she seems unable to control herself from coming to the children's rescue when Ramani bullies them. However, by creating in his heroine strong maternal feelings, Narayan reveals the strong emotional ties that bind Savitri to the home.

In order to counterbalance the image of a traditional woman in Janamma, Narayan presents us with the outrageous and extroverted Gangu, another of Savitri's close friends. Gangu wears flimsy, crepe saris and arranges her hair and flowers in an eccentric manner. Gangu has ambitions to become a singer and an actress. Wife of a trendy schoolteacher who considers himself a champion of women's rights, Gangu "talked irresponsibly and enjoyed being unpopular in the elderly society of South Extension. She left home when she pleased and went wherever she liked, moved about without an escort, stared back at people and talked loudly" (14). Although Gangu was despised by Janamma for her free ways, she was tolerated in the Extension because she was interesting. Furthermore, "with all her talk, she was very religious, visiting the temple regularly, and she was not immoral" (15). It is interesting that the submissive "Savitri found Gangu fascinating" (14). Although she may not want to live Gangu's eccentric lifestyle, when she ponders about her own powerlessness in her marriage, Savitri envies Gangu's freedom: "There were girls nowadays

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" (5). One suspects that Savitri may have gotten her individualistic notions from her friendship with Gangu.

Yet, Savitri's rebellious reaction to the Navaratri incident is a frustrated one. It is a kind of self-imposed imprisonment as she has no other way to express her disagreement and unhappiness. She tries in her own (albeit, ineffectual) way to retaliate against her husband. However, she takes her anger out on herself, by refusing food in self-deprivation and by turning her face towards the wall in refusal to participate in a life where she has no say in almost anything.

The metaphor of the dark room is effectively used by Narayan to convey the image of the Indian woman's victimisation. According to S.C. Harrex, the dark room symbolizes "the emotional emptiness and domestic claustrophobia which can result from a circumscribed marital orthodoxy."<sup>10</sup> Elena J. Kalinnikova also points out that "The title of The Dark Room is profoundly symbolic because the dark room is an embodiment of the protagonist's life itself, which is hard and without any happiness."<sup>11</sup> Holmstrom also sees the dark room as an image of "a limited privacy, a limited protest."<sup>12</sup> It is true that Savitri's rebellion is only a limited one as she does not voice her

unhappiness and disagreement with her husband, and she still clings on to the orthodox notion that a Hindu wife should never talk back to her husband. O.P. Mathur correctly remarks that "The portrait of the heroine given by the novelist... suggests that he does seem to feel that a character who is a blind prisoner of the past can only land herself in a dark room, both literally and metaphorically."<sup>13</sup>

Janamma's response to Savitri's interference with Ramani's punishment of Babu is echoed by the cook. The next day the conversation between the cook and Ranga, the servant, reveals the long held chauvinistic beliefs about women and child-rearing:

It is no business of a wife's to butt in when the father is dealing with his son. It is a bad habit. Only a battered son will grow into a sound man.

"My wife is also like that," admitted Ranga.

...The cook said, "Only once has my wife tried to interfere and then I nearly broke her bones. She has learned to leave me alone now. Women must be taught their place" (39).

This conversation illustrates the pervasiveness of patriarchal thinking in Indian society as a whole. But, in a way, this conversation reveals that both men and women are victims of cultural inculcation. Perhaps this is why Narayan, in his characteristic manner, makes no overt

criticism of Ramani. Nowhere in the novel does he indicate contempt or disapproval of Ramani's mistreatment of Savitri. We are presented with the scenario and left to our own conclusions. His criticism of Ramani's behaviour and attitude is implicit rather than explicit.

When Ramani contemplates women's emancipation, his perception is that of many who are products of a patriarchal society. His view of women's emancipation is limited to that of women's freedom to pursue pleasurable entertainment previously frowned upon. To Ramani it means giving concession to women who were previously bound to the house, if they first adhere to the role of wife and mother: "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 the pictures occasionally; but that should not blind them to their primary duties of being wives and mothers; they mustn't attempt to ape the Western women, all of whom according to Ramani's belief, lived in a chaos of promiscuity and divorce" (105). Peter Nazareth points out that Narayan does unobtrusively criticise Indian society by making it clear that Ramani has acquired his callous attitude towards Savitri from the ancient epics:<sup>14</sup>

He held that India owed its spiritual eminence to the fact that the people here realised that a woman's primary duty (also a divine privilege) was being a wife

and a mother. And what woman retained the right of being a wife who disobeyed her husband? Didn't all the ancient epics and Scriptures enjoin upon women the strictest identification with her husbands. 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 (105).

The image of the shadow to describe women clearly speaks of the denial of their substance and individuality as human beings.<sup>15</sup> Critics who consider Narayan a traditional writer may claim that the above view is Narayan's own. However, Peter Nazareth explains that Narayan's criticism of Ramani's view is so subtle and the "irony ...is so unobtrusive that it often escapes notice. Readers often assume that Narayan is presenting Ramani's thoughts without criticism!"<sup>16</sup>

This kind of indirect criticism of patriarchal thinking through irony is obvious early in the novel when Ramani and Savitri go to the movies. The irony in Narayan's description of the story line is so slight that one may miss it: "the old story from the epics, of Krishna and his old classmate Kuchela, who was too busy with his daily prayers and meditation to work and earn, and hence left to his wife the task of finding food for their twenty-seven children ..."(21). Narayan seems amused by Kuchela who has time to



produce twenty-seven children but has no time to take care of them.

Likewise irony is used once again to contrast the different responses of Savitri and Ramani to the epic. While "Savitri sympathized intensely with the unfortunate woman, Kuchela's wife" (22), Ramani, insensitive to the woman's suffering remarks "Note how patient she is, and how uncomplaining" (22). Once again Narayan, indirectly criticises the ancient epics which keep on promoting the image of the ideal woman as the silently long-suffering wife who accepts the injustices that life presents to her.

Most ironic and comic is Narayan's portrayal of Ramani. Although Ramani condemns the West for its "chaos of promiscuity and divorce", he finds himself attracted to the new female insurance trainee, Shanta Bai, a woman whom he considers "educated" (66) and "cultured" (106), despite the fact that she is a divorcee. Ironically, he who in his Hindu mindset believes that a woman should never leave her husband, admires her for having left her husband. His infatuation with Shanta Bai is made comical by Narayan; he falls for her dramatic playacting and even goes on to think that Shanta Bai is superior to Savitri and that Savitri could learn some refinement from her:

She was steadily, definitely working herself up to a breakdown...More than the breakdown the subsequent heroic efforts to master it stirred him deeply. He had

never seen such things before; his wife's moods were different. She only knew one thing, 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; it made all the difference (66).

It is indeed ironical that Ramani thinks that education would change Savitri's "crude sulking". It is precisely the lack of education that leaves her with no other options but to retreat into the dark room. With education she would probably have the option to choose a different life and with the knowledge that she could be financially independent, she would have the courage to leave him exactly the way the woman he much admires left her husband. It is even more ironical that he espouses equal rights and woman's liberation when he is with Shanta Bai and tyrannizes with patriarchal power when he is with Savitri at home.

Ramani's view of the relationship between himself and his wife is based on economics. For him, the duty of the husband is to be the financial provider, and in return for his money he expects to be repaid with obedience and housework. Savitri has, in his opinion, no right to question his activities or demand his loyalty as she does when she hears from Gangu that he was seen at the cinema with Shanta Bai: "Will you promise not to go near her again?" (82).

Ramani's alleged affair with Shanta Bai is the

last straw for the already unhappy Savitri and leads to her leaving the home. Thus it is crucial how Narayan handles the relationship between Shanta Bai and Ramani. They spend hours talking and Ramani stays late into the night with her, yet nowhere does Narayan explicitly depict sex or mention that they were lovers. This brings out a slight flaw in the storyline as it makes Savitri seem like an overly suspicious, insecure housewife who over-reacts to the hearsay that her husband goes to the movies with another woman. Yet, one must keep in mind that Narayan is not a sexually graphic writer.<sup>17</sup> He tends to be reticent about love-making, perhaps because of his own sensibility or because of conservative Indian readers. This can be seen in all his novels; even in his depiction of the highly controversial lovers, Raju and Rosie in The Guide, Raju describes their first sexual encounter as "I...stepped in and locked the door on the world" (77). However, Narayan makes it clear that Ramani's intentions towards Shanta Bai were not entirely innocent. He hires Shanta Bai and not the others because she is a young, attractive female. He also goes out of his way to make space in his office building for her, and to get her furniture from his home. He takes her out for drives and there are hints of a sexual relationship in their level of intimacy, which is uncommon in platonic male-female relationships.

Another flaw in the plot involves Shanta Bai.

Narayan does not tell us much about her and her relationship with Ramani after Savitri confronts him about it. Narayan seems to have completely forgotten her. However, Narayan's characterisation of Shanta Bai is superb. Narayan does a very good job of colourfully presenting Shanta Bai as the other woman. She is the archetypal femme fatale who uses her sex to get ahead in life and she makes a blustering fool out of Ramani. Her theatrical helplessness and her pretentiously Bohemian speeches are comical:

She compressed her lips and jerked her head in the perfect Garbo manner; the temperamental heroine and the impending doom. Ramani had to be the soothing lover...she revelled in the vision of a blasted future...She freed herself from his arms and paced the room up and down...She was steadily, definitely, methodically working herself up to a breakdown (67).

Narayan draws a few ironic comparisons between Shanta Bai and Savitri. While Savitri has been brought up on and has lived her life according to the ideology of Pativrata, Shanta Bai lives from day to day on a makeshift philosophy, which creeps in every ten minutes: "As for me life is.... something or other, some simple affair like Living Today and Letting Tomorrow Take Care of Itself, or Honour Being the One Important Possession, and so forth" (61). Her philosophies which impress Ramani are pretentious:

Dead yesterday and unborn tomorrow. "What, without asking wither hurried hence" and so on. The cup of life must be filled to the brim and drained; another and another cup to drown the impertinence of this memory.... Khayyam says: 'Into this universe and why not knowing,' etcetera. I am as wind along the waste" (113).

Unlike Shanta Bai's affected and melodramatic speech and mannerism, Savitri's speech (when she finally speaks) is simple yet genuinely passionate:

She pushed away his hand crying, "Don't touch me".... I'm 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 leave us when you choose" (82).

Her suppressed feelings of being treated like an object emerge. She gives voice to her subjectivity and in breaking her silence authenticates her self. Her ultimatum "You are not having me and her at the same time, understand? I shall go out of this house this minute"(83) is followed by her angry words:

You are dirty, you are impure. Even if I burn my skin I can't cleanse myself of the impurity of your touch... 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" (84).

Having patiently borne Ramani's domestic injustice for years, she draws the line at his suspected infidelity. In her decision to leave him, she decides not to take anything that she received from him: "What possession can a woman call her own except her body? Everything else that she has is her father's, her husband's or her son's" (84). Savitri's self-awakening involves the realisation of women's utter dependence on men for survival and the vicious cycle of being transferred from first her father's then her husband's and finally her son's possession in having to rely on them for self-support. She even refuses to take the jewellery given to her by her father: "Take them away. They are also a man's gift" (85). Realizing that even the children are not really hers, as Ramani had paid for their every need, she walks out of the house, alone. Savitri's decision to leave her husband can be seen as a contrast to the mythical Savitri who did not leave her husband's side even at his death. And unlike Kannaki of the Tamil classic, Silappathikaram, whose patience and loyalty to her husband Kovalan did not change despite his infidelity towards her in living with his mistress, Madhavi for fourteen years, Savitri leaves her husband as soon as she hears that her husband was seen with

another woman. And unlike the classic heroine Nalayani, who carries her husband to the prostitutes that he desires, Savitri loses her temper at the very thought that her husband might be having an affair. The difference of attitude toward male infidelity between the epic or classical heroines and the modern heroines summarises the changes in male-female relationships that Narayan wishes to convey. No longer is the Indian woman expected to remain silent, self-sacrificing and long-suffering.

Yet, Savitri's rebellion can be criticised for being all too sudden somehow. Firstly, Savitri has no real evidence of Ramani's infidelity; all she heard was that he was seen at the movies with Shanta Bai. However, we can say that Savitri may have come to this conclusion because of Ramani's lateness in arriving home at nights. Secondly, it does come as a shock to hear Savitri suddenly voice such individualistic notions and it seems even more out of character for Savitri to criticise the patriarchal society that she lives in. Her refusal to take her father's jewellery because that too is from a man seems exaggerated and her speech about the vicious cycle of female dependence in Indian society where women are financially dependent first on their fathers, then their husbands and finally their sons sounds too much like a piece of well thought out feminist argument.

It may be argued that Narayan is aware that he

cannot show Savitri's rebellion as a direct result of feminist revelations. So he makes Savitri's rebellion short-lived and probable by showing Savitri's own amazement at her rebellion: "Am I the same old Savitri or am I someone else? Perhaps this is just a dream. And I must be someone else posing as Savitri because I couldn't have had the courage to talk back to my husband. I have never done it in my life" (77). Savitri's rebellion appears to be an impulsive reaction, an emotional outburst rather than a heroic act. She reverts back to her traditional, Hindu thinking as soon as she leaves home: "In Yama's world the cauldron must be ready for me for the sin of talking back to a husband and disobeying him, but what could I do?" (90). However, the conflict in Savitri's consciousness arises as a result of the conflict between her modern individualistic notions and her obligation as a Hindu wife to obey her husband according to the Dharma Shashtra. She has been conditioned into being afraid of not living up to others' expectations and to her societal roles:

One definite thing in life is Fear, from the cradle to the funeral pyre, and even beyond that, fear of torture in the other world. Afraid of a husband's displeasures, and of the discomforts that might be caused to him, morning to night and all night too...Afraid of one's father, teachers and everybody in early life, afraid of one's husband, children and



neighbours in later life...(88).

Savitri's bravado cannot be sustained against the overwhelming odds. Savitri has neither courage nor any real education that she can count on in order to survive: "What can I do? Unfit to earn a handful of rice except by begging. If I had gone to 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" (89). In utter helplessness she decides to drown herself in the River Sarayu: "No one who could not live by herself should be allowed to exist" (89).

At this point in the story, Narayan presents Ponni, the wife of the locksmith and part-time thief, Mari, who saves Savitri's life. Ponni is an important person in Narayan's examination of Indian women. In contrast to Savitri, she is of low caste. But Savitri's weakness is contrasted with Ponni's strength; the peasant woman is irascible but kindly and knows exactly how to deal with her husband. She has complete control over her husband when he is sober, bossing him around in a surprisingly untraditional way: "Don't talk now"... "Don't butt in when women are talking" (89). While Savitri was afraid to speak up to her husband and almost all her married life never interrupted his speech, Ponni dominates the conversation, telling her husband never to interrupt women. Although they were childless, Mari had not left his childless wife for

another woman to get a son as the Hindu tradition might have led him to do. Instead, "Mari cared a great deal about his wife, although he chased her about and threw things at her when he was drunk" (91). While Savitri and Ramani's relationship reveals the effects of patriarchy, Ponni and Mari's relationship is clearly included in the novel to show the mutuality involved in a husband-wife relationship.

Ponni's simple method of managing her husband is honed to a skill from life's lessons on survival in a harsh world:

You see that is the way to manage them. He is a splendid boy, but sometimes he goes out with bad friends, who force him to drink, and then he will come home and try to break all the pots and beat me. But when I know that he has been drinking, the moment he comes home, I trip him from behind and push him down, and sit on his back for a little while; he will wriggle a little, swear at me and then sleep, and wake up in the morning quiet as a lamb (102).

Her incredulous statement "I can't believe any husband is unmanageable in this universe..." (102) is funny because of its apparent simple-mindedness, but it speaks of her ingenuity in dealing with whatever problems life throws in her direction. Ponni is never intimidated by men. When the elderly priest asks Savitri too many personal questions, Ponni does not hesitate to interject: "Why do you ask these

questions? There are wounds which must not be prodded"... "Why do you ask things that are painful?" (130-131). She is clearly contrasted with Savitri who would not ordinarily voice her opinions to anyone of authority.

