

## The Darkness in R.K. Narayan's novel 'The Dark Room'

**Dr. Vinod Gupta**

Lecturer, Government Women's Polytechnic College, Bhopal (M.P.)

### Abstract

R.K. Narayan's novel *The Dark Room* (1938) is darkly woven. The darkness binds the whole novel. Every element in the novel - story, plot, theme, characters, description, society, fate, nostalgia, dialogue, irony, style, and Malgudi - contributes to darkness. Everything in the novel is dark. Besides the title, there is "the dark room", "the dark hall", "the dark Sarayu", "the dark moving water", "A dark hefty man and a woman", "a dark corner", "dark shanty", "the dark shrine", "this dark temple" and "his dark face". The novel describes encircling gloom in the heart of Savitri, the leading character. One may feel that Narayan has casually entitled the novel, *The Dark Room*. But this is the way Narayan titles his novels. There is behind his casualness a design and a purpose. *The Dark Room* is more than the tragi-comedy. It is almost a tragedy. The tragedy of Savitri lies in her helpless dependence on her husband and her children.

**Key words** – Dark Room, Darkness, Gloom, Malgudi, Tragic, Husband, Wife

### The Darkness in R.K. Narayan's novel 'The Dark Room'

R.K. Narayan's novel *The Dark Room* (1938) is darkly woven. It is woven of the stuff out of which tragedies are woven. The genius of R.K. Narayan is essentially tragic. There is a wave of heartache that runs through almost all his novels. It is there in his novels like *The English Teacher*, *Waiting for the Mahatma*, *The Guide* and *The Vendor of Sweets*. It is there even in *Swami and Friends*, his first novel, in which Swami loses almost forever his bosom friend, Rajam. It binds almost all his novels architectonically.

When Narayan started writing *The Dark Room*, he might have had in his mind the dark comedies of Shakespeare, *All's Well that Ends Well* (1601-02), *Measure for Measure* (1603) and *Troilus and Cressida* (1603, revised 1607). He might also have had in his mind the tragi-comedy, *The Tempest* (1610) which is not less dark than the above dark comedies. Though Prospero forgives his wicked brother, Antonio, yet he does it cynically.<sup>1</sup>

There are similarities and contrasts in the two works of art. In *The Tempest* it is the brother who has deceived his brother. In *The Dark Room* it is the husband who has deceived his wife. The mouth of Prospero gets infected in calling Antonio his brother. The mouth of Savitri equally gets infected in calling

<sup>1</sup> "For you, most wicked sir, whom to call 'brother'

Would even infect my mouth, I do forgive

Thy rankest fault-all of them-and require

My dukedom of thee, which perforce, I know

Thou must restore."

Ramani her husband who has almost deserted her for the prostitute-like concubine, Shanta Bai. Prospero can forgive even the rankest fault of his brother because he hopes his brother will restore his kingdom. Savitri cannot forgive the rankest fault of her husband because she does not hope he will restore his wifedom. If *The Tempest* is a tragi-comedy, *The Dark Room* is more than the tragi-comedy. It looms frighteningly and menacingly larger than the other one. It is almost a tragedy. The tragedy of Savitri lies in her helpless dependence on her husband and her children. Overwhelmed by the awesome, eerie stillness of the dead night of the temple, she utters:

“What despicable creatures of God are we that we can’t exist without a support. I am like a bamboo pole which cannot stand without a wall to supported.”(Narayan, *The Dark Room* 189)

Like Eustacia Vye in Hardy’s *The Return of the Native*, Susila is a splendid woman, and runs her house splendidly. Not only this. She loves her children splendidly well, and takes care of them. She loves her five-year-old plump daughter Kamala and the eleven-year-old sickly daughter Sumati tenderly. But above all, she loves her husband Ramani from the innermost chambers of her heart. She is a dutiful and obedient wife. She obeys his orders meekly like a docile lady. When she learns about Shanta Bai, her husband’s concubine, she burns with jealousy:

“Perhaps she is very good-looking. What is wrong with my face? These strumpets with their powder and paints!” (*The Dark Room* 104)

