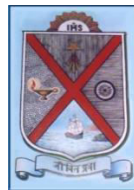


Existentialism in *The Dark Room* by R. K. Narayan

*Project submitted to the University of Calicut in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of*

**Bachelor of Arts
in
English and History
by
Alaina Jose
CCASADER14**



March 2021

**Department of B.A English & History
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Declaration

I, **Alaina Jose**, hereby declare that this project entitled **Existentialism in *The Dark Room* by R. K. Narayan**, submitted to the University of Calicut in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the award of the Degree of Bachelor of Arts in English and History, is a research work done by me under the supervision and guidance of, **Miss. Ansiya T A** Assistant Professor, Department of English & History, Christ College (Autonomous), Irinjalakuda.

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Certificate

This is to certify that this project entitled **Existentialism in *The Dark Room*** by **R. K. Narayan**, a record of research work carried out by **Mrs. Alaina Jose** under my supervision and guidance in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the award of the degree of Bachelor of Arts in English and History submitted to the University of Calicut.

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Alaina Jose

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Introduction

“*The Dark Room*” written by R.K. Narayan is a well-known work in literature. “Literature” is a Latin word which means ‘writing formed with letters’. Literature most commonly refers to the works of the creative imagination. It broadly refers to any collection of written or oral work, but narrowly refers to writings specifically considered to be an art form, especially prose, fiction, drama and poetry in contrast to academic writing and newspapers. Literature, as an art form, can also include works in various non-fiction genres, such as autobiography, diaries, memoir, letters and the essay as well as in the disciplines of history and philosophy.

Literature is classified according to whether it is poetry, prose or drama and such works are categorised according to historical periods or their adherence to certain aesthetic features or genre. The major types of literature across the world are English, Greek, Latin, Roman, African, Indian, American, French, Irish, Spain, Chinese, Italian, Japanese, Persian, Sanskrit, Nepali, Russian and Canadian literature.

Indian literature refers to the literature produced on the Indian subcontinent until 1947 and in the republic of India thereafter. The Republic of India has 22 officially recognised languages and a huge variety of literature has been produced in these languages over the years. The earliest works of Indian literature were orally transmitted. The earliest Indian literature took the form of the canonical Hindu sacred writings known as the Veda, which were written in Sanskrit. Bharatendu Harishchandra (9 September 1850 – 6 January 1885) is known as the Father of Indian Literature.

Indian English literature, also referred to as Indian writing in English, is the body of work by writers in India who write in English language and whose native or co-native language could be one of the numerous languages of India. It is also associated with the works of members of the Indian diaspora. The very definition of the adjective 'Indian' here is hazy. Nissim Ezekie may be justifiably called the Father of post-independence and modern poetry of India and through the entire subcontinent, the Father of the postcolonial South Asian English Poetry as well.

The first generation of Indian English writers projected the themes of nationalism, the freedom struggle, the partition, social reform, rural-urban conflict, freedom and plight of the untouchables and landless poor.

R.K. Narayan is regarded as one of best Indian English writer. R.K. Narayan's full name was Rasipuram Krishnaswami Iyer Narayanaswami. He was born in Madras in 1906, October 10. He was educated there and at Maharaj's College in Mysore. He was an Indian writer known for his work set in the fictional South Indian town of Malgudi. He was a leading author of early Indian literature in English along with Mulk Raj Anand and Raja Rao. He was one of the finest Indian authors of his generation writing in English. Narayan typically portrays the peculiarities of human relationships and the ironies of Indian daily life, in which modern urban existence clashes with ancient tradition. His style is graceful, marked by genial humour, elegance and simplicity.

Reared by his grandmother, Narayan completed his education in 1930 and briefly worked as a teacher before deciding to devote himself to writing. His first novel, *Swami and Friends* (1935), is an episodic narrative recounting the adventures of a group of schoolboys. That book and much of Narayan's later works are set in the

fictitious South Indian town of Malgudi. Narayan typically portrays the peculiarities of human relationships and the ironies of Indian daily life, in which modern urban existence clashes with ancient tradition. His style is graceful, marked by genial humour, elegance, and simplicity. Among the best-received of Narayan's 34 novels are *The English Teacher* (1945), *Waiting for the Mahatma* (1955), *The Guide* (1958), *The Man-Eater of Malgudi* (1961), *The Vendor of Sweets* (1967), and *A Tiger for Malgudi* (1983). Narayan also wrote a number of short stories; collections include *Lawley Road* (1956), *A Horse and Two Goats and Other Stories* (1970), *Under the Banyan Tree and Other Stories* (1985), and *The Grandmother's Tale* (1993). In addition to works of nonfiction (chiefly memoirs), he also published shortened modern prose versions of two Indian epics, *The Ramayana* (1972) and *The Mahabharata* (1978).

R.K. Narayan is considered as one of the leading figures of early Indian literature in English. He is the one who made India accessible to the people a window to peep into Indian culture and sensibilities. In his long career he published fourteen novels, over two hundred short stories, a memoir, two travel books, innumerable essays, and two plays. His last published work was *Grandmother's Tale* (1992), which in many ways reinforced the concerns and motifs of his writing in his long career—themes like exile and return, education (in the widest sense of the term), woman and her status in the society, myths and the ancient Indian past, tradition and modernity, Malgudi and its culture, appearance and reality, the family and so on. These have been Narayan's consistent concerns in a career spanning over nearly seventy years.

In this deep ploughing of a small plot of literary land, Narayan almost resembles Jane Austen who too, in a somewhat shorter career, painted in varying colours a small canvas of quintessential English life and manners. While the range of

Austen or Narayan may be small, their depth places them in the ranks of the truly great novelists of their times. Perhaps no special case needs to be made for Austen because of the enormous scholarship on her. One might however need to highlight Narayan's excellences. In our postmodernist times a writer like him, who is not obscure, difficult or dense in his writings, is likely to be less in favour, though recent scholarship has begun to evaluate him in post-colonial-post-modern terms. He received many awards including Filmfare Award for the Best Story, Padma Bhushan and Padma Vibhushan. He passed away on 13th May 2001 at Chennai due to heart failure.