The priest's suspicious attitude toward Savitri is based on traditional presuppositions that women are possible sources of evil and chaos as the Shastras indicate.<sup>18</sup> He says, "I won't have any woman in the temple. She will start some mischief or other and then the temple will get a bad name" (125). His suspicion is also caused by the fact that she is alone and not in a state of dependence as the Shastras insist<sup>19</sup>: "There must be something wrong about her if she has no home and has to seek a livelihood outside; her husband must have driven her out" (125). The priest's preconceived notion about women looking for a job is an echo of the views expressed by Kataiengar, Ramani's colleague, who thinks that female insurance probationers would not do any good to the company's image. The men's reaction is quite reflective of the way working women were viewed in the 30's:

"A nice treat the boss has arranged. You can have your pick for the harem between the fifteenth and the twentieth. Don't miss the office on any account, " he said to Kataiengar, the office accountant...[who] strongly disapproved of the new scheme. "Do they want to convert the company into a brothel?" he

asked...Ramani felt that these women would in no way add to the profits of the company, though they added considerable colour to the office on the days when they were present (47-48).

Surely Narayan is criticising Indian men for their attitude towards working women who are seen as either pleasant decoration or as sex objects.

On being saved by Mari, Savitri resolves not to eat until she earns her food. She tells Mari and Ponni: "I will come with you on condition that you don't trouble me to come under your roof or any other roof. I will remain only under the sky" (103). This speaks of her need to be free of obligation to anyone. Narayan uses the contrasting images of the dark room and the sky to show the difference in Savitri's states of mind. The dark room which she had cooped herself up in was symbolic of her imprisonment and enslavement, revealing the obligations of matrimony as well as her own uninitiated, suppressed psyche. In contrast, the sky, which she now chooses as her outer space, seems to symbolize her new-found freedom and will to exercise that freedom. After she finds a menial job as a temple helper, she has the pleasure of having earned her meal and of being free under the sky:

She felt a great thrill when she lit the oven and cooked a little rice for herself. "This is my own rice, my very own; and I am not obliged to anyone for

this. This is nobody's charity to me." She felt triumphant and a great peace descended on her as she drank a little water, came out of the kitchen and lay down in the shade of the mango tree. She lay with her head on the threshold of the shanty, gazing at the blue sky and at the deep green of the mango foliage (138).

But Savitri's feelings of elation do not last because of her lack of inner strength. She misses the comforts of her bed and home. Savitri's sense of freedom and accomplishment on getting a job is overshadowed by her fear of being alone. On the very first night at the shanty, she realises the full implications of her choice to live alone. The dark shanty, which replaces the dark room of her home, is a lot more frightening at night. She admits defeat: "This is defeat. I accept it. I am no good for this fight. I am a bamboo pole" (142). Holmstrom comments that Savitri's fight for independence ends in failure because of "her own lack of inner resources to sustain it".<sup>20</sup> Finally, her feelings of nostalgia and maternal concern for her children force her to return: "Perhaps Sumati and Kamala have not had their hair combed for ages now..." (142). Savitri's emotional dependence is clear. Her motherly instincts are stronger than her pride. Her strong maternal feelings are her boon as well as her bane; for it is because of her maternal instinct that she initially shows the courage to speak up against her husband's tyranny, as well

as her inability to stay without him.

Narayan draws certain comparisons between Savitri and Shanta Bai to highlight the emotional and economic dependence of women in Indian society. Shanta Bai and Savitri both lose in their struggle for independence one way or the other; both are victims of their society. Shanta Bai is a victim of Hindu society where child marriage has been a norm and where custom dictates that women should remain with their husbands no matter what: "I was married when I was twelve to a cousin of mine, who was a drunkard. When I was eighteen I found he wouldn't change, and so I left him. My parents would not tolerate it and so I had to leave home" (50). Holmstrom rightly remarks that while Savitri gains a certain amount of economic independence in getting a job as a temple helper, emotionally she is still bound ("I am a bamboo pole"). Shanta Bai, on the other hand, enjoys emotional freedom ("I am as wind along the waste") but is economically still dependent on Ramani.<sup>21</sup> Her job and indirectly her survival depends on how much Ramani likes her. Freedom requires perseverance, courage and sacrifice, which, to a certain extent, both Savitri and Shanta Bai lack.

In drawing ironic comparisons between Savitri and Shanta Bai, Narayan also raises the issue of wifehood as a vocation. Savitri asks herself: "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"(89). This may sound cynical but Narayan seems to criticise women who use marriage as a vocation. Without economic independence and education, the means to attain the former, women cannot have a real say in their destiny and will have to suffer some indignation. Savitri's realisation of this aspect is clear in her remark that "Sumati and Kamala must study up to the B.A. and not depend on marriage for their salvation " (89). If there is one positive note in the bleak ending of the novel, it is the suggestion that Savitri's experience has taught her to make sure that her daughters' choices in life are greater than hers and that their destiny will not be like hers.

The ending of the novel has caused much debate about Narayan's intentions in writing The Dark Room.

Harsharan S. Ahluwalia, who sees Narayan as a traditional writer, sticking to the traditional Indian values of endurance, detachment and withdrawal, cites the ending of The Dark Room as representative of these values.<sup>22</sup> K. V.

Surayanarayana Murti, who also sees Narayan as a traditional writer with a Hinduistic view of life, remarks that Narayan's belief in 'dharma'- correct manner of doing things according to the Shastras - is implicitly suggested in Savitri's return.<sup>23</sup> According to Murti, Narayan seems to imply that "woman is to be 'love' personified, and should

find identity in domestic harmony" which is found suggested in the ideal relationship between Janamma and her husband as well as Ponni and Mari.<sup>24</sup> But, Narayan's portrayal of Ramani's cruelty and Savitri's suffering, being the core of the novel, certainly does not suggest this. The Dark Room is a novel that portrays the victimisation of women in an orthodox Hindu setting (as Narayan himself remarks in writing his autobiography) and thus can be seen only as a novel of dissent not acceptance. As C. Paul Verghese remarks, although Narayan records the emotions of Ramani and Savitri as a detached observer and never openly reveals where his sympathies lie, it is apparent that he is pleading for a better treatment and status of the submissive Indian women who slog for their husbands and children.<sup>25</sup> Narayan also suggests that Indian women need to be educated and should, if necessary, pursue independent vocations instead of being content with their status as housewives.

Shanta Krishnaswamy, who sees Narayan as a writer with a cyclical view of life, considers the ending as defeatist. Krishnaswamy remarks that the ending "demonstrates Narayan's cyclical view of life in all its cynical colours. Why rebel if nothing changes, if underneath, the old norms persist even though they prove to be restrictive and inhibiting?"<sup>26</sup> I disagree with this perspective. Narayan should not be treated as a cynical writer just because he narrativises a failed rebellion;



Savitri fails in her attempt to rebel because of her own lack of inner resources, which is partly because she is very much the victim and product of a society that inculcates obedience, dependence and fear in women.

It may be true that Narayan's ending, on the one hand, seems a let down, an anti-climax for a self-proclaimed feminist novel. It seems to make the novel melodramatic in retrospect; a sulky wife goes away only to return to be bullied again. However, one must see the realism in the ending to fully appreciate the novel. Narayan's sense of realism and his ironic vision of life would not allow him to show an idealistic ending. Narayan's heroine does not succeed in her rebellion because that is the reality of the average Indian woman's plight. Mulk Raj Anand's idealistic heroine in Gauri, who despite starting out Sita-like in personality, successfully rebels against Indian society's illtreatment of women and triumphantly walks away from her repressive marital home into the sunrise of a new tomorrow. Unlike her, Narayan's Savitri is grounded in the reality of her personal and social limitations. Gauri is Anand's overtly political and polemic symbol for freedom from the past traditions and outmoded ways of thinking. Narayan is clearly more interested in the artistic portrayal of Savitri. His social commentary is secondary to his art and therefore it is less contrived, more subtle and indirect. It is not made at the expense of his characterisation.

Narayan's image of Savitri is certainly not that of the idealised woman of the Indian classics, who is perfect in every way; rather, it is that of an unhappy woman caught in complex circumstances that are beyond her. Savitri is not a perfect embodiment of the ideal Indian wife. She is an isolated, insecure and pathetic figure. Narayan presents Savitri as an authentic character by imbuing her with shortcomings. We become well aware of her instability, her lack of confidence, her excessive fears and her strong sense of duty towards others which makes her forget her obligation to herself.<sup>27</sup>

Savitri's short-lived rebellion is Narayan's commentary on the power of social indoctrination and of traditional attitudes of acceptance, of inaction, of bowing down to karma. Keith Garebian claims that "Savitri's return to her domestic context compromises her psychic integrity."<sup>28</sup> But, any other ending would have been implausible considering Savitri's character. Therefore, as Prasad puts it, "the conclusion to the novel is consequential. The incidents and actions anticipate it."<sup>29</sup> More significantly, Savitri's return reflects the near impossibility of a not well-educated woman finding independence in Indian society. Although Narayan's ending can be said to be traditional (when compared to Anand's ending in Gauri) and a realistic one, Savitri's return to a life of tyranny makes the victimisation of Indian women all

the more appalling. It forces us to question the treatment of women in Indian culture; the conclusion though artistically satisfying, makes one question the very basis of traditional values and norms.<sup>30</sup> Of course, Narayan is not interested in presenting the Indian woman as victim only; he is acutely aware of the individual's right and responsibility to choose in order to change one's fate. Although Savitri is meant primarily to present the Indian woman as victim in a patriarchal society and the limited choices that she has, she is also meant to paint a picture of the discontented twentieth century Indian woman who is unable or unwilling to reclaim her rights and authority as an individual because of her own entrapment in the past. Therefore, although it can be said that Savitri fails to do anything constructive in the face of oppression because of her lack of education and her sheltered life as a Brahmin woman, it is an undeniable fact that Savitri failed to rise to the occasion when freedom chanced upon her. She chose to return to Ramani, unwilling to sacrifice the comforts of her home.

However, the effect of Savitri's experience has not been entirely self-belittling. Although Savitri returns to a bullying husband and feels, "A part of me is dead" (156), all is not lost. Narayan suggests that Savitri's rebellion is not totally useless. She has definitely grown more cynical through her experience but she has also learned

something from Ponni. Ponni's advice, "Remember men are good creatures, but you must never give way to them. Be firm and they will behave" (143), is clearly the opposite of what Janamma, Hindu culture or the epics teach women in India. Ponni's advice may sound simplistic but it does prevent Savitri from falling into the same trap of blind obedience and docility:

"He is coming home in sweet mood." Her habit roused her. She was about to shout to Ranga to run to the garage, fretting and fussing so that the lord's homecoming might be smooth and without annoyance...she checked herself.

"The car has come," the children said, jumping up.

"What if it has?" Savitri asked, as the car hooted continuously in front of the garage door.

"As usual Ranga is away somewhere, and the garage door is unopened," Babu said.

"Find Ranga, or go and open the door yourself," said Savitri (155).

William Walsh points out that the Indian peasants are victims of the past and the social order and that from them Savitri learns "a lively sense of independence and disillusion." 31

The experience may have left her disillusioned with life, for she stops herself from calling out to Mari when she sees him pass by one day, but in her own way Savitri does retain

her independence by not returning to her old habits.

The main question that Narayan has raised in The Dark Room is that of "what will happen to a woman like Sita in the modern context, and how will she carve out her own destiny?"<sup>32</sup> Narayan is especially reluctant to give any set theory for women's emancipation in Indian society or any other for that matter. Unlike Anand, who outrightly advocates the dismantling of old values that restrict women, Narayan is more interested in examining the conflicting issues of tradition and modernity, questioning both with his ironic vision. Yet, after examining all the different aspects of feminine consciousness that Narayan has presented in the novel, one can say that Narayan definitely believes that the past has to be re-interpreted and the old myths need to be reformulated to suit the modern world.

Despite some artistic flaws, The Dark Room has much to offer in terms of its imagery and narration. It is certainly not tainted by an overly insistent didacticism as Keith Garebian insists.<sup>33</sup> On the contrary, the strong characterisations and dialogue make it a success in terms of raising feminist issues without being dogmatic. The Dark Room is a philosophically sound novel and a significant precursor to the feminist movement in India. Most importantly, it is a realistic, yet sympathetic and unsentimental portrayal of the Indian woman's awakening and struggle for independence.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>Vanaja Dhruvarajan, Hindu Women and the Power of Ideology (Massachusetts: Bergin & Garvey, 1989) 99-100.

<sup>2</sup>R.K. Narayan, My Days: A Memoir (Delhi: Orient, 1986) 119.

<sup>3</sup>See George Woodcock, "The Maker of Malgudi" Tamarack Review 73 (1978): 85. Woodcock calls the novel Narayan's "least successful novel" because of the attempt at social commentary. Also see V. Panduranga Rao, "The Art of R.K. Narayan," The Journal of Commonwealth Literature (July 1968) 33. Rao calls the novel "a failure" because "without his humour Narayan is out of his element". Despite the serious social commentary, there are numerous instances of humour in the novel that distinguish the novel from being a piece of didacticism. Narayan's dialogues, his characterisation of Shanta Bai, and his amusing portraits of the minor characters like Ponni, Gangu and her husband are engagingly funny. His narration of Ramani's infatuation with Shanta Bai is also filled with ironic humour.

<sup>4</sup>In Swami and Friends (1935), Swami's grandmother is the fairly typical doting grandmother. In The Bachelor of Arts (1937), we see in Malathi, the object of the hero's

fantasies, the traditional portrayal of the woman as a haunting image, beautiful, elusive and unattainable.

<sup>5</sup>Lakshmi Holmstrom, "Women Characters in R.K. Narayan's Novels" Perspectives on R.K. Narayan. ed. Atma Ram (Ghaziabad: Vimal Prakashan, 1981) 62.

<sup>6</sup>O.P. Mathur, "Two Modern Versions of the Sita Myth: Narayan and Anand," The Journal of Commonwealth Literature 21 (1986) 16-25.

<sup>7</sup>O.P. Mathur, "Two Modern Versions" 19.

<sup>8</sup>Kate Millet, Sexual Politics (New York: Doubleday, 1970) 26.

<sup>9</sup>Kate Millet, Sexual Politics 26.

<sup>10</sup>S.C. Harrex, The Fire and the Offering: The English Language Novel of India 1935-1970 (Calcutta: Writers Workshop, 1978) 69.

<sup>11</sup>Elena J. Kalinnikova, Indian English Literature: A Perspective, trans. Virendra Pal Sharma (Ghaziabad: Vimal Prakashan, 1982) 82.

<sup>12</sup>Lakshmi Holmstrom, "Women Characters" 65.

<sup>13</sup>O.P. Mathur, "Two Modern Versions" 65.

<sup>14</sup>Peter Nazareth, "R.K. Narayan: Novelist," English Studies in Africa 8 (1965) 128.

<sup>15</sup>See Manu IX, 13-17 and Manu IX, 18 quoted in "Introduction."

<sup>16</sup>Peter Nazareth, "R.K. Narayan: Novelist" 128-129.

<sup>17</sup>In reply to questions by readers as to why he does not depict sex in detail and treats sex with care and decorum, Narayan remarked that the characters are entitled to their privacy. He said: "Why should I sit by the bedside and take notes?" He also commented that after D.H. Lawrence no one has anything personal to state that is new or original. See 'To an Inquirer,' The Illustrated Weekly of India (26 May 1963) 150.

<sup>18</sup>See Manu IX, 13-17 & 18 quoted in "Introduction."

<sup>19</sup>See Manu IX, 2-3 quoted in "Introduction."

<sup>20</sup>Lakshmi Holmstrom, "Women Characters" 64.

<sup>21</sup>Lakshmi Holmstrom, "Women Characters" 65.

<sup>22</sup>Harsharan S. Ahluwalia, "Narayan's Sense of Audience" 64.