Jealousy is the signature on the love-bond. Then, in order to win her husband back, she tries to appear good-looking to her husband:

“She applied a little scented oil to her hair, and combed it with great care. She braided and coiled it very neatly. She washed her face with soap and water, and applied very lightly a little face-powder...She stood before the mirror, applied a little perfumed paste between her eyebrows and pressed a very elegant pinch of vermilion on it, and trimmed its edge with her little finger to make it perfectly round.” (*The Dark Room* 104)

She does all this splendidly well to win back the love of a deceitful husband. And yet, destiny has been, as it has been to Eustacia, against her, because her husband has deserted her. Naturally this is an ill-conceived world both to Eustacia and to Savitri. Like Eustacia again, she has been crushed by forces beyond her control. It has been beyond her control to keep her husband away from Shanta Bai and win back his love. Like Eustacia, she complains to God that He has devised tortures for her who has done no harm to Him at all. It is a Virgilian cry from the depth of her heart.

There is encircling gloom in the heart of Savitri. Savitri is made to feel by her husband that she is not indispensable and that she has no rights. Insulted and humiliated she goes to lie in the dark room. That Kamla has gone to her mother ten times to persuade her in vain to come out of the dark room shows the intensity of Savitri’s darkening gloom. Savitri lies in the dark room, but really speaking the dark room lies in the heart of Savitri. This is the significance of the title *The Dark Room*. One may feel that Narayan has casually entitled the novel, *The Dark Room*. But this is the way Narayan titles his novels. There is behind his casualness a design and a purpose. *The Dark Room* is a symbolic story, which suggests

figuratively, and tells more than meets the ear. Moreover, the darkness, which is symbolic architectonically, binds the whole novel.

Everything in the novel- story, plot, theme, characters, description, society, fate, nostalgia, dialogue, irony, style, and Malgudi- contributes to darkness. Everything in the novel is dark. Besides the title, there is “the dark room” (The Dark Room 49, 55, 58,142), “the dark hall”<sup>2</sup> (27), “the dark Sarayu”<sup>3</sup> (115), “the dark moving water” (115), “A dark hefty man and a woman” (134), “a dark corner” (142), “dark shanty”<sup>4</sup> (179-80), “the dark shrine”(186), “this dark temple” (188) and “his dark face” (209).

There are here two things worthy of note. The first thing is the darkness that encircles Savitri. She moves from the dark room of her house to the dark shrine of the dark temple. The darkness is both within and around. As Satan in Milton’s Paradise Lost is himself hell, and carries hell wherever he goes, Savitri is herself darkness, and carries darkness wherever she goes. Darkness not only surrounds her from all sides, it resides within the innermost recesses of her heart. The second thing worthy of note is that the darkness of Savitri’s heart and the darkness, which surrounds almost every object outside her heart, bind the novel architectonically. Every element focuses on one point - the darkness of Savitri’s heart consequent upon her husband’s betrayal of her.

The story deals with the triangle love-lust affair. Savitri loves her husband intensely and purely. Her husband Ramani either does not value her or values her only so long as another woman does not enter his life. Shanta Bai, a flirtatious woman, recently separated from her husband, applies for a job in the Englandia Insurance Company. Ramani takes fancy to her. Enamoured of her, he strongly recommends her case. She gets appointed. Then the illicit affair takes wings, and soon becomes the talk of the Malgudi town. Exasperated by the brutal beating of Babu on Ramani’s part on a paltry matter, Savitri goes to lie down in a dark room. On being informed by her friend Gangu of her husband’s illicit affair with the coquettish Shanta Bai, she leaves home and tries to commit suicide by drowning in Sarayu. But she is saved by Mari. Mari’s smart, vivacious wife Ponni persuades her successfully to reside in her cottage in the nearby village. Savitri gets employed in the village temple. But, afraid of the eerie atmosphere of the stillness of night in the lonely dark temple, and sick for home, especially for her children, she returns home. She had moved away from her dark room to a dark temple, and with the darkness growing in her heart, she returns her home with a darker room in her soul.

