

Domestic harmony and the Outsider Intrusion in R. K. Narayan's *The Dark Room*

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Abstract

R.K. Narayan's *Malgudi* is a self-contained universe that has everything that a person would want. The peace-loving citizens go about doing their daily chores with no big ambitions. As modernity reaches Malgudi also inevitably, outsiders come into the serene world. There is cultural class and new ways of living. An emerging middle class apes the west, pretends to be Britishers in their dress, attitude and life style. The moral fabric of the Malgudi universe is challenged and shaken. Ramani, working as the manager of Engladia Insurance Company, enjoys life with a bungalow, car, servants. He, being a B.A degree holder is coated and booted. He is the unchallenged boss in his house as well as in his office. He treats his wife Savithri as a possession to be fed, clothed and provided with needed things to be used as and when he pleases. The novel is a fine study in contrast between the characters of Savitri and Shanta Bai, an outsider, who comes to work in Engladia, the insurance company. Ramani exploits Shanta Bai and develops an extra marital affair with her. Savitri protests and leaves the house. She drowns herself in the river but saved by Mari, the burglar and locksmith. His wife Ponni takes care of her, emboldens her. After a brief sojourn in a temple, Savitri returns home.

Key words: placid Malgudi- modernisation - western influence – male chauvinism – arrival of outsider – complacency challenged – outsider leaving – normalcy regained.

The *Dark Room* published in 1938 is far ahead of its time. As in many of his novels, R.K. Narayan touches upon many of the ideas that the later writers of Indian English Fiction developed. He, as a writer, is both a raconteur and a social revolutionary. His Malgudi, the simple and typical south Indian town is but a universe that contained everything. It's a town at the threshold of modernity with schools and college, restaurants and railway station. In his literary career that spanned for nearly sixty decades and above, he developed his pet child Malgudi and placed it in the literary map of the world. The place is of special significance as it is symptomatic of the many developments that happened in the country. As they put the blame on the place in the movie *Blame It on Rio* for many of the happenings, in *The Dark Room* also the place, besides Ramani, is responsible for many of the happenings.

The Dark Room has two powerful women characters – Savitri and Shanta Bai who are in antithetical stance. Savitri, a traditional woman, lives within the boundaries of a conventional family life. She adjusts with her husband on one hand and takes care of her children on the other. She

bears with all the harsh and intimidating words of her husband. Even when she comes to know that he has an extra marital life, she only requests him to stop it and promise her that he will not carry on that affair. But Ramani is so very rude, authoritative and adamant that he asks Savitri to leave the house if she cannot put up with it. On the other hand, Shanta Bai presents herself as an existentialist who values only the moment, regardless of the past or the present. She came away from her husband as she found him incompatible. She is happy with Ramani when she is with him. She accepts all his favours with no qualms or what so ever as she strongly feels that her charms deserve all and more. Narayan leaves the novel open ended and leaves the conclusion to the readers. The author does not give a clear picture of what happened or might happen to Shanta Bai. As an outsider, Shanta Bai creates problems but they subside in the due course as Malgudi has the nature of consuming everything and let Sarayu flow past as ever.

The first forty pages of the novel describes of an organised South Indian Brahmin family. Ramani, the man of the house, is educated to an extent and is employed in Engladia Insurance Company. He is handsomely paid to run life comfortably with a Chevrolet car. The novel starts with the domestic life of Ramani, his wife Savitri and the three children Babu, Sumati and Kamala.

Ramani is found at his male chauvinistic best bossing over his subservient wife. He finds fault with the menu and the cooking. Ramani does this not because of the items or their taste but because he wants to assert his authority undermining others.

Brinjals, cucumber, radish, and greens, all the twelve months in a 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?" (P.2)

He throws tantrums at others and leaves for the office after having pleased his ego. He coats and boots himself and leaves by his Chevrolet car.

After Ramani leaves, Savitri eats some and rests for a while. She is constantly worried about her children. She attends to her children with love and care when they come home from school for the lunch break. After giving instructions to the cook, she leaves to catch up some gossip with her friends Gangu and Janamma. This is her daily routine, more or less. As Ramani comes back home by Eight thirty, she always returns well ahead of time and dutifully waits for him.

