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~ **CONTENTS** ~

1. Authenticity of a Research Work and the Challenges a Researcher Encounters — **Dr. Elham Hossain**.....9
2. *Songs of Water: A Critical Study on A.H. Baqui's Haiku Poems* — **Manfath Jabin Haque**.....25
3. Marital Mismatch and Its Outcomes in Bharati Mukherjee's Select Novels — **Dr. Satrughna Singh**.....45
4. Conflict between Aspirations and Reality: A Study of Bharati Mukherjee's *Wife* — **Dr. Satrughna Singh**.....52
5. Women's Knowledge, Healing Capacity and Eco-sensitivity: A Study of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Forest of Enchantments* — **B. Chitra**.....58
6. "Whiteness", Huck Finn and the Logomachines: A Critical Study — **Dr. Ayan Mondal**.....70
7. "Beyond Binaries": A Comparative Study of Buddhism and Western Existentialist Theory — **Parth Chandrakant Yadav**.....91
8. Plight and Suffering of Pre-Independent Indian Women in R. K. Narayan's *The Dark Room* — **Sahadev Roy**.....102
9. From Traditional Being to Modern Becoming: A Study of Female Protagonist in Shashi Deshpande's *The Dark Holds No Terrors* — **Sahadev Roy**.....118

## Plight and Suffering of Pre-Independent Indian Women in R. K. Narayan's *The Dark Room*

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### Abstract:

*This paper will investigate the position of women in the pre independence India. An attempt is made to find out the plight conditions of women with fewer opportunities available in thirties. Narayan compares woman to a bamboo pole which can't stand itself or without any support. The Dark Room presents woman's life like that of dark room and the useless domestic things kept there. Female protagonist Savitri is the victim of Indian patriarchal society. Husband neglects and dominates her all the time. Married life serves as a hell rather than protection and security. She protests husband's affair outside and warns him but it doesn't work. She leaves home to oppose the situation but has to return at most in despair. An attempt is made to find out the hampered personal dignity of woman, her detest to any charity, her adaptations to the emerging conditions and her adjustment in married life for the sake of children and security and protection in the life.*

**Keywords: Adjustment in existing conditions; Attempt to liberate; Plight Condition; Search for Individual Identity; Women characters**

Pre-independence period witnessed novels with social reformation in Indian English novels. Social problems and patriotic feelings were at the centre. After independence, there were many challenges for Indians in political, social, cultural and economic spheres which were reflected in Indian English novels. It was a crucial time for emergence of many Indian women novelist in English. Their area of interest was predominantly the portrayal of plight conditions of Indian woman in family as well as patriarchal society. They wrote about her predicament in society, existing moral ethics and social norm, women's whole-hearted sacrifice of individual happiness, unbothered for self-comfort and their own sufferings.

R. K. Narayan is one of the three great Indian novelists who fetched worldwide attention to Indian English novels. He deals with common man and his problems in ordinary situations. R. K. Narayan portrays plight condition of women in traditional patriarchal society. He doesn't give her female characters freedom like western females but presents the reality of their predicament in patriarchal society. His early novels reveal females confined in four walls, their belief in God, traditional, middle class females with social values and their simplicity. However, his later novels shift the image of stronger female protagonist, dominated by western culture and more expressing.

It was a period was of drastically changes. Indian freedom fighting was with full flow. British were gradually losing their grip over administration of India and Indian minds were under the British control. R. K. Narayan portrays this scenario of social system and social change in his works. He presents problems of middle class and their plight conditions. He has written 15 novel and many short stories. It supplies pre and post Independent Indian scenario. He

describes the social context through a fictitious town Malgudi. Satish K. writes about Malgudi in his A survey of Indian English Novel: "is the domain of Narayan's imagination. There is no such town in any dictionary, almanac or atlas of the subcontinent." (Tembhre 3)

According to Rajendra Kumar Dash and Namita Panda, R. K. Narayan shows all types of female characters like pious, religious, females of virtues' like happy-go-lucky young females, house wives and modern females through Malgudi. R. K. Narayan's female protagonist sticks up to traditional roles of mother, wife and sister and lays importance to their familial responsibilities. His characters are not heroic but ordinary people. He deals with various aspect of Indian life with realistic touch. He employs irony and subtle humour and ends with words of wisdom. He always permitted his female characters to be women in their thinking and behaviour but does not allow them to follow westernization. He liberates them slowly, steadily and simply.