Plot is an integrated story. It is the orderly and logical arrangement of the events. While weaving a plot a great artist keeps two things uppermost in mind- firstly there should be the cause-effect relationship of the story and secondly there should not be anything superfluous. We find both these criteria of a good plot in Narayan’s novels. He does not believe in Aristotle’s view that plot is the soul of tragedy and character comes next. He believes that plot and character should feed each other for their mutual growth. However, his plots are made complex by the stream-of-consciousness. His characters are made complex by the interior monologue. In most of his novels we find characters engrossed in reflections and

<sup>2</sup> “The hall became dark.”

<sup>3</sup> “Sarayu was flowing in the dark.”

<sup>4</sup> “There was a shanty”

“It was very dark”

nostalgia. Almost half of *The Vendor of Sweets* is devoured up by the reflections and the nostalgia of Jagan, and his interior monologue. We don't have in *The Dark Room* as much reflection and nostalgia as we have in *The Vendor of Sweets*. Yet we have them at places. When Savitri wipes the dust of the dolls, the memories of her childhood stir in her. Her eyes fall on a wooden rattle with which she had played when she was just a few months old. (34) Here she remembers the incidents of her early life: "Didn't I and my sister finish off the honey in the bottle and then swear we didn't know what had happened to it? And then that scuffle after which I said that my brother had flung the ball at the glass chimney. Poor fellow, bearing patiently all our anger and vileness and never lifting his hand on us because we were girls." (116-17)

We find in Narayan's novels the pendulum-like movement of the story, going back and forward. Both the forward and backward movements develop the plot. Narayan takes utmost care of the logical development of the story. He concentrates on the cause-effect relationship so that what follows is the natural result of what precedes. His plot is like the solution of a mathematical problem in which every successive step is the logical result of the preceding one. Babu brings his friends Chandru to fix up a festoon of ornamental-coloured bulbs under the pavilion arch. He creates a new circuit with an independent switch. However, at about 6 pm the failure of the electric current is affected. This causes darkness in the house. This leads to Ramani's fury and to Babu's brutal thrashing on his part. This leads to Savitri's anger and depression and her retirement to the dark room.

Then the illicit and lascivious relationship between Ramani and Shanta Bai leads to Savitri's leaving her home. All this moves logically. Superfluity is antagonistic to the architectonic felicity. Sometimes certain things in Narayan's novels seem to be superfluous which turn out later to be the inevitable integral parts of the story. Here in *The Dark Room* the detailed descriptions of Savitri's friends Gangu and Janamma and of the dolls, decoration and electricity seem to be superfluous. But, like Milton's epic similes, they are transposed descriptions. They and the story cannot be understood completely without their detailed description in the same manner in which Satan cannot be understood without the detailed descriptions of the sea monster Leviathan. It is the detailed description of the dolls, and the electrifying of the platform on the pavilion that make it possible to understand Ramani's fury and Savitri's departure to the dark room. It is the detailed description of Janamma that reveals to the readers why she is so familiar to the family and why Sumati should approach her. Janamma is integral to the story because it is she who succeeds in persuading Savitri to come out of the dark room. It is the other friend of Savitri, Gangu, who reveals to Savitri the talk of the town about the illicit love affair of her husband and Shanta Bai. Both these friends are inevitable to the story. If one is instrumental in taking Savitri out of the dark room, the other is instrumental in sending her to the dark shrine of the lonely dark temple beyond the Sarayu.