The Dark Room is another marvelous novel written by R. K. Narayan where rigid traditional values are upheld and held staunchly. *The Dark Room* has acute sympathetic descriptions of the characters. There is irony and humour through the poignant pains of the leading female character Savitri. Malgudi, a fabricated town, somewhere in South India, is where the story develops and molds. It is a touching story highlighting the bare truths of life of a woman who was totally dependent on her husband. *The Dark Room* is about a dominant, excessively critical and self-centered husband, Ramani living with his wife Savitri and three children Kamala, Babu and Sumati. Here Savitri is a submissive wife who listens to all the harsh abuses sent out to her by her husband Ramani. Savitri would flee to her dark room when she could not tolerate the pangs of intolerance and maltreatment meted out to her unfairly.

Ramani works for the elite Engladia Insurance Company and will do anything to satisfy his bosses. The first scene sees him criticising everything that his wife serves him on the table. He curses the cook and freely taunts his wife. At work, he takes more than a little fancy to a junior called Shanta Bai. She is pretty and recently separated from her husband. Ramani is taken in by her charms and goes out of his

way to help her out, including vacating a spare room in the office and even making his wife give away some of their furniture to make Shanta comfortable. On the way from his golf club, he regularly starts spending time at her room, and sits entranced listening to her.

Savitri discovers sadly that her husband is having an affair with another woman and her husband had even took her favorite bench so that he can use it to decorate the other woman's house. Her husband seems more interested in flattering and pleasing the other woman. A simpleton like Savitri has nowhere to go. She tries to drown herself but unfortunately she gets saved. She works as a temple custodian. She can fend for herself but she has her past life also. She cannot forget the bleak look on her children's faces when she abandoned them, much to their shock. When Savitri hears of it she is unable to bear the humiliation . She confronts her husband who dismisses her objections. Desolate at being taken so entirely for granted she raises her voice and then is determined to leave the house. She wants to take the kids along, but Ramani stops her harshly. "Don't touch them or talk to them. Go yourself, if you want. They are my children," he shouts.

The blatant disregard shown by her callous husband causes such depression in her heart that she wanders alone in the street and even plunges herself in the river. But overcome by fear, she shouts out for help. A blacksmith by day and burglar by night saves her. He brings along his wife, Ponni who tries to befriend Savitri. She offers her shelter and food. But such a madness seizes Savitri that she refuses to eat anything not earned by herself. She is disgusted at being at the mercy of the men in her life – father, brother, husband. She gets so obstinate about not taking any more charity from anyone that she starts working at a temple as a cleaner for a cantankerous priest. But in a day she realises the impracticality of her choice and returns home, though a part

of her is dead now. Ramani is relieved to find her back, less for her sake, and more to keep up social pretenses.

Narayan's sympathies are with Savitri though he resists from make a grand feminist statement. She leaves the house for valid reasons, but reconciles and comes back. Narayan, above all, much in the vein of say a Jane Austen was a realist and understood the limitations of people in their context and worlds. Narayan's characters rebel against a traditional and regressive society. Earlier in *Bachelor Of Arts*, the young protagonist is sickened at his inability to get the girl he wants and turns a monk for a while. But quickly realising the narrowness of his world, comes back into the mainstream. In *The Dark Room*, Narayan quite clearly feels a deep anguish at the wife being treated shabbily and leaves no opportunity to portray the ugliness and selfishness of the husband's character.

The book is less of a novel and more of a novella. Narayan is effective in his portrayal of Ramani, a vain, sarcastic, self-serving man. Also, the part where Savitri leaves and encounters a different world is poignant, but the book as a whole has a few weaknesses. It is not as lush in its narrative, the story runs rather quickly, and doesn't delve too much into the complexities. Ramani's fling with his junior is awkwardly handled, perhaps because Narayan was writing about an episode he may not have experienced or seen first hand. The 'other' woman's character also remains shadowy.

Indo-Anglican literature, which forms almost an integral part of English literature, has now attained a distinct place in the literary landscape of India. Indian writing in English fiction has been acclaimed around the world for its innovative and radical new approaches to storytelling. The multitude of such writing explores India in its various aspects. Apart from the continued literary output by the older generation

of Indian English writers, we also have newer generation that explores the contemporary angst, alienation and existentialism felt by the 'middle class liberal humanist'. Existentialism analyzes the existence of human beings and impels light on the way they find themselves existing in the world. Soren Kierkegaard, the 19th century philosopher is regarded as The Father of existentialism. He maintained that the individual has the sole responsibility for giving one's own life meaning and with living life passionately and sincerely despite many obstacles and distractions including despair, angst, absurdity, choice, boredom and death. Due to the Great Depression of 1930 and World War II, people all over the world were affected and a deep sense of despair prevailed in the society. It was then the existentialistic ideas came out in society. The spirit of optimism in the society was totally destroyed by World War I and its mid-century calamities. This despair has been articulated well not only in the 20th century but also in the 21st century. Existentialism is a philosophy of reaffirming and regaining the lost status of man in the advanced scientific and technological society. In this modern society, the creator of science himself becomes a victim of his own creation and feels like a mere cog in a highly mechanized system. Various existentialists differ on the fundamental problems but agree on perceiving certain objective realities like the crisis in human values, the significance of human anxiety, deprivation of human freedom and importance of human emotions. No emotional problem is more threatening than the existential problem.

R.K. Narayan's commitment to the Indian English novel has been model. By his selection of themes and a novel style of introduction, he has cut a specialty for himself in the packed literary scene. His protagonists are for the most part normal middle class individuals and the family establishes the center point of his distractions. Remarking on the thematic concerns of Narayan's novels, William Walsh says, "The

family, in reality, is the quick setting wherein the novelists' sensibility works, and his novels are noteworthy for the nuance with which family connections are dealt with”.

The project is divided into three chapters. The first chapter introduce the Existentialism. The second chapter will explain the social relevance, theme and characters of this book. The third chapter shows the presence of existentialism in this book, followed by conclusion.

Chapter 1

Understanding Existentialism

The common perception is that existentialism is only about alienation, despair, absurdity and negativity. It is an odd movement as most thinkers deny that they fall under the category of existentialist. On one hand there are certain ideas and principle which most existentialist agree on some; on the other hand, there are ideas and principles which most existentialist reject. Fuller recognizes the problems in defining existentialism:

There is no single existentialist position. The philosophy varies with its proponents, some of whom insist that they are not existentialist at all. But there is a common fund doctrine that identifies them, nevertheless and indicates quite clearly their relation to the classical philosophic tradition. Their major and differentiating thesis is the metaphysical pronouncement that existence is prior to essence; while in the established tradition essence is prior to existence. What this means for existentialist is that human nature is determined by the course of life rather than life by human nature.