<sup>23</sup>K.V. Surayanarayana Murti, "Monkey and Hanuman: R.K. Narayan's Novels," Kohinoor in the Crown: Critical Studies in Indian English Literature (Banalore: Sterling, 1987) 133.

<sup>24</sup>K.V. Surayanarayana Murti, "Monkey and Hanuman" 133.

<sup>25</sup>C. Paul Verghese, Problems of the Indian Creative Writer in English (Bombay: Somaiya, 1971) 139.

<sup>26</sup>Shanta Krishnaswamy, The Woman In Indian Fiction 112-113.

<sup>27</sup>Shanta Krishnaswamy, The Woman in Indian Fiction 103.

<sup>28</sup>Keith Garebian, "Strategy and Theme in the Art of R.K. Narayan," ARIEL 15 (Jan 1984) 77..



<sup>29</sup>Hari Mohan Prasad, "Shades in the Prism: An Analysis of The Dark Room," Perspectives on R.K. Narayan. ed. Atma Ram (Ghaziabad: Vimal Prakashan, 1981) 88.

<sup>30</sup>O.P. Mathur, "Two Modern Versions" 24.

<sup>31</sup>William Walsh, R.K. Narayan: A Critical Appreciation (London: Heinemann, 1982) 46.

<sup>32</sup>O.P. Mathur, "Two Modern Versions" 24.

<sup>33</sup>Keith Garebian, "Strategy and Theme" 76.

## Chapter 2: The Guide

When the modern women achieve a position of dominance and take on norms or traits of aggression and independence, their unconscious exertions drive them on to suffer as men would suffer. Being but human,...they suffer the weakness of the flesh, the inequity of the law. They are drawn by their desires, human and biological, and restrained by some rule of conduct (Shanta Krishnaswamy, The Women in Indian Fiction in English).<sup>1</sup>

While The Dark Room (1938) deals with the Indian woman as victim in a patriarchal society, The Guide (1958) presents an entirely different picture of the Indian woman. While Savitri of The Dark Room represents the passive feminine consciousness, Rosie of The Guide represents the newly awakened feminine consciousness. As O.P. Mathur puts it, Rosie is the reverse of "the image of a traditional Indian woman, the keeper of the hearth and the bringer-up of her children, the role that Savitri is made to play much against her wishes and dreams."<sup>2</sup>

Rosie is worlds apart from the uneducated, traditional Savitri. An educated woman with an M.A. in Economics, ambitious and independent, she contrasts sharply

with the weak-willed Savitri of The Dark Room, as well as other women that appear in the novels after The Dark Room, such as the apathetic, long-suffering wife of the adulterous Sampath in Mr Sampath- The Printer of Malgudi(1949), and the self-effacing Margayya's wife in The Financial Expert (1953), who lives exclusively for the sake of her son. In moving away from the image of the passive feminine, Narayan creates and examines Rosie, not just as a wife but as a woman, independent of her social roles, with her own sexual desires and artistic ambitions, her strengths and weaknesses. However, through Rosie, Narayan shows that this newly awakened sense of self in the modern woman is characterized by the conflicting demands for personal freedom and the need for societal acceptance.

While Savitri sowed the seeds of rebellion against repression in The Dark Room, it is Rosie who flouts the rules of conventions and is faced with the consequences of exercising her choice. In his portrayal of Rosie, Narayan fully explores the awakened and active feminine consciousness with all its inherent conflicts which emerge in the pursuit of personal goals. Rosie has a divided, ambivalent psyche, placed as she is between the modernity of the present and the traditions of the past. In The Dark Room, Narayan employs two sets of characters to examine the different levels of consciousness in Indian women, but in The Guide, he explores almost the whole range of feminine

consciousness through one woman who contains the polarity of the past and present within herself and attempts to resolve it.<sup>3</sup> Rosie/Nalini symbolizes the conflict in the modern Indian woman and her two names represent this.

The very first thing that we note about Rosie is her non-Indian name. Unlike the traditional heroine of The Dark Room, who is named after a virtuous Hindu woman, Rosie is given a name alien to Indians, showing her modernity and western education as well as her potential for deviance from the norms of her society. Raju says: "Why did she call herself Rosie? She did not come from a foreign land. She was just an Indian, who could have done well with Devi, Meena, Lalitha, or any one of the thousand names we have in our country. She chose to call herself Rosie" (7). The word "chose," though used casually by Raju, serves to show the exercise of choice on Rosie's part, which is a predominant feature of active feminine consciousness.

However, according to Raju, for all her modern education and liberal lifestyle, Rosie is a traditional looking woman: "Don't imagine on hearing her name that she wore a short skirt or cropped her hair. She looked just the orthodox dancer that she was. She wore saris of bright hues and gold lace, had curly hair which she braided and beflowered, wore diamond earrings and had a heavy gold necklace"(7). At once we notice the dichotomy of tradition and modernity in Rosie's appearance and name; her name is

incongruous to her Indian appearance.

There are faint echoes of another modern woman, Shanta Bai of The Dark Room, in Rosie; both are educated and beautiful. The effect that Rosie's beauty has on Raju is somewhat like the effect that Shanta Bai's appearance has on Ramani; they both get lyrical. Raju's description of Rosie is nothing short of poetic:

She was not very glamorous, if that is what you expect, but she did have a figure, a slight and slender one, beautifully fashioned, eyes that sparkled, a complexion not white, but dusky, which made her only half-visible - as if you saw her through a film of tender coconut juice. Forgive me if you find me waxing poetic (56).

However, the similarity between the two women ends there.

In The Dark Room, Shanta Bai cynically comments that education alone is not enough for women; she lacks the moral fibre to persevere in a male-dominated world and she takes the easy way out, using her sex appeal to survive. Although Rosie, has no choice but to turn to Raju for help initially, she has the strength of character and determination to survive after her husband leaves her and she does so with her artistic talent and hard work, not her good looks. Thus, Haydn Moore Williams' comment that Narayan's novels are full of femmes fatales like Shanta Bai and Rosie is somewhat misleading<sup>4</sup> because Rosie is an entirely self-motivated and later completely self-reliant woman.

The description of Rosie as "only half-visible - as if you saw her through a film of tender coconut juice"(56), also lends a sense of mystery and ambiguity to her person. This mystery is further heightened by Narayan's use of the snake motif in association with Rosie throughout the novel. The first thing that Rosie asks Raju the moment she sets foot in Malgudi is, "Can you show me a cobra - a king cobra it must be - which can dance to the music of a flute" (55). Holmstrom notes that Rosie's relationship with Raju begins and ends with the snake dance.<sup>5</sup> Raju at first finds the snake dance repulsive, but when he sees Rosie imitating the cobra in a dance, it is sufficient to convince Raju that she was "the greatest dancer of the century" (58). When Raju's mother comes to hear of the incident, she is convinced that Rosie is a snake-worshipper, one of those "snake women" (59). On the day that Raju's mother leaves her home, protesting her son's relationship with Rosie, she calls Rosie a viper and tells her: "The moment he set eyes on you he was gone. On the very day I heard him mention the 'serpent girl', my heart sank. I knew nothing good would come of it"(150). She is convinced that Rosie is the reason for Raju's financial and moral ruin. On the day that Raju is arrested for forgery, Rosie performs the snake dance. Later, Raju even thinks of warning Mani, Rosie's assistant, about her seductiveness and destructiveness.

It is true that the snake is feared for its

destructiveness, and that it represents evil, seduction and temptation in Judaeo-Christian literature, but as Heinrich Zimmer points out, there are serpent princesses celebrated for their cleverness and charm in South Indian mythology<sup>6</sup>. It is no accident that Narayan has picked the snake to symbolize the ambiguous Rosie. Rosie indirectly causes Raju's financial ruin since Raju is so enamoured with her that he lets his business slide. Raju explains to Velan, "I was obsessed with thoughts of Rosie" (101)...I was tired of it all...Even my finances were unreal to me...The only reality in my life and consciousness was Rosie" (103). The porter and the Seth refer to Rosie as the "shaitan" or devil that has taken control of him. Although Rosie may be considered as a destructive influence in an early phase of Raju's life, he later benefits from her company in many other ways; her artistic talent transports him to a higher aesthetic awareness. Raju, despite his passion for her, seeing her dance, comments: "I could honestly declare that while I watched her perform, my mind was free, for once, from all carnal thought. I viewed her as pure abstraction" (110). Rosie also makes him wealthy through the medium of her dance; he is happy in being her impresario and lover. But it is his own stupidity and possessiveness that causes him to forge Rosie's signature and end up in prison.

The snake represents earthiness and passion. It also becomes a mythic abstraction in its association with

the Hindu God, Siva, whose neck it adorns. The association between Rosie and the two symbolic aspects of the snake is obvious<sup>7</sup>; Rosie's last performance that Raju attends is also a snake dance, (which Raju watches as if "for the first time") in which the music brought out the "mystic quality" of the cobra and "lifted the cobra out of its class of an underground reptile into a creature of grace and divinity and an ornament of the gods"(188). The snake becomes the perfect symbol for Rosie's ambivalent/complex nature: the down to earth Indian woman who wants to be a good wife and the passionate woman who has an affair with Raju, as well as the dancer who is transformed into "pure abstraction". Lakshmi Holmstrom says that two things pull against her role as wife: her need for passion and her need to dance, both symbolised in the snake and the snake dance.<sup>8</sup> Narayan presents Rosie as an ambiguous woman. We cannot definitively say that Rosie is a siren or temptress nor can we say that she is the innocent victim of circumstances; she is, at different times, different things. She is not meant to be an absolute abstraction of feminine wiles or virtues but rather a human being imbued with creative subjectivity.

Throughout the novel, there is a conflict within Rosie's consciousness: the tension between the life of passion and art and the need for respectability and societal acceptance shown in her marriage to Marco.<sup>9</sup> Although she was born into the Devadasi caste, Rosie was fortunate. Like



Savitri of The Dark Room, who did not want her daughters to rely solely on marriage as a form of security or as a career, Rosie's mother tried to change her daughter's destiny by giving her the gift of education: "A different life was planned for me by my mother. She put me to school early in life; I studied well. I took my master's degree in Economics" (73). However, Rosie as well as the other female relatives do not see education as a source of salvation for a woman but rather as a stepping stone to marriage which alone can erase the stigma of her caste:

One day I saw in our paper an advertisement - the usual kind you may have seen: 'Wanted an educated, good-looking girl to marry a rich bachelor of academic interests. No caste restrictions; good looks and university degree essential.'...But all the women in my family were impressed, excited that a man like him was coming to marry one of our class, and it was decided that if it was necessary to give up our traditional art, it was worth the sacrifice. He had a big house, a motor car, he was a man of high social standing; he had a house outside Madras, he was living in it all alone, no family at all; he lived with his books and papers" (74).

Rosie's ambivalent nature becomes clear here; although filled with the individualism that comes from Western education, she is easily persuaded to marry Marco, showing a

relative lack of free will in the choice of a husband. Though educated and modern in every other way, Rosie shows old-fashioned views of marriage and a woman's status. She marries Marco for a better life, getting economic security and social prestige at the expense of sacrificing her first love - dancing.

However Rosie's motivation for marrying Marco was not purely a materialistic one. It is obvious that her decision to marry Marco is not based on a purely pragmatic view of life; rather, it is a desperate act by a woman who wants to shed the social stigma of her caste. No matter how educated she may be, she would always be viewed as a Devadasi, a woman of lowly status: "We are viewed as public women, ..We are not considered respectable, we are not considered civilised" (73). In presenting Rosie as a Devadasi, Narayan also tackles the issue of caste-consciousness that is very strong even in modern India, making the burden of women twice-fold, as they struggle against both sexual and caste discrimination. Rosie represents the plight of the Devadasi women, who are by definition temple dancers but who have generally been viewed as prostitutes. That Narayan has chosen a woman to show the issue of caste in Indian society is quite revealing. The Devadasi caste is different from all others in the sense that it is the only one that has evolved on the basis of sex and is exclusive to the female sex: "I belong to a family

traditionally dedicated to the temples as dancers; my mother, my grandmother, and. before her, her mother" (73). It is the females who are brought up to serve as temple dancers and then perhaps as prostitutes. A Devadasi woman symbolizes the extreme case of a societal role that a patriarchal society places on a woman by virtue of her sex. Therefore, Rosie obviously marries Marco to get out of the social boundaries of sex and caste that circumscribed her being and limited her choices.

Unfortunately, by choosing marriage to Marco, Rosie falls into a greater pit, one that circumscribes her within the boundaries of the role of a housewife. Although Marco appeared to be a perfect match, with his wealth, education and no mother to meddle in their affairs, Rosie is unhappy: "I'd have preferred any kind of mother-in-law, if it had meant one real life husband" (74). Marco is a boring self-absorbed intellectual. His neglect of Rosie is clear when he takes off to the caves without her, totally absorbed in his own world and unmindful of Rosie's boredom, he pours over his notes almost unaware of her presence for weeks when they visit Malgudi.

Though Marco appears to have been generous in choosing to marry a Devadasi woman, he has his own selfish reasons for this. Raju notes that "Marco was just impractical, an absolutely helpless man...All practical affairs of life seemed impossible to him; such a simple

matter as finding food or shelter or buying a railway ticket seemed to him a monumental job" (99). Being an impractical academic, negligent of his household, he seems to have hoped that Rosie with an M.A. in Economics would be able to run the household. Good looks and education were his criteria for a wife. This of course betrays his traditional concept of a wife, one who takes care of the house and looks good. But as Raju points out: "Perhaps he married out of a desire to have someone care for his practical life, but unfortunately his choice was wrong - this girl herself was a dreamer if ever there was one" (99). C.D.Narasimhaiah points out that what Marco really wanted was a wife like his servant Joseph- "a wonderful man...I don't see him, I don't hear him, but he does everything for me, at the right time. That's how I want things to be".<sup>10</sup> Marco is also very condescending toward Rosie about her artistic and intellectual interests. When Rosie tells her husband: "I have so many ideas I'd like to try just as you are trying to..." (130) he cuts her off. When she offers to sing the musical notations on the walls of the cave, he undermines her efforts by saying: "I doubt if you can. It's more difficult than you imagine (130). We wonder why Marco wanted a graduate for a wife.

Marco appears to be liberal in terms of caste in marrying Rosie but he has his own share of prejudices. He totally disapproves of Rosie's interest in Indian dance,

perhaps because it reminds him of her background and caste, which he expects her to have left behind her. Rosie's love for the traditional dance form, Bharat Natyam, which she initially stifles for the sake of security, resurges. She desires to continue with her dancing but also cares for the respectability that her marriage to Marco grants her. Thus, she is torn between the need for personal freedom and social approval. Dance is in her blood and she dreams of practicing and performing it. In this sense she is quite attached to her Indian cultural roots, and she is much more 'Indian' than Marco. He seems to think that Indian dance is a cheap art form and very embarrassing; for all his education, he sees Rosie's dancing as "street acrobatics," while Raju, although not as educated, says: "when she indicated the lotus with her fingers I could almost hear the ripple of water around it" (110). Marco's criticism of Rosie's dance is caustic and nasty:

An acrobat on a trapeze goes on doing the same thing all his life; well your dance is like that. What is there intelligent or creative in it? You repeat your tricks all your life. We watch a monkey perform, not because it is artistic but because it is a monkey that is doing it (130).

