

Treatment of Love, Marriage and Family in the Select Novels of R. K. Narayan: A Brief Analysis

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the vast corpus of R.K.Narayan's writings and his treatment of love, marriage and family. His novels are characterized by simplicity and gentle humour. His fiction forms a wide canvas with a multi - faceted projection of marriage as the focal point of life. This article aims at portraying Narayan's treatment of love with it's beauty and sordidness of human nature and behavior and has delved deep into the psyche of man-woman relationship.

Key words: treatment of love.

R.K.Narayana, popularly known as the novelist of Malgudi, having preserved the identity of his fictional world both in body and spirit, has acquired over the years a Universal character in over half a century of creative writing. The essential quality of Narayan's portrayal of life is Indian and he rarely exploits topicality or contemporaneity as a thematic plank. His vision of life is essentially comic-ironic, generally free from satirical comment of moral attitude in life. His contribution to Indian literature is purely indigenous. The vast corpus of his writings is nothing but a testimony to his Indian sensibility deeply anchored in age-old traditions and still responsive to current compulsive influences. He is fully aware of the limitations of the range of his portrayal of life, but "content like Jane Austen, with his little bit of ivory, just so many inches wide" (Iyengar 360). Portrayal of all roots of life and family is considered by him as an essential condition of good writing. He says, "To be a good writer anywhere, you must have roots-both in religion and family I have three things, I am rooted to the right triangle of Madras, Mysore and Coimbatore, none of them much more than a couple of hundred miles distant from the others"(Mehta)

Narayan's novels are characterized by Chekhovian simplicity and gentle humour. He told stories of simple folks trying to live their simple lives in a changing world. The characters in his novels are very ordinary, down-to-earth Indians trying to blend tradition with modernism. A variegated

pattern of life, encompassing human relationship of various shades-romantic, marital, paternal, and fraternal and so on-provides the canvas of this world. "The family is the immediate context in which his sensibility operates, and his novels are remarkable for the subtlety and conviction with which family relationships are treated-that of son and parents and brother in **The Bachelor of Arts**, of husband and wife, father and daughter in **The English Teacher**, of father and son in **The Financial Expert** and of grandmother and grandson in **Waiting for the Mahatma**" (Walsh 54) To this may be added-of father and son, again, in **The Vendor of Sweets** and aunt and nephew in **The Painter of Signs**. He rarely attempted an ambitious theme on a large canvas. For example, **Waiting for the Mahatma** may be described as a Gandhian novel thematically, but have also Narayan's focus is on the love-story of Sriram and Bharati, a youthful pair.

Narayan's portrayal of life, though circumscribed physically, acquires an element of universality mainly on account of its inherent philosophical profundity of vision. It is all-embracing and positive with no room for negation or rejection of life. "Narayan's greatest charm lies in making Malgudi and its people and their values real for us.....Narayan is neither a social pathologist nor a social reformer. He accepts life in totality" (Mukherjee 87). The middle class family life is the focal of his projection. Within this framework, he further narrows down to concentrate on the themes of love and marriage. From his first 'adult'

novel namely **The Bachelor of Arts** to the latest, it has remained the main thematic plank. **The Bachelor of Arts, The Dark Room, The English Teacher, Mr.Sampath, The Financial Expert, Waiting for the Mahatma, The Guide, The Man-Eater of Malgudi, The Vendor of Sweets and The Painter of Signs**-all form a panoramic cacalcade of projections of these perennially vital themes on a fictional canvas.

No doubt, Narayan's treatment of love and marriage has various hues and shades-bright and dark, sparkling and somber. It has the ardour of infatuation and the euphoria of the illusion of love, the passionate frenzy of a youthful yearning heart and the intensity of married love. Chandran, Krishnan, Ravi, Sriram, Raju and Raman are all lovers in their characteristically individual ways. Raju's love for Rosie passes through the entire gamut of this most primal of instincts and urges. It begins with a consuming passion for the body, grows into an overpowering possessiveness, and finally dissolves in disillusionment. Krishnan's love for his wife Susila is the most lyrical treatment of the ecstasy and agony of love. The ecstasy of marital love terminates in the tragic death of Susila. The cognate theme of marriage receives an equally elaborate treatment in Narayan's novels. From **The Bachelor of Arts** to **The Painter of Signs**, Narayan's fiction forms a wide canvas with a multi-faceted projection of marriage as the focal point of family. Joys and failure of marriage especially in the context of the middle class Hindu family, receive apt treatment in his novels. While **The Bachelor of Arts** deals with the romantic infatuation and euphoria of anticipated marital bliss, **The Dark Room** lays focus on the dark side of marriage in the traditional Indian perspective, which is a poignant portrayal of gloom, despair and failure of marriage where Savitri, the protagonist, is projected as a silent suffering wife, almost an archetypal victim of male chauvinism.