The first and the most basic characteristic is that existentialism begins from man rather than from nature. This philosophy treats man as an existent rather than man as thinking subject. As Sartre says, we mean that man first of all exists, encounters himself, surges up in the world, and defines himself afterwards. If man, as the existentialism sees him, is not definable, it is because to begin with he is nothing. He will not be anything until later, and then he will be what he makes of himself. In Sartre's way of putting it, man's existence precedes his essence. In our life, essence is shaped by existence, not the other way round. We live our lives and that in turn

defines what we truly are, not any set of features. There is no predefined pattern that we can fit into.

Existentialism starts with an individual. Rogers and Thompson write about it, Existentialism is about the experience of living as a human being. It is about engaging with the world and dealing with two features of life- the situation in which we find ourselves and the constant desire to go beyond ourselves, planning and shaping our future. It is not only a philosophy but a way of life as it is not a special occupation concerning only a few. Rather, philosophy should be integrated within life. There are philosophers who developed an elaborate set of methods and concepts but life can be lived philosophically without a technical knowledge of philosophy. Existentialism is not about negativity. Neither it is dark or depressing. It is about life -facing the challenges of life and fighting for life. The field is not purely nihilistic, and the possibility of improvement does exist: The Existential view can assert the possibility of improvement. Most pessimistic systems find the source of their despair in the fixed imperfection of human nature or of the human context; the Existentialist, however, denies all absolute principles and holds that human nature is fixed only in that we have agreed to recognize certain human attributes; it is, therefore, subject to change if human beings can agree on other attributes or even to change by a single person if the person acts authentically in contradiction to the human principles. Hence, for the Existentialist, the possibilities of altering human nature and society are unlimited, but, at the same time, human beings can hope for aid in making such alterations only from within themselves. (Harmon 186) Sartre, Camus and Nietzsche were involved in various wars because they believed in fighting for their people and country. In a broad sense, existentialism is a set of philosophical system concerning with free will, choice and responsibility. Thus, it is concerned with the whole of human experience of

thinking, acting and engaging with the world. For existentialist, this philosophy relates to life, to the ordinary concerns and decisions that people face. Most of the thinkers who were categorized as existentialist were people who denied they are that. Major figures like Jean Paul Sartre, Martin Heidegger and Albert Camus denied that they were existentialist. Soren Kierkegaard and Fredrich Nietzsche, both referred as precursors, were too early for the movement, and yet treated as members of the group. Although these philosophers frequently disagreed with each other and denied belonging to a movement, they held certain views which were common among them. Commenting upon existentialism Philosopher Kaufmann says: Existentialism is not a philosophy but a label for several widely different revolts against traditional philosophy. Most of the living existentialists have repudiated this label, and a bewildered outsider might well conclude that the only thing they have in common is a marked aversion for each other. To add to the confusion, many writers of the past have frequently been hailed as members of this movement, and it is extremely doubtful whether they would have appreciated the company to which they are consigned. In view of this, it might be argued that the label existentialism ought to be abandoned altogether.

Although often treated like a philosophical school of thought, existentialism can be described as a trend that can be found throughout the history of philosophy. The founding fathers of existentialist thought are Pascal, Kierkegaard, Dostoyevsky, Nietzsche and Kakfa. They found existential questions in their writings. There is also a longer history before this, which goes back to St. Augustine to Plato, even to Lao Tzu and Buddha.

Existentialism became more relevant after the Second World War. It depended on other thinkers, who provided much of its groundwork in the field. Barrett, in his

study, provides the background and unique characteristics surrounding the school of thought in the following: After the Second World War, the news of Existentialism arrived. It was news, which is in itself an unusual thing for philosophy these days. Existentialism was a literary movement as well and its leaders, Jean Paul Sartre, Albert Camus, and Simone de Beauvoir were brilliant and engaging writers. Nevertheless, that the American public was curious about the philosophy itself cannot altogether be denied. Perhaps the curiosity consisted in large part of wanting to know what the name, the big word, meant; nothing stirs up popular interest so much as a slogan. But there was also a genuine philosophic curiosity, however intricate, in all this, for here was a movement that seemed to convey a message and a meaning to a good many people abroad, and Americans wanted to know about it.

The term was explicitly adopted by Jean Paul Sartre, and his associates- notably Simone de Beauvoir, Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Albert Camus. Existentialism was identified with a cultural movement that flourished in Europe in 1940s and 1950s. The major philosophers identified as existentialists were Karl Jaspers, Martin Heidegger, Paul Tillich and Martin Buber of Germany, Jose Ortega y Gasset and Miguel de Unamuno of Spain, Jean Wahl and Gabriel Marcel of France and Nikolai Berdyaev and Lev Shestov of Russia.

Although a highly diverse tradition of thought, some essential themes need to be identified to provide some overall unity, these are as follows: Central proposition of existentialism is that existence precedes essence and everything else follows from it. Our existence comes first and by existing and acting, our essence is determined. This phrase was originated by Jean- Paul Sartre. Human beings through this consciousness create their own values and determine a meaning for their life. As we

do not possess any inherent identity or value, it should be created by our actions.

What we do and how we act in our life, determines our apparent qualities.

According to Sartre, inanimate objects are different from human beings. This is so because humans are conscious of their own existence, whereas objects simply exist. Since no predefined essence or definition exists, a person must form his or her own concept of existence by taking responsibility for his/her actions and choices. A person gains his essence through individual choices and actions. Identity of any one person (their essence) cannot be found by examining what other people are like, but only by what that particular person has done. Thus no one can claim that his or her actions are caused by anyone else. This view of existence and essence is contrary to the theological view of the human condition in which the essence of the man is formed in the mind of God before man's existence. Sartre reverses this theological idea for his atheistic existentialism, maintaining that man first exists, and then has complete responsibility for defining who he is as Jean-Paul Sartre has stated in the book *Existentialism from Dostoevsky to Sartre*: What do we mean by saying that existence precedes essence? We mean that man first of all exists, encounters himself, surges up in the world defines himself afterwards. If man as the existentialist sees him is not definable, it is because to begin with he is nothing. He will not be anything until later, and then he will be what he makes of himself. Thus, there is no human nature, because there is no God to have a conception of it. Man is nothing else but what he makes of himself. That is the first principle of existentialism. For we mean to say that man primarily exists- that man is, before all else, something which propels itself towards a future and is aware that it is doing so.