One evening Ramani comes back home early and summons for Savitri. She rushes back home from Janamma's house all tensed. Ramani orders her to get ready to go out for a movie. When Savitri suggests taking the children along with, he dismisses it as he is in his romantic best that evening. They go to the Palace Talkies, the new theatre. He has gone to theater mainly not to see the Tamil movie Kuchela but to show off.

Ramani sat in a first-class seat with his wife by his side, very erect. He was very proud of his wife. She had a very fair complexion and well pronounced features, and her sky-blue saree gave her a distinguished appearance. He surveyed her slyly, with a sense of satisfaction at possessing her. When

people in the theatre threw looks at her, it increased his satisfaction all the more, and he leant over and said, "They are showing Kuchela" (P.22)

This above passage clearly explains how Ramani regards his wife. He sees her more as a prized possession, a beauty doll that he can play with as he pleases. Instead of getting annoyed when people threw looks at her, he rather feels happy. Savitri is so very innocent and pious that when Kuchela lighted camphor and prayed on the screen, she brought her palms together and prayed!

When Navaratri comes, preparations are on for a "golu", the display of dolls. The girls are very much excited about it. Balu throws himself in to make better arrangements and with the help of his friend Chandru arranges for more lights. When switched on, the fuse is blown and the whole house plunges into darkness. Ramani comes back home and slaps Balu. This upsets Savitri and she seeks refuge in "the dark room" only to come out when Janamma comes and cajoles Savitri to come out.

Life goes on fine with minor hitches and insults until this time:

In the new year the Engladia Insurance Company decided to take a few women probationers into its branches, who were to be trained in office and field work, and later assist the company in securing insurance policies on female lives. The company advertised its new scheme with the maximum noise, and the response was very satisfying. (P. 48)

The advertisement was placed but many did not turn up as women then were not educated many in number and even so, many did not come forward to work. Most of them were destined to stay back at home like Savitri and look after the house and its inhabitants. The few who turned up were either destitutes or utterly unsuitable for the job. "On the very last day the last applicant entered. At the sight of her, Ramani pushed his chair back and rose a thing he had not done for anyone till now". (P.49) He felt so very impressed at the very first look itself and carried on the interview. He asked her more questions not to check if she would suit the job or not but to know more about her. Completely satisfied with her appearance and bold, outspoken nature, he appointed her at once.

Shanta Bai is an anti-thesis of Savitri in almost every way. Unlike Savitri, she has availed the benefit of modern education. She has an ambition of establishing an

independent life on her own. She is married to her cousin who is a drunkard and gambler. She deserts him and her parents and receives education at Madras for the sake of setting up an independent career in the world. Shanta Bai is a socially liberated woman in search of a self-dependent entity. After her graduation, she is driven from pillar to post in search of a job. She works as teacher for some time. She applies for the post of woman Insurance agent in Engladia Insurance Company at Malgudi away from her home town.

Ramani not only plays the role of the manager but also that of her well-wisher. He takes personal interest in her well-being and becomes so very attentive of all her needs to see to it that she is comfortable. Such is his "social" responsibility! "Ramani learnt that she lived in a hotel. That simply would not do. He called in Pereira next day and asked, ... why shouldn't we give her that room till she gets settled in this place? (P.52-3) Ramani gets busy getting the room ready and furnishing it too. He arranges for a cot, a bench. A table and a couple of chairs, all brought from his house much to chagrin of his wife Savitri. Ramani persevered and got her appointment confirmed. "The Head office confirmed her appointment nearly a week later. Ramani's recommendation was so strong that the Head Office had no choice in the matter." (P.55)

Ramani, the Secretary of the company, feels drawn towards her as he is impressed by her beauty and her voice at the time of interview. She is appointed on the condition that she will have to give a business of ten thousand rupees in the first two months. In case she fails to do so, she will be dismissed and the next person will be appointed in her place. During the first two months, she will get a monthly stipend of sixty rupees. After the successful completion of the probation-period, she will get a salary of one hundred and fifty rupees per month. The terms and conditions are not very satisfying to her. Ramani fears that she may reject the offer. He tries to persuade her by saying that he will get her salary enhanced later on. She accepts the offer and starts working in his office.