Marco kills Rosie's instinct for life and love of art by denying her both of them.<sup>11</sup> As an archeologist, Marco is only interested in dead art forms such as the sculptures and

paintings of temples and caves. Raju makes an insightful comment about Marco when he says: "Dead and decaying things seemed to loosen his tongue and fire his imagination, rather than things that lived and moved and swung their limbs" (71). John Rothfork suggests that Marco who discovers unknown ancient cave paintings represents the splendour of an Indian past that is no longer vital; in contrast, Rosie symbolizes the living heritage of India, which is experienced not merely studied.<sup>12</sup> While Marco preferred to stare at cold stone walls, Rosie's fascination is with living things. Her sensual delight in life is reported by Raju: "She liked to loaf in the market, eat in a crowded hotel, wander about, see a cinema - those common pleasures seem to have been beyond her reach all these days" (76). This aspect of Rosie's character is further suggested by her association with snakes. Just as the snake seeks the eternal renewal of life by repeatedly sloughing off its skin, Rosie, as the dancer, symbolizes life in all its variety, by its constant motion. Marco only symbolizes death by his interest in static art. Rothfork further remarks: "The archeologist suggests the Aryan, the West, science and intellect. Whereas Rosie suggests the Dravidian, the primal, the mystic."<sup>13</sup> Rosie's primal instinct is displayed by her lack of fear of darkness and her fascination with the wilderness that surrounds the hill house. "This was like heaven to those who loved wild

surroundings and to watch the game, which prowled outside the glass at night. The girl was in ecstasy. Our house was surrounded by rich vegetation. She ran like a child from plant to plant with cries of joy" (65). She tells Raju, "I'm prepared to spend the whole night here...Here at least we have silence and darkness, welcome things, and something to wait for out of that darkness" (68).

It is obviously not just Rosie's love for dancing that creates a rift between her and Marco. She confides in Raju: "When we are alone and start talking, we argue and quarrel over everything. We don't agree on most matters, and then he leaves me alone and comes back and we are all right..." (72). Clearly, Rosie and Marco are entirely different from each other and this puts a great pressure on their marriage. Unlike Savitri of The Dark Room, Rosie is educated and has opinions of her own and is not afraid to voice them, even though her opinions generally clash with Marco's. This, of course, is a complete reversal of the traditional Indian marriage that Janamma of The Dark Room spoke of, where the husband is always right and the wife has no voice of her own. Unlike Savitri who retreats to her dark room in frustration, Rosie voices her unhappiness to Marco. Surely Narayan is making a comment on the failure of the traditional Indian "arranged" marriage in meeting the needs and expectations of a modern Indian woman.

The issue of arranged marriage is brought into

focus through Velan's problem with his sister who ran away from home to avoid getting married to a cousin. Velan treats it as a miracle when his sister agrees to get married after her discussion with Raju. But it is clear to us why she did so, and why she told everyone that Raju was her savior. Raju, after all, tells her in a mystical fashion: "What must happen must happen; no power on earth or heaven can change its course, just as no one can change the course of that river" (18). He appeals to her Hindu sense of fatalism and demands female obedience to which she had been conditioned throughout her life. She realizes the utter futility of trying to rebel and gives in to fate or karma. While it is easier for the simple-minded women like Velan's sister to accept their lot in a match-made, traditional marriage where the woman is expected to accept whatever dissatisfaction she may have, it is quite a trial for an educated, modern Indian woman like Rosie, who has a mind of her own.

It is Rosie's love for dancing, over her husband's objections, that leads to her relationship with Raju. Raju relates to Velan how he helped Rosie to actualize her passion for dance, and how he used it to his advantage:

I told her at the first opportunity what a great dancer she was, and how she fostered our cultural traditions, and it pleased her...Anyone likes to hear flattering



sentiments, and more than others, I suppose dancers. They like to be told every hour of the day how well they keep their steps. I praised her art whenever I could snatch a moment alone with her and whisper in her ear, out of range of that husband of hers (7).

When Raju steps in to make peace between Marco and Rosie during one of their quarrels, he uses the opportunity to whisper these words in Rosie's ear: "All night I didn't sleep,...the way you danced, your form and figure haunted me all night"(62). He manages to flatter her into coming with them, saying: "You may come out as you are and no one will mind it...Who would decorate a rainbow?" (62). Through this incident, Rosie's weakness - her egotistical nature- becomes obvious to Raju. But Rosie reacts to Raju's attraction to her with a queer mixture of excitement and guilt. Out of guilt for enjoying Raju's attention, she tries to act more like a traditional wife the next time they are back at the hill house with Marco, exclaiming: "Nobody should get up till I call. I'll have coffee ready for everyone"(65). At dinner, she fusses over Raju and Marco, saying "No, no. Let me serve you both, and I will be the last to eat, like a good housewife" (66). But when Raju tries to serve himself she forcibly snatches the dish from his hand, touching him just enough to excite him. Rosie's attention to so-called wifely duties to serve the men, is a parody of the way a traditional woman like Savitri would wait for her husband

before having her own dinner. While Savitri's traditional act of waiting to serve her husband excited her husband, Rosie's behaviour, ironically, is meant to excite not her husband but her admirer.

Realizing Rosie's egotistical nature and the strained relationship between Rosie and Marco, Raju exploits the situation to the fullest. Rosie becomes trapped by her own ego and her emotional needs. Raju's flattery of her dance movements and appreciation of her art is what finally makes her succumb to his attentions:

"...I spoke my mind. I praised her dancing. I spoke out my love, but sandwiched it between my appreciations of her art. I spoke of her as an artist in one breath, and continued in the next as a sweetheart. Something like, "What a glorious snake dance! Oh, I keep thinking of you all night. World's artist number one! Don't you see how I am pining for you every hour!" (73).

It is by praising Rosie's artistic talents that Raju wins her heart. Raju clearly understands Rosie's divided feelings about her responsibility as wife and her obsessive interest in her art: "Her art and her husband could not find a place in her thoughts at the same time; one drove the other out" (107). Raju uses her interest in art to divert her attention from Marco and dissipate any guilt feelings

she has: "I found out the clue to her affection and utilized it to the utmost" (107).

Rosie's affair with Raju and her sexual liberation is motivated by Raju's appeal to her person as a whole. Rosie is motivated by her ego and her artistic needs to change her unhappy marriage in a way that Savitri never was. While Savitri's act of leaving her home was a rebellious and self-renouncing one, Rosie's act of infidelity to her husband is a self-satisfying one. Narayan seems to be making an important point about woman's independence here. He obliquely hints that the ideal independent woman may have as much egotism and as much aggression as the tyrannical patriarch they criticise.<sup>14</sup> Therefore, Rosie is more like Ramani than Savitri of The Dark Room. Like Ramani she tries to have the cake and eat it too; she wants Raju because he fulfills her sexual desires and flatters her ego, and yet she wants her marriage with Marco to work out. Narayan's reasons for choosing to portray Rosie as a performing artist and an educated woman may be to show the growth and strength of the modern Indian woman's consciousness. The modern Indian woman is no longer the self-sacrificing figure who recedes into the background, putting her husband and family's needs before her own. Rosie does not hesitate to accept the flattering remarks about her figure and art that she so badly needs. Nor does she hesitate to have an affair to fulfill her sexual needs

that are not met by her dull and dry husband.

Rosie is a queer/ironic mixture of tradition and modernity. She plans on getting a Sanskrit pundit to teach her: "I shall also want him to read for me episodes from Ramayana and Mahabharata, because they are a treasure house, and we can pick up so many new ideas for new compositions from them" (108). While Savitri and Janamma of The Dark Room read the sacred Hindu texts to learn certain moral lessons about woman's virtues, Rosie is interested in them only as an artist. It is ironical that Rosie plans to use the Ramayana that inculcates in women virtues of chastity as well as obedience to their husbands. Rosie wants to fulfill her dream of performing, despite her husband's disapproval.

However, Rosie suffers from an inner conflict, torn as she is in her quest for personal fulfilment and her sense of moral responsibility. Her traditional upbringing becomes clear when soon after her affair with Raju begins, she feels pangs of guilt and tries to make up for her betrayal. "She was showing extra solicitude for him nowadays. She fussed a great deal over him. It was all the same to him... She arranged his room. She spoke to Joseph about his food" (100). From the very beginning, her divided feelings about the affair are obvious. Rosie's guilt feelings do not allow her to be at ease or be casual about her affair with Raju. Raju relates how she would suddenly free herself from his embrace/ caresses and say: "Tell

Gaffur to bring the car. I want to go and see him" (104).

The reasons for her guilt become clear when she refers to a wife's duty toward her husband: "After all he is my husband.

I have to respect him. After all...After all...Is this

right what I am doing? ...is it not a wife's duty to guard and help her husband, whatever the way in which he deals

with her?" (105). The indelible influence that an orthodox Hindu upbringing can have on the Indian woman's

consciousness is made clear by Rosie's crisis of conscience.

Despite her education, her sexual liberation, and despite

their incompatibility, Rosie feels a sense of obligation and duty toward Marco as his wife. Despite her dedication to

her art, she is conditioned by Dharma or duty appropriate to one's role in life. She is expected to conform to the

traditional feminine model, and thus develops an ambivalent attitude towards self-assertion.<sup>15</sup> Whenever she feels pangs

of guilt about her affair with Raju, her husband's needs

seem to matter more to her than her own frustration in the

marriage, his careless treatment of her, and even her strong

desire to perform. Her ambivalence becomes more apparent

when Marco discovers her affair with Raju; Rosie completely

reverts back to her social persona as a Hindu wife:

I realized I had committed an enormous sin...My mind was greatly troubled. I didn't want anything more in life than to make peace with him. I did not want to dance. I felt lost...I was in terror. I was filled

with some sort of pity for him too-... I stood like a prisoner at the bar. "I have come to apologize sincerely. I want to say I will do whatever you ask me to do. I committed a blunder..."(132).

Because of her cultural conditioning, Rosie suffers from a crisis of moral rectitude. This brings out Narayan's concern about modern human beings grappling with the issues of freedom and responsibility, the conflicts that emerge as a result of one's social roles and one's personal responsibility to oneself.

Rosie continues to suffer from this double net of consciousness even after she has lived with Raju for some time and has found fame as a classical dancer. When Marco publishes his book, Rosie cuts out a photograph of him from a magazine and keeps it on her dresser. Her view of Marco who so cruelly deserts her is completely reversed: "...he is my husband... I may be mistaken in my own judgement of him. After all, he had been kind to me" (179). Despite being treated by him so shabbily, she still continues to think of him as her husband. Her ambivalent attitude toward Marco is baffling when seen from the modern perspective but becomes clear when viewed from the traditional Indian perspective on marriage. Despite her new-found independence and artistic success, she still seems to be bound by culturally-imposed feelings about her marriage to Marco; she sees marriage as eternal. This explains why she never asks for a divorce

from Marco.

Although Rosie never completely gets over her feelings of guilt and remorse, blaming herself for the breakup of her marriage, Narayan shows understanding for Rosie's plight and his portrayal of Marco as a boring, lifeless, cruel, unforgiving and heartless person is surely meant to show that she is not entirely to blame. Rosie's apologies fall on deaf ears as Marco is totally unforgiving; she "followed him, day after day, like a dog- waiting on his grace...like a shadow, leaving aside all..pride and self-respect"(133). He ignores her completely except to say, "You are a woman who will go to bed with anyone that flatters your antics" (134). When he completes his research, he packs his bag and leaves her stranded at the railway station, telling her "I have no ticket for you" (134). Though a major part of the story hinges on the illicit affair between Rosie and Raju, Rosie remains above criticism.<sup>16</sup> In fact Narayan goes out of his way to defend Rosie. Narayan, who generally does not take sides with any of his characters, stands steadfastly by Rosie; Rosie is almost completely free from Narayan's ironic handling.<sup>17</sup> Narasimhaiah argues that Narayan shows Rosie's remorse and atonement for her digression from the strict Hindu code of behaviour because he wishes to present the "very picture of ideal womanhood inspite of her loss of chastity" and that by his attempt to "preserve Rosie from inner taint Narayan

seems to be affirming what has been hailed in the Indian tradition as the Feminine Principle in life".<sup>18</sup> It is indeed true that Narayan refrains from making any criticism of Rosie, but it is not true that Narayan does this in order to make Rosie a picture of perfect womanhood or to elevate the "Feminine Principle". Rosie is not a perfect woman of classical literature and Narayan has no intention of portraying her as such. In portraying her as a woman of the Devadasi caste, Narayan shows Rosie's faint resemblance to Madhavi, the Devadasi woman in the Tamil epic, Silappathikaram. The difference, however, lies in the fact that while in the epic it is the man, Kovalan, who abandons his wife for Madhavi, in The Guide it is the woman who betrays her husband and has an affair with another man. It seems that Narayan wishes to show the changing nature of male-female relationships, and the fact that adultery is no longer a male privilege. Rosie has come a long way from the Indian women like Sita and Savitri of the Hindu epics, who are revered for their loyalty to their husbands. Rosie is a modern woman of independent India, and her extra-marital affair with Raju is an expression of the freedom and independence of the new Indian woman. Rosie's feelings of guilt and atonement are not meant as Narayan's attempts to uphold or promote traditional view of women as symbols of perfection. Rather, they are only symptomatic of her mind in a state of newly-found independence. The conflict in her



consciousness stems from the exercise of her new sense of freedom in a traditional society which has always held the belief in feminine virtues of chastity and loyalty.

Raju's mother can be seen as representing the alter-ego of Rosie, the modern Indian woman caught between two worlds. Raju's conservative mother is shocked at Rosie's arrival and her very first question upon meeting Rosie, "who has come with you Rosie?" (124) reveals her orthodox frame of mind. This, of course, recalls Manu's Hindu law that women should be guarded and never left to stray on their own.<sup>19</sup> Raju's mother's sense of amazement at Rosie: "Girls today! How courageous you are! In our days we wouldn't go to the street corner without an escort. And I have been to the market only once in my life, when Raju's father was alive" reveals the vast difference in the two women's lives. Raju's mother is full of admiration for Rosie's education: "Then you lack nothing in the world. You are not like us uneducated women. You will get on anywhere" (125). Yet, her view of Rosie changes as soon as she finds out about Rosie's background. To Raju's mother, education is good for women's status- it shows potential for independence. But, this independence must not be exercised to the extent of forgetting traditional values like obedience to one's husband. Rebelliousness against tradition is seen as the evil influence of Western education. She tells Raju, "Why can't she go to her husband

and fall at his feet? You know, living with a husband is no joke, as these modern girls imagine. No husband worth the name was ever conquered by powder and lipstick alone" (136). A Hindu wife's virtues of patience and humility are, in Raju's mother's eyes, the key to keeping a marriage life-long. In her view, the issues of pride and ego were non-existent for women:

After a few days she began to allude to the problems of husband and wife whenever she spoke to Rosie, and filled the time with anecdotes about husbands; good husbands, bad husbands, reasonable husbands, unreasonable ones, savage ones, slightly deranged ones, moody ones, and so on and so forth; but it was always the wife, by her doggedness, perseverance, and patience, that brought him round. She quoted numerous mythological stories of Savitri, Seeta, and all the well-known heroines. Apparently it was general talk but my mother's motives were naively clear (137).

Raju's mother's strong belief in Pativratty and her references to Seeta and Savitri remind us of Janamma in The Dark Room. She is clearly meant to present the other side of the picture in this novel which examines the divided psyche of the modern Indian woman.

Unlike Savitri of The Dark Room, who retreats to her dark room when things do not go right, Rosie becomes more determined to get what she had wanted all along - to be

a classical dancer. She practices every morning for three hours. Her experience with Marco seems to have toughened her resolution to survive. Her seriousness about her art becomes obvious to Raju as she would push him away whenever he tried to distract her from her practice: "She was a devoted artist; her passion for physical love was falling into place and had ceased to be a primary obsession with her" (144). Narayan seems to emphasise the growth in Rosie's consciousness from a realization of her sexual potential to artistic and aesthetic awakening, leading to her search for a spiritual fulfilment. Raju happily enjoys their new-found freedom especially after his mother leaves with her brother. They make love constantly, but Rosie also insists that Raju find her a chance to perform. Rosie's self-motivation and dedication to her art are abundantly clear.