From an existential perspective, freedom cannot be separated from responsibility because freedom puts forth responsibility. Realizing the fact and nature

of our freedom makes a man mature; he can exercise control, direction and command over his own life. He becomes an individual with all satisfaction, concreteness and security that this implies. For a successful and authentic living, a man must be fully aware of his freedom along with his responsibility and control. A man must be willing to accept full responsibility for all his actions. Once the inevitability of responsibility is recognized, man is inclined to take the full blame on himself rather than blaming others or on some situations beyond his control. Once we are clear about this fact that we are fully accountable for our actions, our lives and our mistakes, only then we will exercise our responsibility. No one else can make a decision for our life. It will be childish and immature to allow others to decide for us. It means that a man must be independent and thereby decide for himself. It is not possible to abandon our responsibility. We cannot request to anybody other than ourselves for the final decisions. We can request to a friend, a teacher, a parent, a counsellor, God and so for the advice, however, that cannot be the final since we personally make the decision of whom to approach. Once we have received the request advise, the decision of whether to adopt it or to reject it is again solely our own. We are solely responsible for our decision and this is the existential fact. Thus the ultimate responsibility rests on our own shoulders. We must recognize this fact in order to make a life successful.

One of the most prominent themes in existentialist writing is that of choice. Humanity's primary distinction, in the view of most existentialists, is the freedom to choose. According to existentialists human beings do not have a fixed nature or essence; each human being makes choices that create his or her own nature. It is central to human existence. Choice is inescapable, even the refusal to choose is a choice itself. All our actions are free choices. Whenever we act consciously and deliberately, we experience a sense of free will. All our conscious acts are in effect

choices among alternatives. Free choice in actions cannot be avoided. When we are confronted with any particular situation, we are forced to make some choice.

According to Sartre, choice is more accurately a condemnation than a matter of celebration. Often, it is difficult to realize that all acts are free choices as the choices that are available to us may be unpleasant and painful. Every time the alternatives available to us may not be pleasant. But to be free does mean that there are always alternatives among which we can choose. The mature and authentic individual makes a deliberate and honest effort to identify clearly all the alternatives available to him and makes a choice/decision. This freedom of choice entails commitment and responsibility. As humans are free to choose their own path, existentialists have argued that they must accept the risk and responsibility of following their commitment wherever it leads.

Existentialism is a trend or mood involving philosophical themes rather than a coherent system of philosophy. It is possible to trace through the past a number of precursors who were not existentialists, but did explore existentialist themes and thereby paved the way for the creation of existentialism in the 20th century. Human existence in the twenty first century is premised on the development of man and time. Before the twenty first century, human beings had lived and existed through the Stone Age to the Modern Age. The development of human beings in areas of life such as science, technology and philosophy have in a way helped in reshaping and defining the history of human existence.

Existential idea is better conveyed through literature since art is the most powerful expression of human creativity. Existentialists communicated their ideas through plays, novels and short stories. This was due to the unique literary talent and aspirations of the French existentialists, Simone de Beauvoir, Jean-Paul Sartre, Albert

Camus and Gabriel Marcel. Their novels and plays published during and after World War II, were more widely read than their philosophical works. It was mainly through these philosophers that existentialism was initially conveyed to the reading public. The 19th-century Russian novelist Fyodor Dostoyevsky is probably the most well known existentialist literary figure.

Existential psychology is the psychology of human existence in all its complexity and paradoxes. Human existence is more than an abstract concept as it involves real people in concrete situations. The field of existential psychology combines the big questions of philosophy with the tenets of psychology. This field considers how these philosophical questions affect the psyche and behavior. It is a practical psychology of everyday living—how to survive and thrive in the midst of tensions between good and evil, hope and despair, love and hate, courage and safety and so. It is the mature, positive psychology of how to live and die well in spite of the conflicts and tensions that pervade human existence.

Chapter 2

Social relevance, Theme and Characters of the novel

The Dark Room by R.K. Narayan

The Dark Room is the story of two women who have but one aspect common between them – they both depend on a man for survival. *The Dark Room* is a searching look at a difficult marriage and a woman who eventually rebels against the demands of being a good and obedient wife.

Savitri, as the name suggests, is a dutiful, conforming housewife who has never had the freedom to educate herself. In a fiercely patriarchal society, her submissive behaviour quite naturally makes her the victim of her husband, Ramani's varying whims, fancies, insults and criticisms. She somehow manages to survive within the four walls of her home until the day her husband starts to spend his nights with Shanta bai.

A story as relevant today as it was way back when it was first published in 1956, it certainly makes for a thought-provoking read. It reflects the unfair conservatism of a patriarchal society. Delicately woven around flat characters, and interspersed with short bursts of humor *The Dark Room* accurately describes the typical reality of that time's orthodox Chennai household. Written in a simple, lucid language, a tale so moving and yet so real, could have only been authored by RK Narayan.

At a first glance, the title may sound old fashioned, vintage lit-crit in the genre of Life & Times or Men of Letters series. But the book opens with the freshness of a new found love that encourages a rediscovery of the self. Ranga Rao's doctoral

dissertation was on Narayan, in the sixties. Half a century later appears this fascinating book weaving the story of R.K. Narayan with that of Ranga Rao himself, through wisdom garnered over time, and perspectives honed by teaching. And haven't many of us 'grown up' with RK Narayan's timeless tales played imaginary cricket in Malgudi, wept over the fate of Savitri in *The Dark Room*, longed for a woman like Rosie as did the guide Raju, or worried about sexuality like Jagan, the vendor of sweets? And by waving that wand of literary magic, Ranga Rao has successfully recreated R.K. Narayan's world with insight and joy, but with an alluring modernity that makes us see Narayan's life-wisdom all around us.