Shanta Bai receives excessive attention from Ramani. Her appointment in the office creates different reactions in the mind of other male employees. A table, a chair and a separating screen are set up for her. Too much of fuss about her irritates Kanteinger, the accountant who is all against the entry of a woman employee in the office.

Pereira, the Manager does not feel upset over it. Rather he enjoys the discomfiture of Kanteinger. Ramani gets a room vacated in the office for her stay. He brings a cot, a bench and some vessels for her from his own house. One night on his way back home from the club, he goes to his office on the pretext of checking up his papers and locks etc. He knocks at Shanta Bai's room in the passage. She receives him inside the room. During her first private meeting with him, she tells him the story of her past life. She is given to hysterical moods. Her moods change suddenly from hilarity to moroseness and irritability. She expresses pseudo-philosophical ideas about life such as "Living Today and Letting Tomorrow Take Care of Itself", " or Omar Khayyam's philosophy of drinking the cup of life to its lees. She says that she is like a wind along the waste. Whenever she is in a mood of depression, she likes to play upon piano. The euphemistic sister-brother relationship between Shanta Bai and Ramani develops into amorous one. Being an enchantress, she holds him completely under her spell.

Shanta Bai accepted all favours pretending to be a bit uncomfortable about the undue favours. She is coquettish no doubt what so ever. She starts to placate the soft emotions of Ramani. She said, "I thought that if I had a start of two hundred, I could buy a tiny Baby Austin for myself. "She added with a sentimental sigh, "But I suppose all one's dreams can never come true." (P.56) It is clear that she has big ambitions. A hopeless wayward woman eyes for a Baby Austin!

Their love-making continues at the cost of normalcy of Savitri's family. Ramani takes her round the town in his car. They retire to the privacy of river Sarayu in the moonlit night. They visit a theatre but leave it before the film ends because Shanta Bai does not feel interested in the film. He does whatever she likes him to do. He stays away from his house with her throughout the night. This love association of the two breaks down the normalcy of Savitri's domestic life as she leaves her husband's home in protest against his persistent entanglement into the vicious snares of Shanta Bai. Moreover, this extra-marital relationship also exposes the double-facedness of Ramani's character. He is autocratic, tyrannical and self-willed as a husband on the one hand and submissive, cajoling, persuasive and self-effacing as a lover on the other.

Ramani unthinkingly goes around with Shanta Bai and gets noticed by many. He is totally unconcerned about

what the society might think as his dotage overflow the measure. He takes her to all places with no inhibition – to the Sarayu River bank, to restaurants and to the cinema. Gangu happens to see them together and she brings it to the notice of Savitri.

"Well, what is the news in the town? asked Savitri.

Nothing very special. Did you see the Tamil picture they show you at the Palace? ... I think your husband went to the picture....

Gangu said unasked. "Don't think I am gossiping, but there was another person with him; perhaps it is the person about whom people are talking all this nonsense." (P.77)

Poor Savitri, instead of accosting him with the issue, thinks that she has become unattractive and spruces up herself to entice Ramani. Savitri made up herself to entice Ramani and was waiting for him.

She sat up quite late into the night. When overcome by fatigue she lay down, keeping her head lightly on the pillow for fear that she might crush the flowers or rumple the hair. He might come any time and she wanted to meet him fresh as she was in the evening; there was nothing more unsightly than rumpled hairs and crushed flowers on one's head... She dreamt that her husband came home, held her in his arms, and swore that he had been carrying about only a parasol, and silly people said that he had been going about with a woman... (P.83)

But Ramani did not pay attention to her as he was occupied otherwise. As he was totally immersed in his dotage with the crafty Shanta Bai, he does not bother about the domestic treat!