This new phase of her life is marked by the change in her name from Rosie to Nalini. Her old life as Rosie is relegated to her past. As Nalini, the talented classical dancer she achieves fame, public adulation and great wealth. Unlike Raju who lets fame and fortune get to his head, Nalini accepts her wealth and fame "with a touch of resignation rather than bouncing contentment" (172). Although Raju tries to make her elite and exclusive, she tells him: "I never care for that sort of superiority" (169). Paradoxically, the more she goes outside ordinary

social rules, the more traditional her values become.<sup>20</sup> Though they could easily employ a cook, Rosie says "I must not lose touch with my womanly duties" (163). She is never snobbish and readily makes herself available to other artists, music teachers, and all who need her artistic help, thinking that these people have "the blessing of Goddess Saraswathi on them" (168). Raju, however, gets greedy and makes her perform till she feels like "the bulls yoked to an oil crusher ...going round and round and round, in a circle, without a beginning or an end"(179). She apparently begins to realize that Raju is exploiting her. She tells Raju: "I feel like one of those parrots in a cage taken around village fairs, or a performing monkey as [Marco] used to say" (180). She gradually gets tired of Raju's commercial and possessive behaviour, but she accepts it with a sense of detachment and resignation.

When Marco, in his desire to keep all his business matters in order, sends Rosie the release papers for her jewellery box, Raju forges her signature. Apart from his greed, Raju wants to keep this information from Rosie; he is afraid of losing Rosie, and he suspects that this act of generosity on Marco's part may lead to Rosie and Marco's reunification. Raju's act of forgery leads to his arrest but Rosie's reaction to the whole thing is a fatalistic one - "I felt all along you were not doing right things. This is Karma. What can we do?" (192). Her

comment to Raju recalls her earlier statement regarding Marco's desertion of her: "Well, it is just as well. We were not meant to be in each other's company"(134). Rosie's deeply ingrained Hindu belief in karma and fate resurfaces. Rosie seems to accept losing the men in her life with a Hinduistic sense of fatalism. Despite all her education, modernity, wealth, change in lifestyle and sexual liberation, Nalini the dancer is still basically Rosie of the Devadasi class.<sup>21</sup> Despite her dedication to her art, she is still bound by her belief in karma and dharma. C.Paul Verghese calls Rosie a typical Indian heroine because in spite of the fact that she is highly individualistic, she is essentially Indian in her attitude of resignation.<sup>22</sup> Thus she is quite detached in her pronouncement that Raju has reaped what he had sowed. She, who used to break down on small issues, now simply accepts the grave reality of Raju's error with a sense of detachment.

However, Raju's arrest serves as a catalyst in the further awakening of Rosie's consciousness. She loses all respect for and interest in Raju. He becomes a mere "hanger-on in the house". She never spoke to him "except as to a tramp she had salvaged" (194). She runs the household and oversees the manager. Although she scrapes together all her money to help Raju fight his legal battle, she does so "in a sort of cold, businesslike manner" (194). She works very hard, taking on many engagements to pay for Raju's

lawyer but in return for all this, she demands her freedom: "If I have to pawn my last possession, I'll do it to save you from jail. But once it's over, leave me once for all; that's all I ask. Forget me. Leave me to live or die, as I choose; that's all" (197). It is only after Raju's imprisonment that Rosie truly finds herself and becomes independent and totally self-reliant. She carries on with her successful career as a dancer. It is this determination to pursue the career she loves and to lead her life on her own terms, despite obstacles, that differentiates her from women like Savitri of The Dark Room whose identity is limited to that of being a wife and mother. By taking up the challenge of a specific career, she frees herself from the twisted vision that cultural conditioning had imposed on her.<sup>23</sup> She realises that she does not need Raju or Marco. Once liberated, she would never subordinate herself to another human being, and in hindsight Raju confesses:

I feared that, in spite of her protestations to the contrary, she would never stop dancing. She would not be able to stop. She would go from strength to strength. I knew, looking at the way she was going about her business, that she would manage - whether I was inside the bars or outside; whether her husband approved of it or not. Neither Marco nor I had any place in her life, which had its own sustaining

vitality and which she herself had underestimated all along (198).

Although Raju is the protagonist of the novel, Rosie is not merely his love interest. She is a character on whom Narayan spends considerable creative effort. Ram Dial sees Rosie and Raju's mother as significant characters in the anima formation of Raju and his process of individuation<sup>24</sup>. Dial contends that Raju's mother presents only the social, maternal and self-sacrificing aspects of the anima, but Rosie has a creative role in the psychic and spiritual development of Raju:

In Raju's unconscious and archetypal image of a woman, she [the mother] presents only a partial aspect. Hence the unconscious urge to find the remaining and opposing aspect of the feminine - woman who is young, beautiful, temptress and seductress rolled into one - an embodiment, as it were of a "faithless Eros." And Raju finds this aspect of the anima in the person of Rosie. His strong attraction toward Rosie, therefore is the expression of his innate desire to come in contact with a woman who may seem to show the possibility of fulfilment of his anima needs.<sup>25</sup>

We may view Rosie as Raju's anima but, Narayan seems to be equally concerned with developing Rosie as a complex personality and as an individual with a strong self-identity. She cannot be seen only as an instrument for the

anima-formation of the hero, the other half of Raju's self that is needed for his individuation. The treatment of woman as an embodiment of the 'feminine principle' that is needed to promote wholeness in the male is what Simone de Beauvoir refers to as the appropriation of the Other.<sup>26</sup> Narayan's portrayal of Rosie is very unlike that of Raja Rao's presentation of Savithri in The Serpent and the Rope. In The Serpent and the Rope, Rama's love for Savithri is tantric; it transforms him into a higher level of being<sup>27</sup>. Rama quotes the famous saying of Yagnyavalkya to his wife: "The husband does not love the wife for the wife's sake, the husband loves the wife for the sake of the Self in her"<sup>28</sup>. Rao's treatment reduces Savithri into a symbol or a metaphysical principle. In Rao's presentation, Savithri is doomed to be the spiritual helpmate of the creative male. Rama tells Savithri to marry Pratap to live her life according to her Dharma, despite their love for each other: "be a wife, Savithri, a wife. A true wife."<sup>29</sup> Rao mythologizes the Indian woman and treats her as an abstraction.

Narayan, however, does not treat Rosie in this way. Rosie is not merely the medium through which the hero attains moksha or salvation. Viney Kirpal suggests that Narayan has presented Raju's life as an archetypal four-stage journey or ashramas, consisting of being a student, householder, hermit and the ascetic, and that leads to



Raju's moksha.<sup>30</sup> Kirpal sees Rosie as essential to Raju's development in the stage of the 'householder'; Raju's life with Rosie implies the individual's yearning for kama (pleasure) which has to be overcome.<sup>31</sup> However, Rosie is portrayed as a much more complex character; she has a life of her own and she actualizes herself in spite of Raju.

Rosie is examined by Narayan not only as the female in relation to the male (Marco, her husband and Raju, her lover) but also as an individual in relation to her own reality. Narayan examines the problems that surface when the ambitions and desires of a modern woman like Rosie conflict with a conservative society like India.<sup>32</sup> With the awakening of feminine consciousness, comes the gradual reduction of the male figure in Narayan's fiction, perhaps reflecting the changing social, economic and political roles of men and women in Indian society.<sup>33</sup> The new Indian woman, despite her conflicting beliefs, grows into a much stronger person than her male counterpart. Rosie represents a sort of role model for modern Indian women.

Rosie achieves independence and success in the end, but A.V. Krishna Rao sees her return to dancing as a failure on her part to get out of her destiny as a Devadasi.<sup>34</sup> Rao believes that Narayan presents Rosie as "typical of a traditional form of culture" and that her "fulfilment lies in the disinterested performance of the

classical dance."<sup>35</sup> Narayan does not wish to present Rosie as a symbol of traditional culture; she is far too modern and breaks away from too many cultural norms. It would be more true to say that she embodies the dichotomy of tradition and modernity that confronts the modern Indian woman. O.P. Mathur rightly says: "Narayan gives us the feel of life itself which is neither all white or all black but the grey twilight world of contemporary life quivering hesitatingly between tradition and modernity, East and West, inextricably mixed up in the minds of individuals."<sup>36</sup> Narayan's ironic vision does not miss the dualities of Indian life with all its psychological and moral conflicts that arise out of the existing old ways and the modern values. Therefore, Rosie's return to dancing should not be seen as a failure of a Devadasi woman to break away from her cultural past. Rosie dances because she loves the classical art form. By making a career out of her first love, she has managed to break free from the stigma associated with Devadasis as temple-dancers. As a classical dancer, she would not be viewed as a Devadasi but as a performing artist. Her success as Nalini, the dancer, proves this, and her break away from Raju's exploitative behaviour marks the beginning of a new life for Rosie.

Rosie's ambivalent attitude towards womanhood as reflected in her guilt and shame at her sexual digression brings out the tension between the dictates of her heart and

her sense of moral and social sin.<sup>37</sup> Her social persona bothers her for a while, but eventually she succeeds in living her life on her own terms. Narayan has not only created a memorable and admirable woman in Rosie, but has presented quite realistically the cultural constraints and inner conflicts that the modern Indian woman faces in her struggle towards independence and freedom. The ambivalence in Rosie and the new breed of women like her is symptomatic of the moral uncertainty and unrest that women experience as they venture into modernity. Thus, far from portraying a static life in his portrayal of Malgudi, as Ahluwalia and A. N. Kaul claim,<sup>38</sup> Narayan offers us glimpses into the process of transformation of Indian society, with its new social, psychological and moral problems. The Guide truly reflects the changing world of the post-Gandhian India where old values are gradually giving way to a new way of life and new modes of thinking.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>Shanta Krishnaswamy, The Woman in Indian Fiction 129.

<sup>2</sup>O.P. Mathur, "The Guide: A Study in Cultural Ambivalence," The Literary Endeavour: A Quarterly Journal Devoted to English Studies 3 (Jan-Jun 1982) 70-79.

<sup>3</sup>Lakshmi Holmstrom, "Women Characters," 66.

<sup>4</sup>Haydn Moore Williams, "R.K.Narayan and R. Praver Jhabvala: Two Interpreters of Modern India," Literature East and West 16 (1972) 1141.

<sup>5</sup>Lakshmi Holmstrom, "Women Characters" 69.

<sup>6</sup>Zimmer Heinrich, Myths and Symbols in Indian Art and Civilisation (New Jersey: Princeton U, 1949) 63.

<sup>7</sup>Lakshmi Holmstrom, "Women Characters" 70.

<sup>8</sup>Lakshmi Holmstrom, "Women Characters" 67.

<sup>9</sup>Lakshmi Holmstrom, "Women Characters" 65.

<sup>10</sup>C.D. Narasimhaiah, "R.K. Narayan's The Guide," Aspects of Indian Writing in English. ed. M.K. Naik (Madras: Macmillan, 1979) 183.

<sup>11</sup>C.D. Narasimhaiah, "R.K. Narayan's The Guide" 183.

<sup>12</sup>John Rothfork, "Hindu Mysticism in the Twentieth Century; R.K. Narayan's The Guide," Philological Quarterly 62 (Winter 1983) 33. Although Rothfork does make some insightful comments about the novel, his study is almost entirely based on mystical and symbolic interpretation.

<sup>13</sup>John Rothfork, "Hindu Mysticism" 33.

<sup>14</sup>Shanta Krishnaswamy, The Woman in Indian Fiction 129.

<sup>15</sup>Shanta Krishnaswamy, The Woman in Indian Fiction 132.

<sup>16</sup>Ram Sewak Singh, R.K. Narayan: The Guide (Delhi: Doaba House, 1971) 70.

<sup>17</sup>C.D. Narasimhaiah, The Swan and the Eagle (Simla: Indian Institute of Advanced Study, 1969) 153.

<sup>18</sup>C.D. Narasimhaiah, The Swan and the Eagle 153.

<sup>19</sup>Refer to Manu IX, 2-3 quoted in "Introduction."

<sup>20</sup>Lakshmi Holmstrom, "Women Characters" 68.

<sup>21</sup>Shanta Krishnaswamy, The Woman in Indian Fiction 133.

<sup>22</sup>C. Paul Verghese, Problems of the Indian Creative Writer 140.

<sup>23</sup>Shanta Krishnaswamy, The Woman in Indian Fiction 134.

<sup>24</sup>Ram Dial "The Anima-Animus Interaction in The Guide," Perspectives on R.K. Narayan. ed. Atma Ram (Ghaziabad: Vimal Prakashan, 1981) 136-150.

<sup>25</sup>Ram Dial, "The Anima-Animus Interaction" 140.

<sup>26</sup>Simone De Beavoir, The Second Sex 152.

<sup>27</sup>For a detailed study of this view see Shanta Krishnaswamy, "Raja Rao: The Indian Pattern of Saved Heroes and Doomed Females," The Woman in Indian Fiction. Also see S.C. Harrex, "The Fascination of What's Difficult: Some Student Responses to Raja Rao," Indo-English Literature: A Collection of Critical Essays. ed. K.K. Sharma (Ghaziabad: Vimal Prakashan, 1977).

<sup>28</sup>Raja Rao, The Serpent and the Rope (New Delhi: Orient, 1968) 171.

<sup>29</sup>Raja Rao, The Serpent and the Rope, 364. Note also Rao's treatment of the other women in the novel. Little Mother is an embodiment of the divine Mother principle while Saroja, Rama's step-sister is mythologised: "What a deep and reverential mystery womanhood is. I could bow down before Saroja and call her queen" (50). She is forced to marry someone with whom she is not compatible but stoically accepts her dharma. She writes to Rama: "For me life has come to an end. By life I mean hope, work, fulfilment" (369).

<sup>30</sup>Viney Pal Kirpal, "Moksha for Raju: The Archetypal Four-Stage Journey," World Literature Written in English 28 (1988): 353-63.

<sup>31</sup>Viney Pal Kirpal, "Moksha for Raju" 357.

<sup>32</sup>Shanta Krishnaswamy, The Woman in Indian Fiction 128.

<sup>33</sup>Shanta Krishnaswamy, The Woman in Indian Fiction 123-124.

<sup>34</sup>A.V. Krishna Rao, The Anglo-Indian Novel and the Changing Tradition (Mysore: Rao & Raghavan, 1972) 100.

<sup>35</sup>A.V. Krishna Rao, The Anglo-Indian Novel 100.

<sup>36</sup>O.P.Mathur "The Guide: A Study," 71.

<sup>37</sup>Shanta Krishnaswamy, The Woman in Indian Fiction 153.

<sup>38</sup>Harsharan S. Ahluwalia, "Narayan's Sense of Audience," 64. For Ahluwalia's comment see quotation in my "Introduction," pl. For Kaul's comments see A.N. Kaul, "Narayan and the East-West Theme," Indian Literature ed. A. Poddar (Simla: Indian Institute of Advanced Study, 1972) 222-246.

### Chapter 3: The Painter of Signs

You belong to such a uniquely free generation and that is something very new in our country. At least we have won our freedom and you can do as you choose. How much you can do - how many careers and vocations - and all the spirit and intelligence to do it with ... With such opportunities at hand, you must surely want something greater than pleasure alone or the security of marriage alone - something more rare, more responsible (Anita Desai, Voices in the City).

The growth of the Indian woman's consciousness reaches maturity in Daisy, the independent, highly individualistic and extremely dedicated population control officer of The Painter of Signs (1976). While Narayan painted a picture of the passive consciousness of the Indian woman in The Dark Room and the image of the awakened but discordant consciousness of the Indian woman in The Guide, in The Painter of Signs, he presents the image of the awakened and active consciousness of the Indian woman of the seventies. While Savitri is an image of submission, Daisy is an image of social revolt. She rejects the socially prescribed pattern of female dependence, successfully living outside the accepted norms of her society. In Daisy, Narayan



presents the Indian feminist woman who has liberated herself from the distorted perspective that cultural conditioning has imposed on Indian women. In The Painter of Signs, Narayan has moved away from the traditional image of the Indian woman as victim to that of an empowered figure who has remarkable control over her life. Daisy not only frees herself from the narrow confines of cultural conditioning but also uses her freedom, independence and education in her mission to free others from the evils of poverty, starvation and overpopulation.