Rao's interpretation of R.K. Narayan is based on the Indian theory of the three Gunas, sattva, rajas and tamas. As Rao explains, these are personality types, the satvic is 'gentle, mild, kindly amiable', the rajasic is 'haughty and arrogant', and the tamasic is 'angry, wicked'. Using this formulation, which in popular belief spills into Indian food and health practices, Ranga Rao sees the characters in R.K. Narayan's fictional world dominated by these traits and indulging in comic excesses at times.

In fact, Rao would like to emphasize the 'humane comedy' of R.K. Narayan, saying 'the three gunas are not aberrations of human nature, but states and stages or phases totally this worldly in the inevitable progress of the human spirit'.

As I finished reading R. K. Narayan's brilliant Masterpiece *The Dark Room*, it left me wondering how the author has beautifully crafted the marital saga of a couple interspersed with conservatism along with the dawn of reformists ideas. R.K. Narayan had planted the seeds of "Emancipation and Empowerment of Women" in his literary work during that era when such things were considered to be taboo.

Typically situated in Malgudi, R.K. Narayn weaves the characters with such depth that leaves a strong impact on us. His main protagonists Ramani and his wife Savitri shared a volatile relation with respect to each other. This middle aged Tam Bram couple with 3 school going children Babu, Sumati and Kamala along with their cook and helper lead a very comfortable life in Malgudi.

Ramani expected perfect order in the house. Right from seeing him to the office to opening the motor shed when he returned back in his Chevrolet, the meek and docile Savitri had to be there at his beck and call. Every morning, apart from doing the daily chores, giving bath to Kamala, tying up daughter's pigtails, packing them off to school; she had to listen to the nasty comments Ramani passed on when his choice of food was not served. Poor lady endured all and always had a sigh of relief the moment he left. She had to wait in the afternoon to serve meals to her daughters when they returned from school. Her only recreation was to go to her friends Gangu and elderly Janamma's house to share the day's story.

Once when Ramani discovered that Savitri was not in the home to receive him when he came early from the office, he burst at her. He immediately dragged her to watch old Krishna movie "Kuchela" leaving the kids at home to fend for them. Savitri tried helplessly to convince her husband to take the kids but he adamantly upheld his views!

Savitri, being very traditional and religious celebrated all the festivals in devout manner. During one such Navaratri, wherein plenty of clay dolls of various Gods, Goddesses, animals, people etc were arranged on steps made out of wooden planks, the entire family except Ramani was enthusiastic in decoration. Babu with his half baked knowledge on electricity added some extra lightings to enhance the dolls.

But in the evening, as he put on the switch, the fuse blew away and the house was plunged in darkness. When Ramani came to know about it, he thrashed Babu. Savitri could not see her son mercilessly being slapped and she revolted. But being conservative, she could not utter more, wept and threw herself to the dark room, next to the store.

This dark room epitomized Savitri's revolt against her husband's inhumane nature. She would always sulk there, sometimes for days, with unkempt hair, not eat food or take bath, brood at her fate, feel helpless at her sordid state, pity that she is being treated like dirt by him.

As Savitri lay there, it did not move her husband at all. According to him, no one was indispensable and ordered the cook to do the chores without bothering to cajole his wife. He behaved extra nice with the kids and completely ignored Savitri's tantrums and left for office. The daughters were shocked that mother had not yet come out of the dark room and ran to Janamma for help. Later after being convinced by her friend how men are, Savitri came out of the dark room and returned to her chores.

Ramani's office was hiring female probationers to canvass about their life insurance policies meant for women. During one such interview, Ramani happened to meet Mrs. Shanta Bai from Mangalore who had left her alcoholic husband. He was immediately drawn to her beauty though she never showed any interest in him. Being single, he didn't want Shanta Bai to stay in hotel. Instead, provided room in his office for her to stay, much to the amusement of the staff. He showered extra concern in taking the spare cot, few vessels, a chair and the teakwood bench the only favorite piece of furniture of Savitri from his house to have illicit affair with Shanta.

Savitri realized that, despite protesting he did not listen to her. Soon she started hearing rumors about his infidelity. She became sulkier, cursed her fate and even started dressing up well for him. But Ramani returned very late at nights and even did not have time for the kids. Once when he did not come by night, Savitri grew more suspicious. Later in the evening, she had a major argument with him about leaving this woman once and for all. Ramani bounced back and in a fit of rage asked her to get out of the house.

It was for the first time that she had stepped out in late night. She was so disappointed that she entered Sarayu River to end her life. At that time, Mari, a blacksmith cum robber saved her and took her to his village. His wife took care of Savitri. But Savitri was adamant to be self-reliant and work for herself. Finally she got a job in a temple to clean Gods idols at the mercy of an old priest for half measure rice and quarter coin a day. Savitri was overjoyed with her own earnings for she no longer had to be dependent on Ramani. That night when she had to stay alone in a small dingy room adjacent to the temple, strange thoughts crept her. She couldn't believe how she had revolted against her husband in this manner. As any mother, she was feeling guilty in abandoning her children. She worried how they would cope up and who would take care of them. Heart of heart, she decided to gulp her husband's insults and immediately, set off for Malgudi to return back home.

Many would feel that R.K. Narayan has made Savitri a very weak character that finally succumbs to the male dominated society. Instead of coping up with challenges in life & succeeding it, R.K, Narayan has given twist to the Savitri's character in accepting that life is meaningless without husband and kids. But on the other hand, Shanta bai seems to portray the "liberated woman" who lives life according to her terms without bothering about the society. Whatever the author had

in mind, this striking contrast between both the women is a reflection of the Indian society prevalent around 1938.

Savitri after her short 'exile' or short-lived stint in the temple seems to be a changed woman. She looks the very picture of sorrow. She is shorn her erstwhile 'fieriness' and self-confidence. A sort of oppressive weariness crushes her soul. She, of course, speaks with her children with affection but not with her customary cheer, fervour and self-assurance. She is nervous, timid, meek and hesitant. She is not excited at the arrival of her husband, as she was in the past. She serves food to her husband mechanically, not with the interest and involvement of a wife. She is cold and indifferent to Ramani's husbandly overtures and his special efforts to make peace with or please her. She turns down even his plea to have "a little talk" with her.