Waiting for the Mahatma is again redolent with the fragrance of youthful romantic love. **The Guide** is a major work of Narayan's fiction where the themes of love and marriage receive some unusual treatment. With all its ardour and passion, the love-relationship of Raju and Rosie is morally flawed as it carries the stigma of adultery and infidelity on the part of Rosie and that of seduction and temptation on Raju's part. The married life of Rosie and Marco is a psychic study of incompatibility in marriage. It is R.K.N's second elaborate and penetrative study of the failure of marriage after **The Dark Room**.

Though R.K.Narayan has taken up for treatment a diversity of themes, love and marriage are said to be undeniably the two most prominent and recurrent themes projected in his fiction. The theme essentially dealt with in **The Bachelor of Arts** is nothing but the romantic illusions of youth and their persistence in spite of lessons learned from hard experience of life. The protagonist here is Chandran, a young man "in his last year of college and his first year of freedom" (Bachelor of Arts) Chandran's whole being is almost consumed by the youthful frenzy of the passion of love. In fact, it is not love but the passion of being in love, its illusion, that overwhelms him. The theme of love acquires some new colouring because of Narayan's treatment of it in its youthful rainbow colours. Chandran's imagination turns his illusions increasingly colourful. He begins to imagine the mental working of Malathi and seek the inner recesses of her mind. "He had every reason to believe that the girl had told her parents she would marry Chandran and no one else. But now could she know him or his name? Girls had a knack of learning these things by a sort of sixth sense. How splendid of her to speak out her mind like this, brave girl" (79). Chandran's love for Malathi is, in fact, a mad passion of falling in the delusion of love. Part-II of the novel further develops and intensifies the aura of infatuation and illusion of love. The passion of love knows no barriers of reason and control. But in the case of Chandran, it is not so much the passion of love as its illusion that constitutes the thematic significance of this part of the novel. Love which in the beginning was an all-consuming passion turns into a hollow unreality. Recapitulating his experience before his friend Mohan, he goes to the extreme, "He then explained his new philosophy, which followed the devastating discovery that love and friendship were the veriest illusion. He explained that people married because their sexual appetite had to be satisfied and there must be somebody to manage the house. There was nothing deeper than that in any man and woman relationship" (P 123). The girl Susila is divine with all the charm, beauty and enchantment of irony in a sweetly delectable.

" For the rest of journey the music of the word 'Susila' range in his ears. Susila, Susila Susila. Her name, music, figure, face and everything about her was divine. Susila, Susila Malathi, not a spot beside susila. it was a tongue twister; he wondered why people like that name" (The Bachelor of Arts 162)

Chandran returned "a new man, his mind full of Susila, the sacred fire, of brilliant lights , music,

gaiety and laughter" (Greene IX). He remains a romantic day-dreamer, still lost in a world of make-believe. He is able to imagine all qualities, accomplishments and graces in Susila as he had done earlier in Malathi. Narayan treats the theme of romantic love in a romantic, almost mocking vein, it is free from any moral attitude. The portrayal is clear and objective. The theme of romantic love is not something new. Chendran in his passionate ardour of first love, may well be taken up as a re-incarnation of an Orlando, a Romeo or a Ferdinand.