Narayan writes novel, not history. He concentrates not on improbable probabilities but on probable improbabilities. And, as he writes of common ways of life and of fundamental human feelings, the improbabilities, if any, are rare, very rare. He does not write simply of what happened. He writes of what is likely to happen to the given characters in the given circumstances and situations. Ramani is not

reasonable and logical. He contradicts himself. When Savitri tells him that Babu has gone to the Electric Office, he shouts:

“Babu, Babu, a very big man to go.” (45)

Within the space of one page he contradicts himself:

“Is Babu to be protected like a girl?” (46)

What can Savitri expect with such a pointless bullying beast-like person? Ramani is self-willed, eccentric and lawless. He hectors and bullies. The mild hooting of his Chevrolet car is the sign of his happy mood. The happy mood indicates that some friend is likely to come for lunch or dinner so that extra dishes are to be prepared. When Savitri hears the hoarse hooting of the horn, she speaks loudly to the servant, Ranga, to open the motor shed. Ramani, as a rule, sounds his horn at about a furlong from his gate. The two long hoots are the shouting orders for Ranga to keep the shed door open before he reaches there, if Ranga values his life. It is an order for Savitri to see that Ranga does his work properly. He expects from his wife not love but lust which is boisterous:

“And he laughed and patted her on the back. She understood what it meant: he would make love to her, a kind of heavy, boisterous love, even before the cook and the children.” (15)

He is enamoured of the physical beauty of Shanta Bai. He forcibly takes from his wife her favourite bench to furnish the room of his paramour. While returning from the club he visits the room of Shanta Bai in the office. He tells her:

“Your brother, if you will permit me to say so.”(81)

Within the space of a few pages the brother-sister become the lascivious lovers which is the worst kind of sin:

“Ramani rushed at her, locked her in his arms.” (89)

Visiting the room of Shanta Bai becomes for Ramani a regular feature. They go to see film, roam about the city in the car and sit for hours together at the bank of the river.

Shanta Bai is almost a prostitute. She has no sense of shame and propriety. She persuades and incites Ramani to flirt in the open. She says to him:

“Perhaps you don’t wish to be seen in public with me; perhaps your wife will object.” (90)

She tempts and excites Ramani for making her love. She says:

“I’m rather mad tonight... You have a mad woman beside you tonight... I can’t sleep tonight.” (91)

These words have a sexual suggestion. Only a prostitute can persuade a man to spend the whole night with her. She says to Ramani:

“Would you care to step in? Shall we sit up and chat till dawn? ...He returned home at five o’clock next morning.” (92)

Shanta Bai acts in accordance with her character. She believes in eating, drinking and being merry. She wants to emulate the hedonistic philosophy of Omar Khayyam:

“The dead yesterday, the uncertain tomorrow  
Why fret with fear if today be sweet.”

She wants to enjoy life to the fill. She demands everything from Ramani, even piano, and Ramani says that he is grateful to her for every demand she makes. But had he married Shanta Bai he would have behaved with her in the same manner in which he behaves with his wife. There was once a nine days wonder in his love for Savitri when she was bubbling with bloom. But now she is not indispensable to him. He does not care for her when she leaves home, does not search her and does not report her disappearance to the police. Instead of feeling sad and guilty he enjoys her absence, and takes the children to cinema. When the children ask him about their mother, he tells a monstrous lie that she has gone to Talapur to see her ailing father.

The theme of the novel, in harmony with its title, story, plot and characters, is the loneliness of Savitri consequent upon her separation from her husband who deceives and deserts and makes her heart gloomy and dark. It is something more. This something more is the irony of life. The tragic irony for Savitri lies in the fact that she owns nothing, not even her children. That a woman does not own even her own children whom she bears, is the greatest irony of life. And it goes to the credit of Narayan to have imagined and realized this irony. Let us illustrate this irony from the dialogue between Savitri and her husband:

““Very well. Take your things and get out this moment.”

“Things? 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. So take these too...” (113)

She removes all her jewels, and then addresses her children:

“Now, come on, children, get up! Let us get out.” (113)

Her husband bars her way and says:

“Don’t touch them or talk to them. Go yourself, if you want. They are my children.” (113)

She hesitates for a moment and then speaks out sarcastically an irony as grim as the one in The Guide in which Raju suffers martyrdom because his statement is misinformed by Velan’s idiot brother:

“Yes, you are right. They are yours, absolutely. You paid the mid-wife and the nurse. You pay for their clothes and teachers. You are right. Didn’t I say that a woman owns nothing?” (113)

And when she asks what will the children do without her, he replies monstrously:

“They will get on splendidly without you, don’t you worry. No one is indispensable in this world.” (113-14)

This shows that Savitri is a sagacious woman. She is timid and docile only to an extent, just to please a little vanity of her husband, to see the household go on smoothly. But when things come to a dreadful pass, she is altogether a different woman. She has fire in her being. Her toughness of character and the feeling that she owns nothing get expressed in the village beyond the Sarayu. She does not want to reside in the cottage of Ponni, and does not accept her food because she does not want to accept what is not her own. She does not want to live on charity. She remains hungry till she gets a job in the temple and receives half a measure of rice as the earning of her work. She cooks rice even without salt. She would not accept even such a trifle as a little salt from Ponni because She does not want to survive on charity. When the affectionate Ponni proposes to bring for her a little buttermilk and salt, she replies resolutely: "If I have to take buttermilk and salt from you, why should I work for the rice alone?" (184)

This character throws light on the successive events of the novel, even on the theme. It may be asked why, when she has lost her husband forever, does she return home. The truth is that she returns home not for her husband but for her children. Her home is her children. She is obsessed by her love for them. Even when she is going to drown herself, she prays to God to protect her children. When Mari saves her from drowning and she has not regained complete consciousness, she speaks, as if in a delirium, to Mari about Babu:

"Has Babu gone out to play? Did he drink the coffee?" (132)

She is almost obsessed with her children:

"And she grew homesick. Nostalgia for children, home, and accustomed comforts seized her...

...And then the children. What a void they created! "I must see them; I must see Babu, I must see Sumati, and I must see Kamala.'" (189)

It is her children who compel her to accept defeat in life:

"The futility, the frustration, and her own inescapable weakness made her cry and sob. "A wretched fate wouldn't let me drown first time... I accept it. I am no good for this fight. I am a bamboo pole... Perhaps Sumati and Kamla have not had their hair combed for ages now..." (190)

All this is the clue to her return. She never remembers her deceitful husband. There is one more Gordian knot to open. She is heartily grateful to Mari who saved her life and to Ponni his wife who showered all her affection on her. Why is it then that when she returns her home and listens to the voice of Mari does she not invite him to take lunch or even a glass of water? She is in a dilemma. She is in Hamlet-like dilemma. She wants to call Mari and yet she does not call him. When she is about to call him, she suddenly becomes conscious of her utter poverty. She remembers that she does not possess anything in the world. Whatever she has, belongs to her father, her husband and her son. What can there be more painful than to think that even her children, whom she gave birth to, are not hers. She remembers what she had said, "I don't possess anything in the world. What possession can a woman own except her body." She also remembers what she had said in response to her husband's statements: "Yes, you are right. They are yours, absolutely. You paid the mid-wife and the nurse. You pay for the clothes and

teachers. You are right. Didn't I say that a woman owns nothing?" Nothing has changed since the time she had spoken these words. And whenever she remembers this, her wound is prodded. She did not accept charity from Ponni who loved her. She cannot accept charity from her husband who does not love her. She feels that she cannot entertain Mari on what belongs to her husband. That is the reason why she, though willing to call Mari, does not call him. Here we have Yank's feelings of alienation and rootlessness in O'Neil's *The Hairy Ape*.<sup>5</sup> (210-11) Yes, Savitri feels uprooted because nothing belongs to her, not even her children. Now, we no longer feel angry with her because she does not call Mari. We rather sympathize with her.

We find in *The Dark Room* Narayan's vision of life. The vision is that of the darkness of a woman's heart caused by the betrayal of a husband, and a tragic feeling that nothing in the world belongs to her, not even her children whom she bore.

The beauty of *The Dark Room* lies in the fact that almost all the elements of the novels like plot, characters, dialogue, description, narration, Malgudi, society, fate, humour and the correspondingly simple and felicitous language, have concentrated on, and contributed to, the expression of the theme of the novel, the dark vision.

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<sup>5</sup> "All the other monkeys set up an angry chattering in the darkness ... You don't belong wit, em.... Even him didn't think I belonged"