Nothing is more humiliating and tormenting to Savitri than the excruciating consciousness of her unavoidable, 'destined' dependence on her husband. She symbolizes, here, the Indian woman whose plight and pitiable condition is in no way different from hers. Narayan brings out the distressful situation of Savitri with creative sensitivity when Savitri gives up her idea of calling Mari, the lock-repairer and husband of Ponni. She feels strongly that she must "give him food, water, and a magnificent gift, and inquire about her great friend Ponni" and repay her debt of to her. But she checks herself after she painfully realizes that she not have anything, which she can claim to be her own, to offer Mari about the consent of her husband. She reflects, "Why should I call him? What have I?" She silently stands by the window, haunted memory of Mari's shining hungry face and his cry 'locks repaired' after he is gone. Savitri remains a dejected and oppressed woman end of the novel brings to light Savitri's kindness and helplessness. Savitri, representing the suffering woman, is a lock that cannot be repaired. K.V. Suryanarayana Murti rightly identifies the rich

suggestiveness of the end: The closing is suggestive of Savitri's humanity and charity and inability. Her failure is that she is like an irreparable lock-a symbol of the feminine. The novel closes with Savitri's helpless dependency after her returning home which points to the same condition of her dependency at the beginning of the novel. Savitri attempts to commit suicide by drowning herself in the river Sarayu after she quits her house. Her mental toughness in enduring the insults of her husband, her courage in leaving her home and children and her bold resolve to be independent do not match with her sudden and cowardly decision as only those who are mentally weak and fear to face the failures and disappointments in life will be tempted to commit suicide. Perhaps, Narayan wants to heighten the impact of his heroine's misery on the readers or imply that self-destruction is the only-or the best-option available to a helpless and unfortunate woman like Savitri to whom life, without her children, becomes meaningless and killing. This episode, no doubt, strikes a jarring note in the characterization of Savitri but one has to admit that it develop the plot as it brings in time Ponni's husband Man to rescue with from death. In the character of Savitri in *The Dark Room*, R.K. Narayan highlights her genius for suffering which is in absolute consonance with the ancient Indian tradition. She closely resembles her mythical namesake, Savitri, for her fidelity and devotion to her husband.

Chapter 3

Analysis of Existentialism in the character of Savitri

The Dark Room presents marital unhappiness and domestic disharmony.

Narayan sets down a fragment of life as he actually sees. Though the storyline is thin, underlying theme is profoundly realistic and presents the struggle of a sensitive woman to come to terms with her predicament. The crisis in the novel is adultery. The heroine is left trapped in an existential predicament of unrequited moral struggle close to life in death: "A part of me is dead."

The Dark Room and Savitri are deliberately named so by Narayan. *The Dark room* for the dark room in the house is a room used to store junk of the house. The protagonist Savitri identifies herself with the junk, which has outlived its utility. The room is dark and she feels that there is no light waiting at the end of the tunnel. Her self worth is wounded. According to Harrex, the dark room here symbolizes as: "the emotional and domestic claustrophobia which can result from a circumscribed marital orthodoxy."

The Dark Room portrays the protagonist alienated from herself, from the society and from the world and is in quest for marital identity. Savitri also goes through the crisis of discontent to the quest for happiness. Savitri of the ancient legend is a paragon of virtue and courage who confronts even Death to save her husband is finally victorious. Ironically unlike the legendary Savitri, Narayan's Savitri chooses to leave home, husband and children once she comes to know of her husband's infidelity. There is a touch of irony at the start of the novel when her

husband tells Savitri: "What a dutiful wife! Would rather starve than precede her husband. You are some of the women in our ancient books".

Contrary to the legend, Savitri is just an ordinary, amiable, housewife. Our first impression is that of a traditional, docile and submissive Indian wife. The wives, mothers, grandmothers all illustrate the passive feminine characters in Narayan's novels. They are not even named. They are merely slotted. *The Dark Room* is the only novel of Narayan which is woman-centric until *A Grandmother's tale* (1993), his last book which was a novella. After the first two novels ending with a positive note, the narrative technique with a dramatic element is incorporated with themes of dissonance and despair in marital relationship between the protagonist Ramani and Savitri. The heroine of the novel is Savitri.

There are two critical phases in the novel. The second phase has greater intensity as it throws light on the disintegration of the family whose familial ties were amiable in the first phase. In the first phase, Ramani showers all the love and affection and takes Savitri into the cinema. He sits in the first class seat with his wife by his side. He is proud of her and has satisfaction of possessing her. He decides to take her separately and take the children the next day. He is very possessive and constantly enquires if her chair is comfortable. "It's a Tamil film. I thought you would like it". He also wants her to see the film care free without bothering about children.

When Ramani claims the children as his own, she breaks down: "Yes, you are right. They are yours, absolutely. You paid the midwife and the nurse. You pay for their clothes and teachers. You are right. Didn't I say a woman owns nothing"? She is totally heartbroken and in Harish Raizada's words: "She feels that she has been denied the dignity of living a human being and has to depend on her father, husband

and children”. Realization of her helplessness hits Savitri: “I don’t possess anything in this world. 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”. Ramani’s words pierce her heart when he says: “They will get on splendidly without you, don’t worry. No one is indispensable in this world!!”

Ramani has been very domineering and cynical in his ways and is very authoritative. He is also very strict with his children. He has complete control over his family and this behaviour is enough for Savitri to go through the mental agony. Now, to add to it he also has an affair with his office secretary, Shantabai, a new employee in his office who has deserted her husband and has joined as an insurance canvasser. Savitri confronts him and forewarns him of the consequences. Realizing that all her life she has been treated as a stooge first by her father before marriage and secondly by her husband, she grows into a rebel against the traditionally defined position of women in Indian society.

A meek Savitri turns against the mythical implications of her name, protesting that she is a human being and that in general men never agree to it. For them women are playthings. When they feel like hugging, they hug otherwise are slaves to them. She also retorts that men should not think that they can fondle women whenever they wish and kick them whenever they choose. “He does not bother and refuses to change his ways. She rebels and shouts at him saying that he should not touch her, He is impure and even if she burns her skin, she will not be able to cleanse herself of impurity of his touch”. The scene vividly depicts the agonized and tormented wife’s rage and sentiments.

