

THE LITERARY MARRIAGE: SITES OF TENSION AND TRANSFORMATION IN *THE DARK ROOM* BY R. K. NARAYAN

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Abstract: Marriage, as both a social institution and a personal relationship, has long occupied a central place in literature. It serves not only as a plot device but as a symbolic and thematic site where deeper cultural, emotional, and psychological conflicts are played out. The title “The Literary Marriage: Sites of Tension and Transformation” captures this dual function—highlighting how literary representations of marriage reveal the undercurrents of personal disillusionment, societal expectation, and evolving gender dynamics. This paper explores how marriage in literature is seldom static or idealized; rather, it is often marked by tension, negotiation, and change.

By focusing on moments of crisis, miscommunication, and transformation within marital relationships, this research paper examines how authors use marriage as a lens to critique social norms, question patriarchal structures, and explore emotional authenticity. Ultimately, “The Literary Marriage” is not just about unions, but about what those unions reveal—tension as a catalyst for transformation, and transformation as a path to deeper narrative meaning. *The Dark Room* is the only novel in the whole oeuvre of Narayan’s writings which deal exclusively with the problems of an Indian housewife who is financially dependent on her husband. In the novel Narayan has exhibited his understanding of the socio-economic dimension of marriage. *The Dark Room* is centered on Savitri’s revolt on this issue from the 1930s women’s movement. The present paper tries to explore how Narayan grounds his novel on the female politics of the time, which reveals the reality of women’s lives in the thirties.

Keywords: Marriage, Tension, Transformation, Identity, liberty, Romanticism

1.0 Introduction

Narayan takes the subject matter of *The Dark Room* (1938) from the socio-political events of the thirties when All Indian Women Conference was organized to further the women's cause in general and their economic Independence in particular. Founded in 1927, the AIWC was first dedicated to the cause of women's education. By the thirties, it emerged as an influential social reform organization which was determined to fight for the cause of women. Kamala Devi Chattopadhyaya, the secretary of AIWC pointed out that this agitation cannot in any sense be said to be a rebellion against men. She moved a campaign which was intended to make all people aware of the subjugation under which women are forced to live after marriage. In 1936, a book named *Our Cause: A Symposium by Indian Women* was published, which is an attack on the institution of marriage. The editor of the book Shyam Kumari Nehru writes: “it is a cunning device to keep women economically dependent on men, chained with the four walls of the zenana, confined to the performing of household duties alone. Usually marriage is thrust on her much before she can think for herself, and the tie is indissoluble.” (xii) G.J.Bahadurji, one of the contributors of the book considers marriage as bondage. According to her, marriage not only transforms a woman into either a “dressed-up-doll” or a “beast of burden” but

its corollary, motherhood, ensures her lifelong slavery: her creations become the bonds that tie her to the yoke of family life, which, once entered, leaves no room for self-expression, or self-realization" (324). This discourse later became the main agenda of AIWC. Like these women, Savitri is concerned with her economic dependence. The Dark Room is centered on Savitri's revolt on these issues from the 1930s women's movement. The present paper tries to explore how Narayan grounds his novel on the female politics of the time, which reveals the reality of women's lives in the thirties. Narayan himself writes about this novel in My Days:

I was somehow obsessed with the 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 cunningness that she herself began to lose all notions of her independence, individuality, stature, and strength. (Narayan: 1975, 119)

The theme of economic independence of women is reinforced not only from the protagonist Savitri's situation but from Shanta Bai's and 200 other women applicants at Englandia Insurance Company. Savitri is very keen to see her daughters educated and independent: "Sumati and Kamala must study up to the B.A. and not depend for their salvation on marriage." (The Dark Room 93) But the narrator also seems to suggest indirectly that women should throw this oppression from their minds only then their access to work can bring them self-reliance. Shanta Bai who is modern and self-reliant but carries this oppression inside her and enjoys the subjugation forced on her.

The narrative portrays the condition and atmosphere in the family of Ramani, the secretary of Englandia Insurance Company. He is presented as a very arrogant, eccentric and self-opinionated husband, and governs his house according to his own sweet will. The happiness or unhappiness of the house purely depends on his mood. As he is always irritable, the atmosphere in his house is generally very tense, and his wife, children and servants always remain in a state of terror. His wife, Savitri is a traditional Indian woman. She is very beautiful and completely devoted to her husband. But Ramani does not respond to her sentiments even with ordinary warmth. His wife has received nothing from her husband except his temper during the fifteen years of their marriage. Ramani's elaborate ritual of dressing, his elegant and prestigious Chevrolet and his enviable position in Englandia Insurance Company gratifies his sense of self-importance but a deliberate attempt to discourage and subdue his wife's self-assertion.