In an interview with S. Krishnan, Narayan explains how he came to write about such an independent heroine in The Painter of Signs after his portrayal of a submissive woman like Savitri in The Dark Room:

In The Dark Room I was concerned with showing the utter dependence of woman on man in our society. I suppose I have moved along with the times. This girl in my new novel is quite different. Not only is she not dependent on men, she actually has no use for them as an integral part of her life. To show her complete independence and ability to stand by herself, I took care not to give her a name with any kind of emotional connotation...I am calling her simply Daisy. She is a very strong character. All the same, when you read the novel you will find she is very feminine also. There is a conflict. That is the whole point.<sup>1</sup>

Once again, we notice Narayan's concern with the name of his heroine. Daisy's name is free from the emotional and mythical connotations that Savitri's name is meant to evoke; it is a non-denominational name that the independent heroine chooses for herself:

She called herself just Daisy. She was a slender girl in a sari. No one could say who was her husband, father or brother, or where she came from - a sudden descent on Malgudi. Daisy! What a name for someone who looked so very Indian, traditional, and gentle!...But this girl looked like a minor dancer... Raman wanted to stop and ask, "Why is she calling herself Daisy. Daisy What?...Who was her protector, and what happened to him, that this slender creature should be left to tackle the population problems of this nation singlehanded? (28).

Raman's fascination with Daisy's name is reminiscent of Raju's fascination with Rosie's in The Guide. Once again the Narayan heroine gives herself a name of her own choice suggesting that the independent woman has a sense of self-identity and is a person of her own making. Belonging to a society which, even in the seventies, tended to view women as needing male protection, Raman's thoughts about Daisy echo Raju's mother's first question to Rosie in The Guide: "Who has come with you, Rosie?" (124). Raman wonders who her brother, father, husband or male protector is, but Daisy

is very different from the heroines of Narayan's previous novels in her hardiness and total independence from any man. Daisy does not need male protection or help, and she is as good as any man at her job.

In The Dark Room, Narayan highlights through Savitri's situation the importance of education for women's self-reliance, and through Shanta Bai he hints that education alone is not enough for women's freedom. In The Guide he develops the notion that strength of character is important for a woman to overcome the burden of deeply ingrained moral and social expectations of Indian society. In The Painter of Signs, Narayan further enlarges upon this idea through his portrayal of a woman who has the unique vision, courage and determination to live life on her own terms rather than according to society's expectations of her, before she acquires the education that assists her in her quest for total self-reliance and freedom.

Daisy's strong sense of individuality even as a child is seen in her need for privacy in a large, loud, joint family with fifteen children and a great number of adult relatives where all "individuality was lost in this mass existence" (102). Daisy tells Raman:

I sometimes wished I could be alone; there was no time or place to consider what one should do or think.

Practically no privacy...The noise at home, which no one seemed to notice, was enough to madden me...It was

a madhouse. Somehow everything there repelled me. I do not know for what reason since my parents were very kind ...and my sisters, brothers and cousins were extremely friendly. But I did not like so much common living (101).

Even as a young girl, Daisy had known that she was different from the others and had a strong sense of purpose. "I was always obsessed with the thought that I ought to be doing something better, something more useful than this routine life" (101). Narayan makes it clear at the outset that Daisy is an individual who yearns for personal freedom, not for the sake of freedom only but for a higher purpose in life. This aspiration, coupled with her sense of responsibility - sign of maturity - lead to her service to her society as a population control officer.

Daisy's quest for freedom begins when her mother tells her that she was to be inspected by a prospective bridegroom. She rebels against the socially accepted norms with regard to the treatment and status of women: "They had a shock at home when I told my people that I'd not allow anyone to inspect me as a bride and that I'd rather do the inspection of the groom" and that "if its not done it is better that someone starts doing it now" (102). Even at the age of thirteen, Daisy had known what she wanted to make of her life and it was certainly not to accept the socially prescribed roles of wife and mother: "I had to explain that

was not my aim in life. I had other aims. I said that I would like to work, rather than be a wife" (102).

Daisy's strong sense of individuality and her intelligence that the traditional pattern of female obedience and docility attempted to retard are conveyed by Narayan in these words:

They decked me in all the jewellery...and clad me in a heavy sari crackling with gold lace. I felt suffocated with all that stuff over me. I felt sick and felt that I was losing my identity. I hated the whole scene. I was seized with a feeling that I was in a wrong world, and that I was a stranger in their midst. I saw my mother's face beaming in satisfaction and I was irritated at her simplicity. Although I was only thirteen, I had my own notions of what was good for me and what I should do in life (103).

Daisy's self-assertiveness, pride and courage to break cultural conventions, as well as her wittiness and outspoken nature are eloquently portrayed by Narayan in the inspection scene that Daisy recalls:

I strode up like a soldier marching before the fellow, and he perhaps thought I would knock him down, and retreated slightly. They all looked a little shaken at the very style of my walk...My mother said, "Make your obeisance, prostrate yourself on the ground." I shook my head. I have always hated the notion of one human

being prostrating at the feet of another...Then the man asked, "What class are you studying in?" A routine question that all would-be brides have to answer modestly. But I turned it round to ask, "What class are you studying in?"...They got over this shock, and asked, "Can you sing?" "Can you?" I asked (104).

Daisy does not succumb to her parents' pressure and makes a mockery of the whole bridal inspection; she is made of sterner stuff than all the heroines we have come across so far.<sup>2</sup> Although Daisy is hustled to an "inner room" and is ostracised by her family for ruining the family reputation, she does not wither or waver. Rather than live a life of restrictions and passivity, Daisy runs away from her orthodox Brahmin home to live a life of her own making and choice.

With the growth of feminine consciousness, there is a reduction in the male figures in Narayan's novels. Like Barathi, the intelligent, dedicated freedom-fighter of Waiting for the Mahatma (1955), who has the task of teaching the weak, foolish Sriram, Daisy is more educated and worldly than Raman. From the very beginning it becomes clear that Raman is the susceptible partner and Daisy the influential one: "He realized that he was gradually becoming overconsiderate ...Otherwise how could I ever show this zest for birth-control?" (52). He gets influenced by "Daisyism" as he calls it.

Narayan makes clear that Daisy is a stronger character than Raman. While Raman finds it difficult to live without his material comforts and is grouchy and unhappy during his propaganda assignments to remote villages with her, Daisy manages very well:

Her adaptability was astonishing; she could spread out the little roll of carpet that she carried in a bag and sleep anywhere...She had no taboo of any kind. Raman, though brought up as a strict vegetarian, tried to eat for her sake and suffered in silence. It made him sick...She bathed in a public well...never bothered about comforts, conveniences. She accepted any hospitality, even in the lowliest hut, and proved extremely undemanding (48).

Raman, on the other hand, misses the luxuries like his afternoon coffee at The Boardless. He is well aware that Daisy desires no such things: "But this woman seemed impervious to such needs - she was satisfied if she could eliminate pregnancies" (52).

Although Raman is a self-professed rationalist, we notice Narayan's deliberate attempt to contrast Raman's foolish sentimentality and impulsive love-sick behaviour with Daisy's level-headedness, intelligence and calmness. Witness Raman's silly plan to tie down the independent Daisy: "He would just slip in and hold her down if she resisted. And then she'd become pregnant...She'd come to

depend upon him completely and he would protect her and give her a good life" (74). We cannot miss his clumsy attempt to rape her during their journey back from their family planning assignments. In contrast, we see Daisy's quick thinking in climbing up the tamarind tree to evade him before he can get to her.

Throughout their relationship, Raman is afraid to voice his opinions to Daisy for fear of offending her and he seldom disagrees with her. Although he believes there is no reason for such a drastic birth control campaign, he never tells Daisy his views: "Perhaps there was nothing wrong in their coming into the world. They had as much right to be here as anyone else, more mouths to feed - all right, find more stuff for the mouths to feed that's all"(27). He does not approve of Daisy's methods and tone in dealing with people about birth control, but he curbs his tongue: "Raman felt like asking "How is it your concern" (55). When a sort of debate about high birth-rate ensues between Daisy and the teacher of a village they visit, Raman thinks that the schoolteacher "had a lot of guts...to engage himself in a controversy with Daisy" (54). He is generally silent not just on matters of her vocation that he disagrees with but also in matters that have to do with their private life. He does not agree with her concept of a highly individualised marriage but he withholds his reservations and gives in to her:



It rather bothered him, but he accepted everything she said. He realized that the path of peace lay in not contradicting her. Two drivers cannot be at the steering wheel of a motorcar, he often thought. He was quite prepared to surrender himself completely to her way of thinking, and do nothing that might leave him in the plight of Santhanu. No questioning and the wife stays, but any slight doubt expressed, she flies away forever (131).

Raman and Daisy's relationship is totally unlike the relationship between Ramani and Savitri of The Dark Room. Narayan has turned the tables on the traditional pattern of male-female relationships; the woman is no longer the self-effacing, silent partner. It is the man who is afraid of asserting himself while the woman dominates. Raman is depicted as entirely different from Ramani of The Dark Room. Raman without the "i" is indeed quite a puny creature when compared with Ramani, the dominating male with a large ego. Raman tells Daisy, "Whatever you say, I will never interfere. I won't question you. I will be like the ancient king Santhanu..." (125). Raman is willing to sacrifice everything for Daisy - not just his pride, beliefs and way of life but even his possible progeny:

Daisy had laid down two conditions before accepting his proposal. One that they should have no children, and two, if by mischance one was born she would give the

child away and keep herself free to pursue her social work. Raman was not to object or modify this in any manner (124).

The change in the balance of power between man and woman in the modern-day relationship cannot go unnoticed.

Traditionally, it is the man who has the bargaining power and the Indian bride is inspected for her personal qualities and is accepted on condition of what she can bring as dowry. Whereas Savitri commanded very little power in her family, Daisy gets to call the shots even before the marriage begins. Daisy tells Raman, "If you want to marry me, you must leave me to my own plans even when I am a wife. On any day you question why or how, I will leave you" (124).

Although it is only a verbal agreement, in a way, Daisy's conditions are like those of pre-nuptial agreements that are common in the West. Yet, the agreement is all the weightier because the Gandharva style of marriage that they plan to have is all the easier to dissolve.

Unlike Savitri of The Dark Room, Margayya's wife in The Financial Expert, and Raju's mother in The Guide, whose sole purpose and meaning in life is derived from their service to their husbands and children, Daisy's meaning in life is derived from her service to society. While the passive feminine consciousness embraces feminine mystique and treats motherhood as a full-time vocation, suppressing all other desires and ambitions, the active feminine

consciousness pursues her ambitions and does not consider motherhood as an important process, let alone a divine vocation.

Previously well-defined sexual roles of husband as the provider and wife as the child-bearer and caretaker of domestic affairs become almost completely obsolete in this new pattern of male-female relationship:

Long ago I broke away from the routine of a woman's life. There are millions of women who go through it happily. I am not one of them. I have a well-defined purpose from which I will not swerve (124).

Daisy has no interest in domestic tasks like raising children or keeping house. "A home in Daisy's view, was only a retreat from sun and rain, and for sleeping, washing, and depositing one's trunk" (130). Raman, on the other hand, is the one who spends one week cleaning the house and buying a new stove, pots and pans in preparation for their new married life. He even goes so far as to think of naming their home "Nest" and of designing the sign board which he would display on the door (132). Daisy, on the other hand, is only interested in making signboards for the propaganda of birth-control.

Raman's emotional dependence on Daisy is clear from the beginning. His fear of voicing his opinions about birth control and the nature of their relationship stems from his fear of losing her. Raman finds himself in a

position similar to that of Savitri. Unlike Savitri, who was financially and more significantly emotionally dependent on her husband, Daisy is completely self-reliant; this feminist woman does not see her womanhood as deriving its substance from her husband as the Shastras insist; she will not even change her name after her marriage, let alone her identity. Narayan is obviously illustrating the change in the balance of power between men and women and the complete reversal of woman's status and her heightened consciousness of self and well-defined self-identity.

Daisy's career choice is interestingly significant to her portrayal as a psychologically viable character. Daisy tells Raman that she was inspired early in life by a missionary gentleman who educated her to pursue the social service of promoting birth control. When Raman notices Daisy's zealotry in promoting birth control, he rationally speculates "what freakish experience or trauma might be responsible for this sort of unmitigated antagonism to conception" (70). When Daisy tells him about her background, Raman wonders if the experience of living in a crowded household has some psychological bearing on the vehemence with which she wants to control the population: "Could this be the reason why you also want our country to be less crowded?" (101). Although Daisy angrily denies this, it appears to be Narayan's intention to suggest some psychological motivation for Daisy's zeal.

Daisy's occupation also has some undeniable feminist implications. In "Family Planning and Women", feminist sociologist Sushila Singh contends that family planning is very much a women's issue:

All their problems whether physical, moral, social or economic are directly or indirectly related to their function as child-bearers,...Thus to a woman, family planning does not only mean a solution of population problem but also a much needed solution for the problems of her own status and rights. Unless she has the basic freedom to decide upon the number and spacing of children, she will remain incapable of availing herself of other freedoms.<sup>3</sup>

That Narayan has chosen to portray his heroine as a population control officer is not to be overlooked in a novel that examines the life of an independent, liberated young woman. Though Daisy never makes any feminist statements concerning her promotion of birth control, Narayan does indirectly highlight the feminist nature of her cause. There is only one scene in the novel that shows the real effects of the lack of birth control:

The villager looked forlorn...He said, 'Doctor, please go in and speak to my woman.'

Daisy remained inside the hut for some time, conversing in a low voice, came out, and said to the villager, 'Ten childbirths in twelve years of married life: don't

you see that it will kill your wife?’

‘True she is very sickly,’ admitted the man. ‘I have to spend so much on medicines for her, but nothing helps.’...

She turned to Raman with a sad smile, ‘They think I can abort!’...but the villager kept pleading, ‘If only the doctor makes up her mind to help us...’

Daisy said firmly to him, ‘At least prevent the next child coming. Other doctors will be here next month. Let this baby come; can’t be stopped now.’ The villager escorted them to the bus-stop, saying the same thing over and over again and pleading repeatedly all the way (51).

Despite Daisy’s citation of statistics on poverty and starvation, which reflect the direct results of overpopulation, Narayan does not highlight these. Instead, he makes us see the immediate result of the lack of birth control: the effect that child-bearing has on a woman’s health. Narayan clearly sees Daisy’s job as a feminist one; her social work saves women from sickness and death that come from unwanted pregnancies and desperately performed abortions. As the harbinger of the knowledge of contraception, Daisy offers women a kind of freedom; she gives them choices in life that are not limited by their biology.

Although both Daisy and Rosie have a vocation

which they pursue at all costs, the difference between them lies in the fact that despite her education and liberal behaviour, Rosie suffers from an ambivalent attitude towards woman's identity and her own individuality. Though Rosie attains economic, artistic and spiritual freedom, her resigned acceptance of fate reveals her essentially deeply ingrained traditional Indian attitude toward life. Psychologically she is still a prisoner of the past. Daisy, on the other hand, is totally free from any culturally imposed feelings of guilt or shame at her womanhood. She does not see her femaleness as a punishment for misdeeds in her previous life, as her karma or ill fate.<sup>4</sup> She handles her femaleness with the same sense of ease and sophistication that she handles her job of explaining physiology, anatomy, sexual intercourse and contraception to the public, both men and women: "Sometimes the men sniggered, the women giggled but she quietened them with a word or a gesture" (49).

Even Raman thinks of sex as a taboo and shies away from his sexuality. He chides himself for thinking too much about sex and women:

When he emerged from the surface and opened his eyes, he noticed the woman's thigh. Nice sight, he told himself...He lingered on the spectacle for a little while, checked his thoughts as being unholy, averted his head and hurried back home. Living on the river,

he occasionally entertained himself by watching the bathers...but it always ended in self-criticism. He wanted to get away from sex thoughts, minimize their importance (15).