Savitri is shattered with the repeated reprimands, rebuke, and now infidelity from her husband of fifteen year leaves the house to commit suicide. She decides to go empty-handed leaving all her ornaments. She also leaves behind the ornaments given by her father too because she feels that all men are alike and doesn't want to depend upon any men. Her existential agony is unbearable and she rightly retorts: "What is the difference between a prostitute and married women? - the prostitute changes her men, but a married woman doesn't; that is all, both earn their food and shelter in the same manner". Her interior monologue reveals her mental anguish and she feels pity for the women who have no support.

Savitri is on her way to commit suicide in the Sarayu River. Narayan reveals her state of mind where she herself is amazed at her rebellion. "She feels that she has changed. She imagines whether she is the old Savitri or someone else. This must be a dream and she does not have the courage to talk back to her husband and she has never done it in her life". She can never think of indulging in any controversies with her husband. Thus, after her decision of leaving home, she is caught in a conflict between a wifely devotion and her new individual existence. It is my dispute that Narayan is being accurate in portraying his women as inclined by traditions and customs and other values sustained by society. We can see that women even today believe in conforming to pacts at least most of them do.

By presenting both the kinds of women the conventional and non-conformist side by side in this novel, R. K. Narayan is being true to life. It would seem too artificial and contrived if we had only one ideal type of woman because this is not the case in society. Shantabai has questioned the traditions and conventions of society. She defies them in leaving her husband and ending her marriage. The need to be free from bonds of matrimony and commitment is great but in her attempt to be free, she

drifts anchorless for want of an ideal alternative to traditional values. In modern woman's quest for self-fulfillment, apart from facing personal and social conflicts, she also has to undergo the painful experience of severing the family bonds and re-establishing herself.

Shantabai is the proverbial butterfly, the type of woman who imitates her western counterpart. She is an educative, manipulative seductress who knows how to use woman's charm to win the man. She is cunning and makes the right move to trap her prey. He visits her home for the first time; her style of talking is conspicuous of her intention of enticing him. She narrated her sob story and at the end of every ten minutes of her narration she would say: "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". She defies the traditional status of the woman in Indian society. She abandons her gambler and drunkard husband and her family. But her independence proves detrimental to Savitri's familial peace.

In Shantabai we find all the characteristics of a 'coquette' in Indo English literature. Narayan skillfully portrays her every action and in his ironic subtle fashion puts across the artificiality behind it. She shows how she compresses her lips, tosses her head in perfect Garbo manner: the temperamental heroine and the impending doom. Narayan shows how she poses as an intellectual and explains her own philosophy of life: "Tonight, I feel like pacing the whole earth up and down. I won't sleep. I won't sleep. I feel like roaming all over the town and the whole length of the river. I will laugh and dance. That's the philosophy of my life".

R.K.Narayan has created Shantabai not just to reveal or portray the other type of woman but also to point out indirectly the hypocrisy implicit in middle class value systems. Shantabai represents the pseudo-emancipated woman who in her outward manner seems to know exactly what she wants and how she gets it. Ramani is hopelessly spellbound by her. Her theatrical display of hysterics moves him deeply and he contrasts it with his wife's crude sulking in the dark room. Shantabai indirectly brings certain hypocrisies of the male psyche to the fore. Narayan gives the women a chance to break away from the fold and assert their strength. But then again it cannot be said that making them return is a contrived act. When the women break away from the fold as Savitri does or when they undergo suffering they become aware of their inner selves and of the predicament of women in general.

The experience of self-realization is a transforming experience. Her existential crisis is vividly portrayed in the following lines: "One definite thing in life is fear. Fear from the cradle to the funeral pyre and even beyond that, fear of torture in the other world. She is also afraid of her husband's displeasures and of the discomforts".

Gangu is an educated woman and Savitri's friend, who stays in the neighbourhood. She aspires to be a professional singer. Her husband is a teacher. She is a Malgudi delegate to the All India Women's Conference and a politician. She has full support of her husband who believes in women's freedom. Her husband is very broadminded and she manages to keep a balance between tradition and independence. She too has her daily squabbles and has thrown everything at home. She comes to meet Savitri and confesses her mood swings that day. She tells her husband: "Don't expect any tiffin this evening when you come back from school. I would advise you to fill your stomach in a hotel". She tells Savitri that he has to get a packet for her and the children otherwise he will be driven back out to get them. Gangu is the new

woman, whom Narayan throws light on being at par with her man. Gangu is the one to convey to Savitri about her husband's scandalous affair. She had seen Shantabai with Ramani in the theatre watching the film. She indirectly instigates her to assert herself, question her husband about the affair.

Narayan throws light on the woman Ponni of the Sukkur village whose husband Mari saves Savitri when she attempts to commit suicide. Mari was a burglar at night and a blacksmith during the day. He cared for his wife although he chased her about and threw things at her whenever he was drunk. Ponni has been a dominating woman and Mari does fear her. Ponni is a childless middle aged woman, who is vulnerable but is a woman who has complete freedom and dominance over her husband, Mari. After listening to Savitri's predicament, Ponni advises the vanquished Savitri how to manage and treat a man. She says: "Sister, remember this. Keep the men under the rod and they will be all right. Show them that you care for them and they will tie you up and treat you like a dog".

Perhaps what Narayan wants to emphasize in his indirect subtle way is that self-realization is the first step towards self-actualization. In fact, to emphasize that all women characters in his novels conform to conventions and traditions, does not mean that they are passive and meek. They are inherently passive because they are conditioned to be passive and in embracing the traditional values and upholding them they prove not only wiser but also stronger. The women emerge after the turmoil stronger in spirit and go about their lives with greater knowledge and strength.

While Narayan makes them come back and accept the dictate of the society, the women are no longer the same, docile weak persons that they were at the start. His novels reflect on his narration. He is detached observer and leaves the interpretation to

the reader. In India men make fun of a woman if she speaks of freedom. Men may appear to think that when woman becomes aware of her capabilities, she stops being a woman! Herein lies their faulty thinking. The word 'freedom' is misconceived, misunderstood. Freedom from whom? Freedom from what?

In fact, the Indian woman has chained to her own misconceived ideas, there are number of shackles around her. But the fact is today these shackles are rusted but she is not aware of the rust. She has to awaken from her slumber. She has to see the things in their true perspective and colours. She has to recognize her own self. That can happen only when she discards her fear out of her mind. But in reality is it easy for an Indian woman to cast fear of society and its dictates, to lead independent individual life Freedom is certainly the concept when one is reminded about the women's lib. R. K. Narayan has admitted being obsessed with the philosophy of woman as opposed to man, her constant oppressor. This must have been an early testament of the Women's Liberation movement.