As Savitri understands that things have gone out of her hands and beyond her control, she decides to quit the house. At night, she leaves and walks towards the river Sarayu. She wades into the river and as she was about to drown, she is rescued by the lock smith cum burglar Mari. He takes Savitri home. Ponni, his wife, nurses Savitri back to health and accommodates her and emboldens her. Ponni observes, "Remember, men are good creatures, but you must never give way to them. Be firm and they will behave. (P.148)

He felt relieved at having found a way out of the present difficulty, however vague the exit might be. He reversed the car and retraced his way. His heart was lighter now as he drove up the silent market road.at

the crossing he turned to his left, drove into race-Course Road, and stopped before his office. (P. 157)

After Savitri comes back home and resumes her normal routine life, one afternoon she hears Mari hawking in the streets for job.

"She called Ranga and told him, "Call that lock-repairer who was crying in the street just now. He must be in the next street.

"Yes, Madam."

As Ranga was about to step out, she changed her mind: "Let him go, don't call him."She thought: "Why should I call him here? What have I?" (P.162)

This clearly depicts the helpless condition of Indian women who are left with no money of their own as they do not have financial resources or independence. The story entails the tale of a tormented wife. *The Dark Room* is a superb examination of a patriarchal society and also reflects the injustices that this type of society causes to woman and children.

Nazar Singh Sidhu asserts, "The dark room in the ultimate analysis becomes a point of irony, the more Savitri suffers behind its dark, the more she achieves her authentic self". In this milieu alienation is the very essence of existence and the most glorious recovery of being. She overcomes all the existential storms through patience and fortitude and the belongingness towards Malgudi. This simple novel brings out Narayan's concern for the 'Savitris' of our country. Savitri is an agent for Narayan's quest for psychological insight and awareness of the plight of unfortunate woman who has neither the strength of will nor the economic and educational opportunities to withstand unfair male aggression.

Shanta Bai, being a drifter, sensed that her survival in Malgudi is no more plausible and so she vanished into thin air. Or maybe Narayan was not interested in developing her character further as the purpose is over. Ramani also does not reveal any emotional attachment to Shanta Bai like Raju in *The Guide* towards Rosie.

He felt relieved at having found a way out of the present difficulty, however vague the exit might be. He reversed the car and retraced his way. His heart was lighter now as he drove up the silent market road. at the crossing he turned to his left, drove into race-Course Road, and stopped before his office. (DR, 157)

The Dark Room, *The Guide* and *The Painter of Signs* examine the evolution of modern women. Savitri and Shanta Bai in *The Dark Room* present antithetical stands. Savitri is tradition-bound and suffers from the countless ties of culture and orthodoxy. Shanta Bai is a divorcee at the age of eighteen and she is let loose into the world to fend for herself. Savitri represents the suppressed condition of women in family and society. She is a typical victim of an oppressive system that keeps women in dark rooms.

The Dark Room brings out the inherent danger related to women's liberation through the character of Shanta Bai. With no moorings, either with her parents or husband, she chooses to live all by herself as her whim carries her. Savitri and Shanta Bai represent two different antithetical values of life. Savitri finds safety and security in her slavery and Shanta Bai finds insecurity and rootlessness in her freedom. Shanta Bai happens to let herself loose in the world at the mercy of predators like Ramani who seek a home away from home. The arrival of Shanta Bai disrupts the constructed, established and accepted universe of Savitri. Though she is not inwardly happy with the life with Ramani, she accepts it and has mothered three children, yes, there is romance in her life. But all gets spoiled on the arrival of Shanta Bai on the scene.

Savitri quits home as she finds the atmosphere stifling. She can put up any form of humiliation as long as her husband remains true to her. But once she comes to know for sure that Ramani will not stay away from Shanta Bai she takes the bold decision to quit and end her life. But Sarayu will not take her in as Savitri is destined to live. Her stay with Ponni emboldens her to a great extent. Her stay in the temple for a while shows her that her dark room is far

better! So, she returns home and tries to adjust with the prevailing conditions.

Shanta Bai, the rational drifter, understands her position and acts accordingly. Her end is not clearly etched in the novel.

It seems Narayan has hinted at the concept of live - in catching up in the southern parts of India as well in this novel. Women, with education and exposure, are emboldened to come out of the shackles of the patriarchal fiefdom and seek the career of their choice. True to the tenets of post modernism, Narayan clearly indicates that the thrust is on the choice of the individual and not of the family or society.

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