He is fidgety when he is in close proximity to Daisy and keeps on running a mental commentary about his immoral thoughts and desires about her: "Yes, said his truthful conscience...You are preoccupied with her physical form inch by inch..." (39). Even when their relationship begins, he is agitated and anxious about how the relationship was going to turn out, whereas "she lives for the moment" and takes him "on her terms, when it suits her with a queenly grace," as Shanta Krishnaswamy aptly puts it.<sup>5</sup>

When Raman and Daisy finally consummate their love, her sexual sophistication is far more advanced than that of her lover:

He stroked her gently, letting his hands rest on her breasts...He was struck by the elegance of her form and features, suddenly saw her as an abstraction - perhaps a goddess to be worshipped, not to be disturbed or defiled with coarse fingers. Very gently he withdrew his hand and edged away. But she suddenly turned over on her side and with her eyes still closed, threw her arms around his neck and drew him nearer and lay unmindful as his fingers fumbled with her clothes. He was overwhelmed by her surrender and essayed to



whisper, 'This is our true moment of consummation. No need to feel stealthy or guilty anymore, under my own roof. The bride has come home' (136).

While Daisy is bold, confident, self-possessed and has no inhibitions about her sexuality, Raman is nervous, hesitant and sexually inexperienced. When Raman next meets her, he expects her to behave differently but is surprised at her coolness: "Raman had believed that a subtle intimacy had been established between them and that she would carry traces of the earlier afternoon's ecstasy about her. But she displayed no such sign, and remained aloof and official" (137). For Daisy, the sexual relationship is as natural as the process of birth.<sup>6</sup> She is a truly liberated woman in a conservative society with countless taboos.

Although Narayan seems to be offering an ideal picture of modern Indian womanhood through his portrayal of Daisy, we cannot overlook the ironic tone that he employs in portraying Daisy. Critics may see the novel as Narayan's political satire on Sanjay Gandhi's notorious birth control campaign with its rampant abortions and vasectomies. This is not true; Narayan makes it clear that Daisy works for a missionary and not for the government or any political party. Furthermore, Narayan makes it very clear in the novel that Daisy does not perform abortions nor does she give material rewards to people who decide to use contraceptives. When the bangle-seller tells Raman to tell

Daisy that he would like to supply the bangles that are given away to people who are operated on for birth-control, she gets outraged at the rumour that she was doing this:

'Rubbish!' said her voice. 'We don't believe in that kind of conversion. They must understand what they are doing, and not be enticed in this childish manner. Tell your friend to keep his bangles...This sort of thing maddens me, I tell you' (113).

However, we can see that Narayan's treatment of Daisy is ironical in another way: Daisy's dogmatism and ruthlessness in promoting birth-control could be seen as a satire on propagandists. The "family planning programme as Narayan presents it contains a great deal of sharp satire on those who wish to direct our existence by doctrine."<sup>7</sup> Daisy sounds no different from any stock broker when she rattles off figures on the population and sounds like a dictator when she gets carried away with her plans to "convert" new lands into contraception grounds. Daisy seems to fail to see the people behind the figures that she constantly quotes. Narayan makes fun of the dogmatic and propagandistic approach to family-planning.

Perhaps Narayan's irony in his treatment of Daisy can be best detected if we keep in mind his comic tone throughout the novel. We can see that Narayan makes fun of Daisy's overzealousness in her vocation rather than satirising her, because he also makes fun of Raman's self-

important views about his occupation as a painter of signs in the same way. M.K. Naik points out that the devotion of both Raman and Daisy to their respective professions leads to some capital scenes of what Bergson has called 'professional comic'.<sup>8</sup> Daisy does not consider it awkward to give the man who is obviously attracted to her a long lecture on "the course a recalcitrant sperm [takes] and the strategy to halt its journey" (70) while she is cooped up in a bullock cart with him. Similarly, Raman's exaggerated thought that "the world was peopled by persons who expected cash to be written in green" (23) upsets him so much that it sets him thinking: "The fault is in the education system and the political leadership, people who ought to mould the taste of the public and help their minds grow were busy otherwise" (23). Together with the irony and comic tone that Narayan employs in describing both Raman and Daisy's obsession with their occupations, Narayan presents other comic-ironic scenarios regarding their occupations. Raman's plan to foil Daisy's attempts at population control by impregnating a few women in each of the village they visit is hilarious in its irony. So too is his plan to foul Daisy's career by getting Daisy pregnant with twins: "they'd probably sack her for unprofessional conduct"(74). The comic tone is very apparent throughout the novel and its importance in the novel is not to be undermined. Thus we can conclude that Narayan's attitude towards Daisy is one of

gentle irony and humour rather than sarcasm or satire. However, this tone is not meant to undermine his interest and examination of serious issues in the novel but rather to lighten the tone of a novel which deals with such hefty issues as women's emancipation and equality between the sexes. Perhaps Raman's thoughts about Daisy explain Narayan's use of ironic-humour in a novel that raises feminist issues: "Why such anger? Why not accomplish it all with less grimness" (48).

Although the novel has a definite feminist slant, at various times, Daisy is unflatteringly referred to as "Queen Victoria", "Rani Jhansi, the warrior queen of Indian history", "dictator" and even "bully" by Raman. Narayan, with his ironic vision, is able to see issues of contention in feminism and is not afraid to raise them. Narayan seems to be criticising the new breed of feminist women who can be as heartless, cold and domineering in their vocation as the male patriarchs and chauvinists that they criticise. Raman is annoyed by her overbearing attitude towards people who do not agree with her views on birth-control and thinks to himself: "If people like to live crowded, its their business. What a frightful bully you are turning out to be. Thank God, you are not a dictator" (55). We also notice that Narayan with his gentle humour and irony pokes fun at Daisy's handling of her relationship with Raman. She is more like a dominating business partner. Her refusal to

compromise on any issue could be construed as a sign of her insensitivity to Raman, and her refusal to swerve from her ambitions and beliefs makes her come across as aggressive rather than assertive and dogmatic rather than decisive. Perhaps Narayan wishes to imply that in her quest for total freedom and independence Daisy has failed to see the complete picture that is life:

...she was not really a lover of children and viewed them perhaps as symbols of defeat for her cause. She never patted a child or tried any baby talk. She looked at them as if to say, You had no business to arrive - you lengthen the queues, that's all (49). She looked at them critically. 'Don't suck your thumb, take it out, otherwise you will stammer,' she said to one. To another one she said, 'Stand erect, don't slouch.' She turned to their mother and added, 'Correct posture is important. Children must be taught all this early in life.'...children had better not be born, but if born, must take their thumbs out of their mouths and avoid slouching (64).

Her lack of interest in children strikes us as a lack of human warmth and sensitivity, as well as a lack of interest in motherhood.

One notices Narayan's sympathy for Raman, despite his weaknesses. Although Narayan raises feminist issues he is very much a humanist at heart. Narayan seems to

understand that the average Indian male of the seventies finds the new generation of independent, feminist younger women like Daisy irresistibly attractive yet finds it difficult to get used to this new image of womanhood, which is different from the image of women around him and in the literature that he has read. Raman has difficulties communicating with her and thinks of trying to win Daisy's affection in the outmoded ways. The naive hero, whose understanding of and experience with women is limited to the movies he has seen and the books he has read, thinks that he should "dash up, seize her, and behave like Rudolph Valentino in The Sheik, which he had seen as a student. Women liked an aggressive lover - so said the novelists" (74). Of course, Narayan, as a writer concerned with the status of women, is making fun of the twisted images of women and the false impressions about male-female relationship that movies and books portray. Raman imagines violent and forceful ways to get Daisy: "One sure way to win a bride was to break a collar-bone gently" (80). Unused to the sudden change in the power equilibrium, Raman cannot help but indulge in imaginary physical battles of the sexes to quell and bring Daisy under his control. His expectations of women are framed by his cultural conditioning. Raman is the average Indian male who generally takes women for granted, and he cannot help but compare Daisy to his orthodox aunt:

He has had no occasion to observe her [his aunt] so closely, and her way of life was a revelation to him. He brooded over her life and mission: She seems to have existed only for his sake. Except for the evening visit to the temple, her world was purely dedicated to his well being. She had stayed at home, waiting to feed him, watching his moods to know if he was happy and contented. When he went out she waited to open the door for him... It'd been a lifetime of dedication for another human being, actually. How would Daisy fit into this scheme? Would she stand beside the cow at dawn, or keep the oil jar aired regularly? Unthinkable (129).

Yet, Raman's aunt and Daisy are in some respects no different from each other. Raman notes that Daisy's "possessions were limited to this ideal - in some ways, very much like Aunt. If Aunt's worldly possessions could go into a little jute bag, Daisy's filled a small tin trunk and a BOAC air travel bag" (130). Raman's widowed aunt's minimal material wants and needs are similar to Daisy's, but while her life is that of a self-sacrificing narrow service to her nephew, Daisy's life is that of absolute service to the nation as a population control officer. By drawing a comparison between Raman's aunt and Daisy, Narayan seems to question the assumption that the feminist movement makes regarding women's freedom from domestic slavery and the

importance of a career. Daisy's sacrifice of her personal life for her missionary cause may be due to her overzealousness but she certainly shares with other women the predicament resulting from career choices. She represents the countless women of India who find that women's emancipation from the home does not guarantee them freedom, but merely leads them to become slaves to the jobs that previously enslaved men. Narayan seems to ask, "What is the difference between a woman slaving for her family and one who slaves for her occupation at the expense of her personal life?" For Daisy is clearly torn between her desire for Raman and her desire to do social service, and is forced to choose one at the expense of the other: "...five thousand men and women have to be taken care of immediately. After they may move me elsewhere - even to Africa. I cannot afford to have a personal life" (139). Perhaps the difference between the two situations lies in the issue of choice; the modern woman, with her education and self-reliance has the option to choose her vocation in life, whereas the traditional woman has very little control over her life. While Daisy chooses between becoming a wife and a career woman, Savitri, with her limited education and emotional dependence on her husband, has very little choice in the matter.

Narayan also indirectly brings to the surface another problem that is created by women's emancipation and



the increasing importance attached to their careers. He seems to ask: "If all women were like the liberated Daisy, refusing to conform to society's notions of womanhood, denying the roles of wife and mother, what would become of social institutions like marriage and the family unit?" Daisy has none of the traditional feminine, motherly instincts toward children that Savitri of The Dark Room has. She is not afraid of fulfilling her sexual needs outside the boundaries of marriage. It is obvious that Narayan wants us to consider the direction that humankind would take if all women were like Daisy. Narayan seems to be anxious to discourage a lifestyle without restraint where love, sex and marriage do not necessarily go together and where freedom could lead to the death of the family as a social unit. Shanta Krishnasamy claims that Narayan's Daisy becomes "a symbol of titanic womanhood that desexes men."<sup>9</sup> Perhaps it is "the author's way of warning against the repetition of the mistakes of a male chauvinist society, this time by overzealous feminists who would lead to a cultural death wish and an androgynous blurring of social institutions."<sup>10</sup> Krishnaswamy seems to imply that Narayan sees androgyny as a negative concept but this is not so.

Narayan's portrayal of Daisy does not give this negative impression; Daisy does not desex Raman just because she is self-reliant and Raman wants to please her by giving in to her every condition. The subtext of the novel could

be read differently. Narayan does not seem to adhere to the traditional perspective of sexual identity in this novel. He seems to reject the traditionally accepted binary oppositions of masculinity and femininity. The image of androgyny that emerges is a result of the deconstruction of sexual identity. This concept is similar to Kristeva's theory on the third stage of feminism.<sup>11</sup> Narayan seems to imply that femininity is nothing but a social and cultural construct, not a biological one; one is not born a woman, but becomes one, as Simone de Beauvoir implies in The Second Sex. Perhaps through Daisy, Narayan is taking a feminist stand in subverting the traditional notion of gender identity; he may be redefining femininity in the light of feminism which sees it as a social construct that changes with the times.<sup>12</sup> Therefore, The Painter of Signs seems to be a novel not so much about the battle of the sexes in which one tries to overpower the other, but rather a novel more concerned with culturally imposed notions about sexuality and gender identity.

If the growth in feminine consciousness is reflected by women like Daisy, the growth in the Indian male is reflected by the men's changing attitudes towards the status and role of Indian women. What we viewed as Raman's weakness could be seen differently - as growth in the Indian man's consciousness as he changes with the times. The new Indian male becomes less authoritarian and more willing to

accept the woman's terms and even do the housework. It does not bother Raman that Daisy is more educated than he. Raman tries not to view women only as sex objects and he is sympathetic to the feminist cause: "That is the tragedy of womanhood - utility articles whether in bed or out. You never view them normally until they are past sixty and look shrunken-skinned" (39). Although he is disturbed by "her habit of separating 'his' from 'hers' and her lack of interest in any joint venture" (131), Raman accepts her individuality and understands that this is "her constitution, mental make-up, like the curve of her lip, or the straight line of her hip and can't be helped" (131). In viewing woman as a separate individual with her own quirks and idiosyncrasies, Raman shows character very much unlike that of Ramani in The Dark Room, who expected an Indian wife to be subservient to her husband "like a shadow following the substance". Raman is not attracted to the traditional Indian woman; having spurned various proposals because he had not been interested in women, he falls in love with the totally unconventional Daisy. He is proud of Daisy's uniqueness in breaking away from the traditional pattern of Indian women's lives: "He wanted to announce that Daisy was not going to cook for him. She was a special kind, worth a hundred of the mugs around who called themselves wives and mothers" (126). He is proud of Daisy's independence and courage, her achievements and sacrifices. He wishes he

could convey it to his aunt but realises that she would neither understand nor appreciate it:

He wished to explain Daisy's biography at great length - how she left home with only the clothes she wore, hitchhiked, travelled without tickets, and reached Madras, her personal safety and womanhood endangered, imperilled, and how she survived and so forth;...how she was trained to live with fishermen in their huts and help and educate them, and then in all sorts of slum areas,...and was trained in social work and so forth; all her struggles and trials, so moving when he heard them at first hand. Somehow he could not convey it now, it sounded banal (122).

Just as Raman cannot appreciate his aunt's various accomplishments while everyone else is wonder-struck by her advice on domestic matters, her discourse on the gods, her herbal remedies and horoscope readings, his aunt could never appreciate Daisy's accomplishments. The modern Indian woman seems to be more alienated from and incomprehensible to her female predecessors than her male counterpart. While both Daisy and Raman question and ridicule ancient beliefs, applying logic and rationality to their understanding of the world, Raman's aunt tells Raman: "That's what our shastras say, and we don't have to question it" (19), reminding him that a Hindu's life is governed by duty or dharma. Raman's aunt is shocked to learn that Daisy

left her home: 'A girl who finds her parents intolerable! Those who are orphaned pray for parents, while this girl-' (121). Narayan presents an ironic contrast between Daisy's feelings about her childhood with Raman's seventy-five year old aunt's:

I was one of several children in the house. It's not like these days when people are afraid of children.

The house was full in those days. But nothing bothered anyone in those days - as long as there was a well-stocked granary and the bronze rice-pot was on the boil (19).

The notions of individuality and privacy which are so very important to women like Daisy are non-existent to Raman's aunt.

Although she views Daisy's assertion of her individuality as a lack of filial piety and a breach of her dharma, Raman's aunt is extremely proud of her strong-willed grandmother whose tale she loves to tell Raman:

He had heard the story piecemeal again and again - how her grandfather had run away after his marriage, deserting his young wife, how years later his grandmother went after him, walking all the way with pilgrims going north, and had cornered her husband while he was living in Poona, in grand style...how grandmother managed to get her husband to trek back southward, how he had brought his concubine along also

but only up to Bangalore, midway in their journey, where the grandmother rushed neck deep into a lake and threatened to drown unless the concubine was abandoned, whereupon the grandfather somehow rid himself of the woman, and proceeded onward and settled down to his original home at Kumbakonam to a happy life (31-32).

A different image of the Indian woman is conveyed in this story. The grandmother's refusal to resign herself to her husband abandoning her for another woman as her lot in life and her ultimatum to him provide a fine contrast with Savitri of The Dark Room. Narayan shows that a few determined, rebellious Indian women of the previous generations who refused to accept injustice and had succeeded in fighting for what they wanted in life have paved the way for the likes of independent women like Daisy. Narayan seems to impress upon us that Indian history has lesser known rebellious heroines than Rani Jhansi. However little Daisy may realise it, she is the end product of a long line of unconventional women, outside mainstream history, who broke social rules and conventions.