From the rainbow colours of romantic love to the somber shades of marital incompatibility is a sorrowful transition which Narayan's novel **The Dark Room** marks. This novel treats, in the Indian perspective, the theme of marital disharmony. From the world of romantic infatuation and illusion of youth in **The Bachelor of Arts** Narayan delves deep into the psyche of conjugal conflict and unhappiness. "In **The Dark Room**, Narayan tries to tell a serious tale of silent suffering and temporary rebellion ending in subject surrender...The central theme here is evidently the plight of the traditional Hindu wife..." (Naik 18). The novelist's chief thematic concern in the novel relates to a realistic and poignant portrayal of a traditional Hindu wife's predicament. The discordant note of marital incompatibility is struck on the very first page of the novel. Ramani, the bullying, domineering and unfeeling husband and father is responsible for vitiating the atmosphere of an otherwise happy, understanding and loving family. He is an inveterate fault-finder and gambler. He finds fault with everything, including food in the home - "Ramani was eccentric and lawless in his taste"

Savitri, the central character, finds herself helpless and powerless to do anything. "There were girls now a days who took charge of their husbands the moment they were married; there was her own friend Gangu who has absolutely tethered up her poor man" (*The Dark Room* 6). Savitri is miserable as a wife but she finds her joy as a mother of three cheerful and loving children - two daughters Sumati and Kamala and a son Babu.

Through the character of Janamma, Narayan sketches the traditional uncomplaining Hindu wife who accepts suffering as her destiny. With chapter five opens a new disquieting chapter in Savitri's married life. The caddish and frivolous Ramani gets an opportunity for extra-matrimonial thrills when a fashionable and coquettish woman Shanta Bai joins his office as a probationer, His

craving for novelty and excitement makes him mentally compare his simple devoted wife with the glamorous Shanta Bai - "How well a simple veiled sari sat on her why couldn't one's wife dress so attractively" (DR 72). The sensual charm of Shanta Bai is made more tempting by her coquettish mannerisms - "She tossed her head now and then, slightly pouted her lips, and raised her brows" Narayana presents in Shanta Bai a contrast to Savitri. While Savitri is a home-builder, Shanta Bai is a home-wrecker. She represents the butterfly type of women character in his novels. This novel treats a serious moral aberration in the marital infidelity of the husband. This theme was again taken up by him in **The Guide**. But the situation there is different. Ramani has no moral, emotional or physical compulsions to justify his extra-matrimonial affair while Rosie in **The Guide** is almost pushed into it.

Savitri's act of leaving her home as a protest and rebellion against Ramani's male chauvinism marks the center point of the novel. However, the typical Indianness of the situation characterizes Narayan's treatment of his protagonist. Savitri locks the fiber of Nora. Savitri ruminates, "One definite thing in life is fear. Fear, from the cradle to funeral pyre, and even beyond that, fear of torture in the otherworld. Afraid of a husband's displeasures, and of the discomforts that might be caused to him, morning to night and all night too" (P116). Her long spell of introspection ends in a sudden toppling into the sarayu. The concluding part of the novel begins with the rescue of Savitri by Mari, one of Narayan's countless interesting minor characters. His wife Ponni provides another facet of married life. She has her technique of handling an erring husband

"Keep the men under the rod, and they will be alright. Show them that you care for them and they will toe you up the treat you like a dog" (192)

Bidding her good bye, Ponni gives Savitri her last piece of advice, "Remember, men are good creatures but you must never give way to them. Be firm and they will behave" (P192). Savitri remains essentially a weak ordinary Indian woman. The characteristic Indianness of Savitri's surrender to her accepted destiny is a touch of realism in Narayan's view of life. She finally declares, "I can't keep away from my children and my home."

Narayan regarded **The Dark Room** as "an early testament of the women's Lib' Movement" (P119) and it was described as a major work of fiction for

the portrayal of the dark side of marriage. In the words of C.D.Narasimhaiah, "One may without loss skip the interveing Dark Room" (P 143). A.N.Kaul goes to the extent of describing it as a 'weak novel' this simply unfold story of age old oppression of woman in the confines of marriage is profound and poignant despite its short commings" (P64). As for the theme of love and marriage, Narayan's treatment in the novel **The English Teacher** is rather unmatched by any other work of fiction. the texture of the novel is delicate and redolent with the fragrance of love. The uniqueness of his treatment of love and marriage here in this novel emanates mainly from the delicate fusion of the passion and purity of wedded love. Unlike Chandran, Krishnan is a married youngman, father of a little girl. To him, love is not a physical appetite or obsessive passion. It has acquired serenity, beauty and tenderness of wedded love. The first hint of his married life is delicately suggested through his wife's letter, " I knew the pale blue envelope from my wife , who was in the habit of underlining the anxious last the letter should go off to some other town" (The English Teacher 16)

