

## Stereotypical Male Emotions In R. K. Narayan's *The Dark Room*

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### Abstract

The oxford dictionary defines **emotions** to be instinctive feelings, as distinguished from reasoning. The structure of a novel focuses on the writer's skill of handling emotions of his characters. Emotions and 'feelings' shape the individual's relationship with others, and with the reader. They also influence a character's reactions to different situations and the journey of a particular protagonist through the novel. Emotions such as anger, jealousy, pride, possessiveness, domination and egoism are conventionally regarded as male emotions, as against love, sacrifice, submissiveness, forgiveness and empathy which fall in the stereotypical section of women emotions.

R. K. Narayan's *The Dark Room*, published in 1938, portrays the clichéd man emotions, and reflects the patriarchal society's view on gender inequality, which in many ways remains timeless. Being a highly creative and original writer, Narayan addresses this issue with gentle irony and satire. It is these typecast man emotions that pave the course of action and words of the protagonist Ramani. As a man, Narayan's depiction of women emotions is sensitive and heart-wrenching (thus breaking the hackneyed gender specific traits!). In today's world, when the very existence of the female gender is put to a question mark, this novel evokes feeling of sensitivity in the reader. One gets inspired to break the shackles of male and female stereotypes and move towards a world which celebrates diversity, and yet respects equality.

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All humans (and also the animal and plant world, as some researchers would argue), across centuries, across nations and across generations, can FEEL. Feelings or emotions are the primary reasons behind relationships, learning, inventions, goals and targets. Advance neuroscience suggests that the brain generates emotions through a combination of cognitive appraisal and bodily perception. Emotions are linked to various body feelings associated with mood, temperament, personality, disposition and motivation. It is also triggered by hormones such as dopamine, adrenaline and serotonin. Emotions are universal. Regardless of age, gender or culture, emotions remain constant. They overlap each other. With maturity of age and conditioning, intelligence and experience, one learns to hold their reins. Social sciences often examine emotion for the role it plays in human culture and social interactions.

Emotions such as anger, jealousy, pride, possessiveness, domination and egoism are conventionally regarded as male emotions, as against love, obedience, sacrifice, submissiveness, forgiveness and empathy, which fall in the stereotypical section of women emotions. As K. V. Dominic states:

Mother in India stands for the adjectives — marvellous, unselfish, all-suffering and ever-forgiving. The wife walks behind-the shadow. She must imitate the life of the mother; that is her duty.(p.9)

The structure of any novel focuses on the writer's skill of handling emotions of characters. The material success of novels/stories also depends on how the author is able to convey the feelings and emotions of the characters across to the readers. These emotions shape the characters' relationship with each

other and with the reader; their reactions to situations and the journey of the protagonist through the novel.

Rasipuram Krishnaswami Iyer Narayanaswami (10 October 1906-13 May 2001), or R. K. Narayan as the world lovingly knows him, is one of the greatest first generation Indian writers in English, along with Mulk Raj Anand and Raja Rao. He has been instrumental in introducing the Indian literature in English to the rest of the world. In his writing career spanning over sixty years, Narayan's greatest achievement has been in making India accessible to the outside world through his many novels, essays and short stories. Narayan is a true Indian, both in spirit and thought. The setting for most of Narayan's stories about people and their interactions is in the fictional town of 'Malgudi', first introduced in 'Swami and Friends' (1935). Malgudi is not just a fictional semi-urban town in southern India, but one with real characters, each with their own idiosyncrasies, attitudes and preferences. Narayan's writing skill is simple, with an easy element of humour about it. It focuses on ordinary people, reminding the reader of next-door neighbours, relatives and friends, thereby providing a greater ability to relate to his novels. R. K. Narayan has won many awards and accolades, including the Sahitya Akademi Award in 1958, A. C. Benson Medal from the Royal Society of Literature in 1980, and the Padma Bhushan, India's second-highest civilian award.

A novel depicts the milieu of it's times and R. K. Narayan's novel, *The Dark Room* (1938), brings out the man protagonist's emotions in a stereotype, which is gender based. This highly talented, creative writer tries to portray the clichéd emotions and behavior of the man protagonist Ramani, and in the process hits at the gender inequality of the system with gentle irony and satire. K. V. Dominic, researching the multicultural consciousness in the novels of R. K. Narayan comments:

Critics have called Savitri a weak, whimpering, timid, spineless and vacillating creature, they say, she is a bundle of changing moods and conflicting responses, and made to talk and act in turn like an orthodox Hindu wife, and an ardent feminist, a brooding fatalist and a bold activist. It is difficult to accept that a meek, traditional Hindu wife of the opening scene starts making fiery speeches.(p: 88)

The novel begins with the man protagonist Ramani's male *chauvinism* surfacing, telling his wife Savitri -when she defends their son's absence from school, to 'Go and do any work you like in the kitchen, but leave the training of a grown up boy to me. It is none of a woman's business'(p. 1). Ramani has no qualms in putting forward his *dominant* traits when he asks his wife to 'shut up' and states that 'words will not mend a piece of foul cooking' (p. 3). A man, he is *proud* of his 'wife's fair complexion and well proportioned features when people in the theatre throw looks at her'(p.22). 'It increases his satisfaction all the more'. As a male protagonist, Ramani's *intimidating* personality shows when he asks Kamala, his daughter, to bring a piece of paper to put under the lantern. When her reply is, 'very well father', it *pleases* him. (p. 37)

His *authoritative* and *angry* emotions come to the surface when he twists Babu, his son's ears besides slapping him on his cheeks (p. 38). Later, Ramani shows his *inconsideration*, (p. 42) when he decides to ignore his wife's absence, as she lies sulking in 'the dark room'. To add *insult to injury*, he shows his *calm indifference* by humming a little song. *Chauvinism and indifference* further get reflected when Ramani, despite his wife's obvious suffering in 'the dark room', follows his normal routine of dressing and eating and then leaving for office just to 'convey to whomsoever it might concern that no one was indispensable' (p. 43).