Bullying husbands like Ramani and patient wives like Savitri was the scene in numerous household of those times. It is still prevailing in a male dominated society of the 21st century and is the hapless plight of many Indian housewives. P. S. Sundaram maintains: "The bully who will bring guests into the house without notice and expect them to be fed is hardly thought of as a bully by anyone. It is the India tradition to honour the guest as God, to share whatever one has with the stranger." The stream of beliefs of Savitri is not incessant. The impartial declaration soften intercept them. Interior monologue and soliloquy is a sensitive representation of Savitri's oppressed female psyche. He executes the stream of consciousness technique to project the psychic reverberations of her character in order to lend authenticity to the narration.

The Hindu mind still prevails. The Hindu philosophy, the classical theory of Karma implies a pragmatic approach to life's problems. It is held that an effective experience is painful or pleasurable because karmic traces are produced by our actions and so deserved. Every man has to live out his own Karma. The reality of the writers' predicament is the reality of a universal predicament. The quest for an individual identity in psychological realism is being authentic to one's evolving self. Thus, R. K. Narayan cannot be tallied as a feminist and he never claims to be one but he really considers women's issues consciously from the very beginning.

The women in R. K. Narayan's work are reflective of the women he saw in life around him. He does promote the status of women but does not show that westernization to be the only way out. The fiction of Narayan can be regarded as epics capturing modern India's plight. His fictional town, Malgudi serves as the periscope for observing the living state of women, the challenges and problems they face in reality. Hence, it is rightly stated by Simone de Beauvoir, a French author, philosopher that: "One is not born a woman, but becomes one." Narayan thus progressively creates a healthier position for women within India's own traditions. His women characters grow stronger and show the advent of New Woman who will uphold the traditional values and also be self-reliant.

Savitri is fully aware of the dignity a woman possesses and she knows that by succumbing to the status quo which includes Ramani's petty tyrannies and flirtation, she has proved be her own enemy like Janamma. What she needs is courage recalls Virginia Woolf: "Courage in the manner of Moll Flanders, the power to stand her ground". After such unpleasant involvements, a new awareness stifles in her. She has to make a choice and lead a meaningful life. When Mari passes by her window, her natural urge is to rush out, hail him and reward him for having helped her. But she

feels it's futile and is helpless: "What am I? A part of me is dead. Why should I call him? What have I?" Though such questions disturb her, she is not the meek and timid Savitri anymore. Her new awareness would enable her to see that her daughters at least do not fall in the same trap when they grow.

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.

Narayan's view matches with Dr Paul Wong's duality hypothesis. It states that positives cannot exist apart from negatives and that authentic happiness grows from pain and suffering. This hypothesis reflects Albert Camus insights: There is no joy without despair. Narayan is quite conscious of the complexity of the experience. Uma Parmeswaran, a critic states: "Though Narayan's vision is positive his affirmation is not a thunderous one, it is found only if one looks for it". This justification cannot be accepted. When the claim of affirmation is doubted the question whether it is so bold or not is not significant.

R. K. Narayan being a traditionalist lauds the resilience of women who face all kinds of pressures from different quarters and yet emerges quietly triumphant and all wiser for it. Psychological deliberations underline acute awareness of general human

concerns that transcend the novels' rootedness in India. R. K. Narayan has employed the streams of consciousness technique in the context of Indian consciousness and not the consciousness of Camus or Kafka's protagonist. He documents the critical moments of the protagonist's life when she is faced with a psychic crisis in to self-revealing internal monologues.

Conclusion

R. K. Narayan's *The Dark Room* offers a feminist view of the contemporary South-Indian society. The dark room is used as a symbol that entails the frustration of a tormented, helpless Indian wife. In *The Dark Room*, R.K.Narayan introduces Savitri, the reincarnation of mythical goddess who would do all she can, even make a dwarf of herself to ascertain the well-being of her husband and family.

A Woman is given the peripheral region and the centre is occupied by a man in the patriarchal society from the olden days of socio-historical chronicle of India. Woman's total dependence on man curbs herself-respect and individuality. The tradition, superstition, male-dominated environment of society leaves woman in a boundary of four walls. It has a passive impact on woman's liberty to dream and achieve a position in the society which she can be proud of. She struggles for identity. This struggle leads to her self-discovery. The emancipation of women started with the remarkable changes that were brought about in the patriarchal and traditional society with the effect of modernism. Women's liberation is not mere shouting of slogans for one's rights. Women's liberation means of a fuller development of her personality. She does not have to ask for freedom. She herself develops a capacity to achieve it. Freedom is not a thing to be given or taken but to be attained by the way of living and self-effort. The novels of R.K.Narayan (1907-2001) can be regarded as more or less a socio-historical chronicle of India of his time-Pre and Post-Independence India. His early novels were written before Independence of India (1947) portray women as mere orthodox and god-believing entities engaged in household chores, deeply rooted in traditional beliefs. His middle novels create women who dare to pursue their own happiness escaping the noose of tradition or social mores. In his later . novels,

R.K.Narayan portrays his heroines are capable of expressing their resistance to male dominance, cruelty against the fair sex, denial of identity and freedom of expression.

The issue of domestic harmony dominates the narrative of 'Dark Room'. Its loss vitiates the whole atmosphere in which not only the male but even children suffer. The conduct of husband-wife is a shaping influence and children's attitude, temperament, preference and goals are directly affected by their parents' visible performance. An indication of it is available in the son Babu's hatred for marriage itself. *The Dark Room* is not an outstanding work of Narayan though its basic concept is of familial ties of husband-wife relationship. William Walsh in his book on R.K.Narayan has lightly dismissed this novel. Professor C. D. Narasimhaiah also skips over it "for all its pathos develops melodramatically and has a didactic ending". The action of Savitri in returning to her husband after pathetically trying in vain to stand on her own legs is rather unconvincing. But is a great leap in the direction of woman's emancipation. So Prof. Sundaram in his perspective study of R. K. Narayan, finds the novel quite realistic. Narayan's realism is psychologically convincing. He narrates the story as a detached observer and focuses the readers' attention to the feelings and emotions of both husband and wife. He leaves interpretations to readers.

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