Raman's choice of a Gandharva marriage that is mentioned in the classical literature in which when "two souls met in harmony the marriage was consummated perfectly, and no further rite or ceremony is called for" (124) is parallel to the modern concept of living together as a committed couple, in which society accepts the man and woman

as common law husband and wife. Narayan seems to show that socially accepted norms are ever changeable and what is acceptable and unacceptable today have evolved over a long period of time. Daisy's attitude towards the whole situation is casual: "Nothing extraordinary for a man and woman beginning to live under the same roof" (146) and it has been Raman who has suggested marriage. Daisy, who is never concerned with what society thinks, agrees with the Gandharva type of marriage not because she believes in the essence of ancient customs but because it is the most convenient and practical; they could live together as life partners without going through the formalities.

Narayan also draws upon Indian mythology for a loose parallel to Daisy's relationship with Raman. Raman twice refers to the myth of King Santhanu and Goddess Ganga in describing his relationship with Daisy. The conditions that Daisy lays down before marrying Raman loosely parallel the conditions under which Goddess Ganga marries King Santhanu.<sup>13</sup> Shyam Asnani points out that "Narayan has successfully made use of myth... and that... he has endeavoured to relive India's hoary past to our contemporary reality...establishing links between the present situation and its parallel situation of the epic times".<sup>14</sup> However, what is more important is that Narayan shows us that this kind of relationship in which the woman has much authority in her marriage and her life has its precedence in the

Mahabharata. The modern man certainly has some forerunners in marrying a woman of equal strength of will and bargaining power. While in The Dark Room, Narayan cites various female Hindu mythical figures such as Sita and Savitri who have been actively though inappropriately used by the patriarchal society of India to promote passivity in Indian women, in The Painter of Signs, Narayan has drawn from Hindu mythology the image of the Indian woman as a powerful and vital figure. Narayan is far from having a traditional perspective on things. He may draw upon the ancient epics and myths of India, but he does not do so with the intention of forcing the old stereotypes onto new situations; rather, he understands and emphasizes the need to recreate the old myths into new patterns for the new generations.

Although Narayan creates Daisy as an admirable modern woman, and as a symbol of social protest, some critics think that the traditional Narayan is not interested in social change:

By evoking the doctrines of karma and moksha and by exalting the life of contemplation and withdrawal from the vanity of human effort and endeavour, the novelist reveals a strange kind of occult resignation to the status quo with little interest in the idea of social change.<sup>15</sup>

It may appear that in the sub-text of the novel Narayan undermines and criticises feminism and Daisy's attempts at



social change, but this is not entirely true. I agree that there is an ironic sub-text in the narrative that counters the feminist view, creating a more balanced perspective. Daisy's dogmatism, seriousness or dedication in her attempt to change the world is countered with the almost light-hearted, resignation of the Town Hall Professor's five-paisa's worth solution to the world's problems: "This will pass" (25). But we cannot simply say that this is Narayan's attempt to undermine Daisy's commitment to her job or her feminist thinking. It may be Narayan's philosophical advice to the everchanging modern world. It could be a narrative strategy: it may be a foretelling of things to come within the novel as the hero needs this advice to accept the heart-ache, trials and tribulations that life and love bring to him. The ending can also be seen as illustrative of Narayan's belief that all human endeavour comes to nought: Raman returns to his old hangout, "The Boardless - that solid, real world of sublime souls who minded their own business" (143) in exactly the same position that he was in at the beginning of the novel. It may be true that Raman stagnates but Daisy certainly moves on in life<sup>16</sup>: he hopes that at least in their next janma (life) they would be together (143). The Indian sense of resignation, belief in karma and withdrawal from life is evident in Raman. Daisy, on the other hand, is free from this cultural conditioning.

We suspect the reason that Daisy leaves Raman is

because she realises that he does not measure up to her in intellect, achievements and maturity. She has outgrown Raman, the naive, romantic, weakminded, though affable lover.<sup>17</sup> Daisy's individuality at this point in the novel does reflect some selfishness rather than independence. Her last minute change of mind not to marry Raman not only reveals her need for independence but also her difficulty in making a personal commitment to another human being. This may reflect Narayan's weakness in portraying an independent, modern female character rather than his intention to portray feminists in this light. However we can understand why Daisy leaves Raman even though he had agreed to all her conditions. Marriage is seen by Daisy as a trap that would limit her freedom: "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" (139). She is not sentimental about the relationship; she realises that falling in love is more a learned and acquired experience than a natural condition. She tells Raman,

'I love you', 'I like you' are words which can hardly be real. You have learnt them from novels and Hollywood films perhaps. When a man says 'I love you' and the woman repeats 'love you,' it sounds mechanical and unconvincing. Perhaps credible in Western society but sounds silly in ours (98).

Neither does she sentimentalise her sexual involvement, seeing it as moments of weakness when she had succumbed to her biological needs. She explains to Raman: 'At some moments, and moods, we say and do things - like talking in our sleep, but when you awake, you realize your folly...' and she is sorry for hurting him: 'Oh forgive me for misleading you' (141). The modern Indian woman does not hesitate to exercise her freedom to leave even though she has been sexually involved with the man in a society where pre-marital sex is taboo. She pursues her vocation at any cost, refusing to be tied down by love, knowing that it is emotional dependence on spouse and family that had led Indian women to put their personal desires, ambitions and feelings aside. Daisy will not repeat the mistake made by Savitri of The Dark Room.

Virginia Woolf says that anything may happen when womanhood has ceased to be a protected occupation<sup>18</sup> and this becomes true in the case of the heroine of The Painter of Signs. The independent Daisy does not see marriage as the only career option in her life and therefore she achieves a higher consciousness than any Narayan heroine. She has demystified and deromanticised the image of the Indian woman, challenging all previous notions of femininity. The growth of feminine consciousness reaches its height in Daisy of The Painter of Signs.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>S.Krishnan, "A Day with R.K.Narayan," Span (April 1975) 42.

<sup>2</sup>Shanta Krishnaswamy, The Woman in Indian Fiction 141.

<sup>3</sup>Sushila Singh, "Family Planning and Women," Role and Status of Women in Indian Society. ed. Renuka Ray (Calcutta: Firma KLM, 1978) 121-123.

<sup>4</sup>Shanta Krishnaswamy, The Woman in Indian Fiction 354.

<sup>5</sup>Shanta Krishnaswamy, The Woman in Indian Fiction 143.

<sup>6</sup>Shanta Krishnaswamy, The Woman in Indian Fiction 175.

<sup>7</sup>George Woodcock, "The Maker of Malgudi" 94.

<sup>8</sup>M.K.Naik, "The Signs are all there," World Literature Written in English 16 (1977) 113.

<sup>9</sup>Shanta Krishnaswamy, The Woman in Indian Fiction 350.

<sup>10</sup>Shanta Krishnaswamy, The Woman in Indian Fiction 350.

<sup>11</sup>Toril Moi explains the three stages of feminism as seen by Kristeva: 1 - Women demand equal access to the symbolic order. Liberal feminism. Equality. 2 - Women reject the male symbolic order in the name of difference. 3 - (This is Kristeva's own position) Women reject the dichotomy between masculine and feminine as metaphysical. See Sexual/Textual Politics 12.

<sup>12</sup>The word femininity is used according to the established feminist practice to represent social constructs (patterns of sexual behaviour imposed by cultural and social norms) as opposed to female which refers to the biological aspects of sexual difference.

<sup>13</sup>Shyam Asnani, "The Use of Myth in R.K.Narayan's Novels," The Literary Endeavour: A Quarterly Journal Devoted to English Studies 3 (Jan-Jun 1982): 29-30.

<sup>14</sup>Shyam Asnani, "The Use of Myth" 32.

<sup>15</sup>Satyanarain Singh, "A Note on the World-View of R.K.Narayan," Indian Literature 24 (Jan-Feb, 1981) 109.

<sup>16</sup>Shanta Krishnaswamy, The Woman in Indian Fiction 149.

<sup>17</sup>Shanta Krishnaswamy, The Woman in Indian Fiction 149.

<sup>18</sup>Virginia Woolf, A Room of One's Own (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1929) 65.

### Conclusion

William Walsh comments that in R.K. Narayan's novels it is the heroes who go through some form of "crisis of consciousness" while the women rather than the old represent "Custom and Reason" and know "what is and what is not proper".<sup>1</sup> This view becomes untenable as soon as one examines the portrayal of the Indian woman's consciousness in Narayan's novels. A study of Narayan's The Dark Room, The Guide and The Painter of Signs reveals that contrary to popular critical belief, Narayan is far from being a traditional writer who is only interested in the Indian male. The women in these novels are not represented as guardians of "Custom" and exponents of "Reason."

The Dark Room, The Guide and The Painter of Signs reveal Narayan's fascination with and thorough examination of the Indian woman. None of the female protagonists in the above three novels represent "Custom and Reason". Even the docile Savitri of The Dark Room questions the customs that trap women in a perpetual pattern of dependence and acts agitatedly though impulsively in her attempt to change her life. Rosie breaks social conventions and Hindu rules of propriety governing a married woman's life when she has an affair with Raju and later lives with him. Daisy breaks every custom and rule of conduct regarding women's behaviour in running away from home and living independently, living

life on her own terms.

Narayan's heroines also take risks and go through the crises of consciousness that his male protagonists go through. The different kinds and levels of crises of consciousness that the Indian woman undergoes are conveyed in the three novels. While Savitri's crisis of consciousness is brought on by her husband's tyrannical and insensitive behaviour, Rosie's crisis of consciousness comes about as a result of conflicting values and needs within her psyche, and she carries some feelings of guilt at her assertion of her individuality. Daisy suffers no guilt or any other effects of cultural conditioning. Her crisis of consciousness is brought on by her conflicting needs for total independence and emotional involvement with a man, and she chooses her career over her relationship with a particular male.

Narayan presents a varying range of independent Indian women. He also presents the other side of the coin. In The Dark Room, Janamma reminds Savitri of her role as a wife and mother. In The Guide, Raju's mother's values clash with those of Rosie's. In The Painter of Signs, Daisy's independence and carefree lifestyle is frowned upon by Raman's aunt. These traditional women's lives centre around nurturing and they find fulfillment in playing the role of a man's wife, mother, aunt or grandmother as defined in The Ordinances of Manu. They represent the traditional values in

an everchanging modern society, with all its crises and conflicts. Hence, Narayan's vision is all pervasive. By presenting the modern women side by side with the traditional women of India, he is portraying both aspects of the Indian woman's consciousness. He examines the problems that modern Indian society faces when faced with the new notions of individuality and the strong pull of traditions and customs which are inherently restrictive and make unfair demands upon women. He explores through his ironic vision the strange and subtle balance of tradition and modernity that the Indian woman's consciousness entails. Rosie is not alone in her concerns about social conventions. Even the sexually liberated Daisy, who pokes fun at Indian customs and beliefs, wears a sari and is feminine in appearance. She too is afraid of what would happen if her relationship with Raman becomes common knowledge.

The Narayan heroines reveal that the Indian woman's struggle for independence, freedom and subjectivity is one that is complex and difficult given the cultural conditioning that she is subjected to. As much as Narayan seems to hope for the emancipation of women, he shows us through the characters of Savitri and Rosie that he is well aware of the enormous difficulties involved in this process. Narayan reveals the levels of compromise that women, brought up in an environment that inculcates female dependence, have to undergo in their struggle for independence. Both Savitri



and Shanta Bai in their failure to make themselves self-reliant reveal this painful truth. Through an examination of male-female relationships in The Dark Room, Narayan shows the hierarchies inherent in a patriarchal society like India and the vicious cycle of dependence that women like Savitri, Janamma and Shanta Bai are trapped in.

On the whole, Daisy is a far cry from the likes of Sita and Savitri of the Hindu classics. The transformation of the Narayan heroine from the meek and sheltered Savitri who retreated to the dark room of her mind into the outgoing and independent Daisy is perhaps representative of the awakening and growth of the Indian woman's consciousness. And Narayan has in the process, thoroughly deromanticised womanhood. Rosie and Daisy do not believe in the female virtue of chastity and the sacredness of marriage. Neither are they concerned with motherhood; they do not see motherhood as a divine privilege that gives purpose and meaning to their lives.

Because of Narayan's allusions to Indian myths and Hindu epics, he is often mistaken to be a conservative writer with a traditional perspective on things. A.N. Kaul comments that in Narayan's novels we find "the remarkable fact of a static Indian life which touches the West at all points but without real penetration anywhere."<sup>2</sup> To call Narayan's Malgudi static is unfair because Narayan does show the change and growth in his characters. The growth of

selfhood in the Indian woman's consciousness is accompanied by the change of attitude in the male protagonists in Narayan's novels. Raju and Raman are quite different from Ramani. While Ramani viewed women as either homemakers or decorative items, Raju and Raman treat their female lovers differently. They are modern in their outlook; they do not care about the caste or background of their beloved. They do not attempt to restrict the women from pursuing their vocations. They certainly do not subscribe to Ramani's opinions about working women. They are, in fact, willing to give up their own careers to follow the women in their lives. There is no doubt that Rosie and Daisy are stronger than Raju and Raman. Raju and Raman are somewhat weak-minded foolish anti-heroes beside their strong female counterparts. As the female characters get stronger, the male characters get weaker in Narayan's novels. The myth of male hierarchial superiority is revised here. This is perhaps Narayan's way of representing the change in male-female relationships in modern Indian society.

The growth of the Narayan heroine's feminine consciousness and her quest for freedom over the forty-year period can be likened to that of India. The colonization of Savitri, in her unsuccessful rebellion against the shackles of her marriage, can be compared to the colonization of India in the late thirties. Rosie/Nalini with her split psyche can be seen as representative of the post-colonial

India of the fifties. And Daisy, with her complete break from the shackled Indian woman of the past, can be seen as a symbol of the post post-colonial India of the seventies.

Narayan's view of feminism is clearly one that ultimately involves not just woman's freedom but a certain degree of intersubjectivity among individuals within a societal framework. He has shown through Ponni and Mari in The Dark Room, and indirectly through Raman and Daisy in The Painter of Signs that in the final analysis, the struggle for woman's freedom may involve some sense of mutuality with man. In terms of intersubjectivity, both men and women should compromise on the issues of societal roles and their expectations of each other. Daisy's failure to compromise, her refusal to enter into a marital relationship with Raman based on mutual understanding is perhaps viewed by Narayan as a negative aspect of her search for freedom.

Although Savitri, Rosie and Daisy present compelling pictures of the growth of the Indian woman's consciousness, none of them are idealised. In varying degrees, they are all imperfect. If Savitri was far too submissive and weak-willed, Daisy strikes us as being far too cold, unemotional and dogmatic despite her admirable sense of individuality. In his treatment of feminine consciousness, Narayan does not aim at offering any particular female role model nor does he attempt to present a polemic against men in general. Although Raman is a

weaker person, he is far more likeable than Daisy. Narayan does not offer any solutions to the problems that Indian women face; he merely aims at exploring the possibilities that are open to them. He shows no particular bias for or against the traditional and passive heroines or the modern and rebellious heroines that he creates; their consciousness is given due scrutiny because both hold the key to understanding the workings of the Indian woman's consciousness. Indeed, it is clear that in his novels Narayan shows the changing face of Indian womanhood. He shows us that the old stereotypes of the Indian woman are no longer valid or accurate. Of course, Narayan is glad to welcome the change in Indian society as a whole, as he writes in Last Sunday:

Society presses upon us all the time. The progress of the last half century may be described as the Frog out of his well...He will not be left alone.<sup>3</sup>

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>William Walsh, "R.K.Narayan: The Unobtrusive Novelist"  
63-64.

<sup>2</sup>A.N.Kaul, "R.K.Narayan and the East-West Theme" 230.

<sup>3</sup>R.K. Narayan, Last Sunday (New Delhi: Orient, 1956)  
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