Later in the novel, Ramani's man character and emotions are portrayed to show *soft undertones of charm*, when he is trying to woo the other woman, Shanta Bai. When she asks him to sit down, he says, '.... not when a lady is standing' (p. 62). There is a marked difference in words and behaviour pattern, which Narayan gives his man protagonist when he is with his wife and when he is with Shanta Bai. Ramani gives Shanta Bai his undivided attention and says, 'men deserve to be whipped' when she hints at a couple of attempts on her honour' (p. 63). Ramani's character infuses *charm and humour* when he wants to flirt with and impress Shanta Bai. On her insistence at taking the back seat in the car, Ramani says, 'but the engine won't start unless there are two passengers in the front seat'.

Sarbani Putatunda interprets Ramani thus:

[.....] Ramani's arrogance plainly blinds him from admitting even to himself his offence- adultery. The concept, in fact, never crosses his mind. Liason with a woman other than his wife is just a pastime for him and hence, he can not comprehend Savitri's violent reaction against it. Savitri is right in pointing out that women are but playthings to him to be fondled and kicked when he chose.

As the saying goes, 'the devil quotes the scriptures,' Ramani too attempts self- justification by quoting scriptures. A wife's primary duty, he observes, is to tolerate everything her husband does. No matter how wayward he is, she has no right to censor him. Wifely duty demands complete subservience and Savitri, according to Ramani, has flouted this decorum. ( p:74)

The male protagonist's *selfishness* shines when he gives the favourite bench of his wife for Shanta Bai's room. Then again, when Savitri comes to know of his affair with Shanta Bai and wants to leave the house along with the children, Ramani is least ashamed of his acts. Albeit, he tells her to go but not to

'touch' the children or 'talk to them' as he clearly states, 'they are my children'. (p. 88)

In the course of the story Savitri leaves home. When the children ask Ramani about their mother, he *lies* to them, saying she had gone to see their unwell grandfather. This is because he does not have the courage to tell them that it was because of his own relationship with the other woman that Savitri was hurt and thus left home. Two days pass and she does not return. It is then that he gets *slightly frightened*. This emotion is not so much for the state of Savitri, as is for his *own reputation*. 'People would talk. The wife of the secretary.....'. The *discomfort* of looking for his lost wife makes him hate himself. He '*hated* Savitri for bringing him to this pass and he hated Babu for disturbing his peace (p. 157). He still gives in to the *pleasures of the flesh* as he 'drives into race course and stops before his office'.

The novel ends with Savitri returning home. However, the character of Ramani stays typically conventional. He still goes about his normal routine of dressing up and going to the office (p. 159). He *pretends* that nothing has changed and gets jasmine for Savitri to please her 'looking at her mischievously' (p. 160). He tries to humour her without addressing issues about her mental state. He goes to sleep and neither does he enter into any conversation nor tries to *understand* the reason behind his wife's indifference when she says, 'I am very tired. I must sleep'. (p. 161)

S. R. Ramteke studying R. K. Narayan and his social perspective observes of *The Dark Room*:

It is Manu and the later moralists who have made the woman what she is today, weak and utterly helpless. That a woman should have no freedom, is so deeply imbedded in the minds of both Ramani and Savitri, that Ramani could bluntly tell

her that she has no right whatsoever over the children. Savitri could not question him....; she appears to be only a weak, whimpering, timid, spineless and vacillating character. Her plight fails to evoke even pathos, for she is shown to be a bundle of changing moods and conflicting responses. Savitri's pathetic utterances showed how miserable she was in her married life. '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' or her son's'. (p. 13)

The culmination of the story has Savitri choosing to live with Ramani, even when she feels that a 'part of her is dead'. The title of the novel *The Dark Room* signifies the room, next to the store room where Savitri retires whenever she gets overwhelmed by her emotions of hurt and anger (mainly at the hands of her husband). In a way the dark room becomes synonymous with Savitri's emotions where she cries and lets out her feelings of frustration. The utter helplessness of a woman, in a conventional patriarchal society, who can not be an individual identity but only a daughter, a wife or a mother is brought out with tact which truly belongs to Narayan. It is this dark room which gives her solace, where she resolves her unhappy feelings and prepares herself again to live up to her image of a wife and mother.

### **Conclusion**

Narayan brings to the fore the many typical emotions of a man in the patriarchal society. These emotions lead to certain beliefs as to how a woman needs to conduct herself in the institution of marriage. These stereotypical feelings set the course of actions, words and reactions in the man protagonist. Thus the sensitive conundrum of the women issues is brought to light. Narayan hits at the inequality of the system and he subtly points to the boundaries set for women in the society. She can be a

submissive and obedient wife, a loving and caring mother but never perhaps an independent identity in command. The man, however can be dominating, angry, indifferent with his wife, but be charming and tender when wooing a woman outside marriage. Thus the duality and hypocrisy of the society is portrayed by showcasing conventional emotions.

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