The marital life of Krishnan and Susila is gradually unfolded through countless little glimpse and occurrences. **The English Teacher** is an unusual novel, particularly in its treatment of the theme of love and marriage. It possesses shades of the emotion of love. The early part is filled with its ecstasy, the middle with its agony and the last with its fulfilment . It is notable for its richness and intensity, In spite of its obvious note of improbability in the second half of the novel, **the English Teacher** is Narayan's most lyrical portrayal of love. Even the element of improbability is made acceptable by the sheer intensity of feeling, " Whether Narayan is actually putting down his personal experience under a thin disguise, or all this is a mere invention, there is an artistic coherence in all that is written and a sense of actuality, which is all that should matter from the point of view of the novel" (Sundaram 55). **The English Teacher** is indeed more than a work of fiction , it is a deep emotional experience of the poetry of conjugal love with the tears and smiles.

As far as the theme of love is concerned, it is through the character of Ravi that one gets a peculiar fact of the passion of love. The theme of marriage gets an elaborate treatment in the novel **Mr.Sampath** . The family life of Srinivas provides the usual middle class married life in which the wife's greatest satisfaction is to feed her husband well. The married life of Margayya has its moments of joy as well as tension. There was not

scope for courtship or premarital love in such a relationship. The novel does not provide any elaborate or penetrative study of love and marriage in relation to the protagonist and other characters. Margayya's family life is centered on his dreams about the future of his son . Most of the interaction between wife and husband, whenever it occurs is related to the mundane affairs of house-keeping or upbringing of Balu , their only child. The novel **waiting for the Mahatma** , though Gandhian in theme, has as its two main characters Sriram and Bharati, a young pair of lovers. The novel has no scope for treatment of marriage but the love between Sriram and Bharati makes for an engaging thematic interest. Against the vast background of the national struggle for freedom, with the Mahatma occupying the centerstage. The love story of Sriram and Bharati provides moments of tenderness, romance, disappointment, anguish and finally consummation. The love story of Sriram and Bharati is developed in a low key but it has its moments of passion and sensuous charm. As a story of two young lovers, it has redolence and fervour," deliciously reminiscent of the jasmine-filled days of conjugal bliss in Krishnan's life before death claimed Susila. Chandran's romantic passion for Malathi the 'optical communion affair - also suggests itself for comparison" (Girila 137) without being explicit, the author suggests sensuality of a young female body. it prevents his concept of love from becoming abstract or platonic. In **The Guide** the kind of love developed and projected is adulterous in the conventional sense, yet it is invested with all the ardour and intensity of emotion . Moving on various planes, Narayan's treatment of love and marriage in **The Guide** has an uncommon degree of complexity.

The twin theme of love and marriage is introduced here. The theme of marital incompatibility is effectively developed through this pair. They are just not made for each other. Narayan has skillfully built up the theme of marital incompatibility. The two characters, Marco and Rosie , are temperamentally poles apart. Rosie has a Master's degree in Economics but she belongs to a family traditionally dedicated to the temples as dancers; " My mother , grandmother, and before her, her mother. Even as a young girl, I danced in our village temple" (The Guide 75). On the other hand, Marco, a man of high social standing has no family at all; he has lived with his books and papers. He is a total failure as a husband . the Rosie - Marco story is a projection of Narayan's treatment of failure in marriage . The theme of love in the context of man

women relationship finds a chequered and complex treatment through the pair of Raju and Rosie. The love relationship between Raju and Rosie passes through a spectrum of human emotional and deviations. It is passion and infatuation, reminiscent of similar beginnings in **The Bachelor of Arts and Waiting for the Mahatma**. Raju begins as a cunning intriguer in seducing a married woman. The love relationship of Raju and Rosie is doomed to fail but it has no moral sanction.

To conclude, Narayan's treatment of love and marriage is a veritable kaleidoscope of human relationship. It projects both the beauty and sordidness of human nature and behaviour. Narayan's milieu as a writer of fiction is the family. In his novels, he has delved deep into the psyche of man - woman relationship, encompassing the entire humanity.

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Failure is the opportunity to begin again, more intelligently.

~ Henry Ford