The Dark Room is conceived of the author's obsession with the philosophy of "Woman as opposed to man, her constant oppressor." (Narayan: 1975, 118). Narayan seems overly critical about the chauvinistic husbands like Ramani whose behavior is always dictatorial towards his wife, Savitri. He believes in the women's "primary duties being wives and mothers". (DR 109) The narrator describes Ramani as self-willed, lawless, conceited and arrogant and a domineering husband. He is shown rash and impetuous who takes delight in belittling others by his stinging comments just from the beginning of the novel. He behaves cynically and irrationally with his wife Savitri and his son, Babu. Even the servant Ranga and the cook have to bear the brunt of his ill-will and flight of moods. He holds his wife responsible for anything and everything from the vegetables chosen to looking after the duties of cook and habits of children. The narrator depicts Ramani as a typical Indian husband who bosses over and nags his wife for the money he earns and spends over her and her children. "Brinjals, cucumber, radish, and greens, all the twelve months in the year and all the thirty days in the month. I don't know when I shall have a little decent food to eat. I slave all day in the office for this mouthful. No lack of expenses, money for this and money for that. If the cook can't cook properly, do the work yourself. What have you to do better than that?" (DR 2) But when he so chooses and in a romantic mood, he begins to make love to Savitri elaborately in the presence of children and the servants much to the discomfort of Savitri. Ramani is everything a husband should not be. He keeps a mistress and the revelation of the fact is too much for Savitri and she ultimately decides to leave the house.

On the other hand, while portraying Savitri the attitude of the narrator is not so critical. Savitri is depicted as a docile, traditional Hindu wife who is devoted to the household and her husband even though the husband treats her badly. Savitri “never interrupted the running commentary with an explanation.” (DR 3) “As this was almost a daily lament as regular as her husband’s lecture, Savitri ceased to pay attention to it.” (DR 5) The narrator focalizer also makes passing observations on the institutions of marriage in India. It is not an inter- personal man -woman relationship. William Walsh, who is less than enthusiastic about certain aspects of *The Dark Room*, has no doubt about its central theme:

“It is the account of marriage given throughout from the point of view of wife, in which the image projected is that of the Indian woman as a victim, written, it should be remembered, some thirty five to forty years before the current talk of women's liberation.” (43)

After fifteen years of married life, the protagonist Ramani and Savitri portray a marriage crisis, which despite its receptive superficial tranquility is beset within by discord because Ramani’s behavior with his concubine in the office is directly in contrast with his attitude towards Savitri in the house. In the name of tradition and so-called ancient cultural views about women, Ramani tries his best to exploit his meek and docile wife. He is shown as a man who is of the opinion that India owes its spiritual eminence to the fact that the people here realize that woman’s primary duty is being a wife and a mother, and a woman who disobeys her husband cannot retain the right of being called a wife.

Narayan as a heterodiegetic narrator ushers the narratee in the realm of a variety of wifely role models, but none of them appears to be sufficient which can grant the equality to women. It appears as if the narrator constructs marriage as a form of slavery in which women are kept in bondage for life. The narrative conforms to the statements made by women activists of the thirties that the Institution of marriage in India instead of making the women happy subjugates them. Gangu’s marriage is an example of freedom but at the cost of social acceptance; Ponni reveals a tyrannical power in marriage; Janamma shows an extreme submission and Savitri finds herself trapped in a marriage which she can neither end nor alter. The narrative voice projects the sad truth of women’s helplessness to the task of living alone. Throughout the text, the narrative voice remains third person. However towards the end of the novel and particularly in the final section of the text, Narayan takes the step of switching it into the first person plural:

“What despicable creations of God are we that we can’t exist without support? I am like a bamboo pole which cannot stand without a wall to support it” . . . “This is defeat. I accept it. I am no good for this fight. I am a bamboo pole.” (DR 146)

The incorporation of the collective voice ‘we’ is a way to make the novel multi-voiced. The plural use is an effective device in creating a sense of inclusiveness and shared identity. All Indian women are included in Savitri’s condemnation of herself and the text becomes a testament to a particular kind of female loneliness and loss. Savitri is shown oscillating between several competing models of womanhood—the traditional, westernized and the lower caste woman. Out of these the traditional model is most unambiguously critiqued by the narrator. Savitri’s name on a traditional Hindu wife of the Mahabharata is a clear sign of this critique. Savitri of the Mahabharata is the most obedient and devoted wife of a loving and respectful husband Satyavan and his parents. Ramani, however, is not Satyavan and Savitri’s retreat to her home is not presented as an acceptance of a traditional role, but as a defeat.

R.K. Narayan’s *The Dark Room* offers a poignant exploration of marriage as a site of emotional turbulence and societal expectation, particularly within the context of early 20th-century Indian middle-class life. Through the strained relationship between Savitri and her husband Ramani, Narayan constructs a literary marriage marked by deep-seated tension, patriarchal dominance, and moments of

personal awakening—making the novel an apt text for examining how marriage becomes a space for both repression and transformation.

At the heart of the narrative lies the imbalance of power within the marital relationship. Ramani embodies the authoritarian male figure whose cold indifference and emotional neglect reflect the larger patriarchal structure in which the wife's identity is often subordinated. Savitri's emotional withdrawal into the symbolic "dark room" represents her silent protest, a retreat from a reality in which her voice is consistently dismissed. Yet, her eventual decision to leave the home, even briefly, signals a moment of resistance—a disruption in the traditional narrative of obedient wifehood.

Narayan, while often seen as a writer of gentle irony and domestic realism, here subtly critiques the social institution of marriage by illuminating the emotional costs borne by women in rigidly gendered roles. Savitri's return home at the end of the novel may suggest a return to the status quo, but it also leaves lingering questions about female agency, self-worth, and the limits of transformation within oppressive systems.

The Dark Room, then, stands as a literary portrayal of marriage not as a romantic ideal, but as a complex and contested space—one where silence and speech, withdrawal and assertion, obedience and resistance coexist. It affirms the idea that in literature, marriage is not merely a private affair, but a site where cultural values are rehearsed, challenged, and sometimes reshaped.

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