*The Dark Room* (1938) presents South Indian Society. Title aptly symbolizes woman's frustrated and tormented life. Female protagonist Savitri is the victim of Indian patriarchal society. Husband not only dominates her all the time but also neglects her. Married life seems hell for her. Her husband has an affair outside. She protests it and warns him but it doesn't work. She compares her life with that of dark room and the useless domestic things kept there. In order to oppose the situation and husband, she leaves house in a disappointment but has to return in at most in despair.

*The Dark Room* is an account of traditional male dominated society and struggle of female protagonist Savitri for her individual identity. She undergoes everyday humiliation of tyrant husband Ramani. Less educated Savitri finds unbearable with husband even after 15 years of their married life and 3 children. She realizes her personal dignity hampered and damaged by husband time to time. She searches her independent identity in family and at the large in society.

Protagonist Savitri could not bear husband's beating her son Babu after a whole house in complete darkness in Navratri festival. Babu helps sister Kamala and Sumati in arrangement of the platform for the dolls and in illumination show with the help of Chandru but misconnection of a bulb by Babu creates failure of electric current in the house. Husband Ramani roars in terrible temper, grumbles, curses the whole household and humanity. He twists ears of Babu and slaps him. He doesn't let Savitri protect Babu. Savitri creates sentimental show after sobbing and sucks in the dark room on floor. She refuses her guidance to cook and pay no attention to family and children. Her depression of spirits is the sign of her failure in front of tyrant husband who loses his head and heart during domestic affairs instead of solving the problem with cool head.

Protagonist Savitri realizes her powerless authority and helpless position to take any decision at home affair. She couldn't keep Babu at home after a severer fever. On other occasion, she wishes to take 3 children to movie in a well-equipped theatre- The Palace Talkies. But husband denies children. He doesn't allow even younger Kamala. She reflects: "How impotent she was, [...] she had not the slightest power to do anything at home, and that after fifteen years of married life." (Narayan 5) She compares her position to Gangu and newly married girls and feels her mistakes at the initial level after marriage:

She ought to have asserted herself a little more at the beginning of her married life and then all would have been well. There were girls nowadays who took charge of their husbands the moment they were married; there was her own friend Gangu who had absolutely tethered up her poor man. (ibid)

Novelist illustrates the psychological pressure built up for Indian housewife during husband on dining table. Most Indian male don't like this or that and they slip into cold war against wife.

Protagonist Savitri has to float between the cook and husband as "Ramani was eccentric and lawless in his taste" (2).

Husband Ramani never grants the demand of protagonist Savitri to inform the arrival of a guest well in advance for better and unhurried food preparation. He considers them not "so down-and-out yet as not to afford some extra food without having to issue warnings beforehand" (10). He doesn't want to understand the testing conditions for Savitri with sudden arrival of guest and Savitri has to cope with great deal of messing about with oil and frying – pan and stove and getting some extra dish ready in shortest time.

Husband Ramani utilizes the situation for insulting protagonist Savitri. He is infuriated by her silence and while offer an explanation, he commands her "Shut up. Words won't mend a piece of foul cooking" (3). Ramani represents most men in traditional set up for his philosophy regarding women:

Firmness was everything in life; that was the secret of success with women. If they found a man squeamish they would drive him about with a whip. (110)

Ramani grants some freedom to women like reading English novels, playing tennis, attending All-India Conference and occasional movies but women should complete their primary duties assigned by traditional set up. He strictly expects from women "blind stubborn following of their husbands, like the shadow following the substance" (109). He provides Savitri luxurious facilities at home but desires to dominate wife with the privilege of it with his eccentric behaviour.

Protagonist Savitri never cares for her own comforts but much bothered about husband's displeasures, discomforts morning to night and sometimes throughout the nights. She even avoids changing position on bed at night so that his sleep will be sound. Novelist exhibits woman completely engrossed in domestic

responsibilities. Cooking the food and nursing the children are unending responsibilities for women. Protagonist Savitri is bothered of these unending chores. She thinks deeply:

The planning of the night dinner, and on and on endlessly. Was there nothing else for one to do than attend to this miserable business of the stomach from morning till night? (8)

The entry of Shanta Bai in office baffles the attention of Ramani. He hovers about her and shows piece of excess curtesy. His behaviour moves from formal to informal. He swells with importance and offers her a room in the passage of office itself. He shifts domestic things like cot, bench of Savitri, a chair and one or two vessels in office for Shanta Bai with the pretext of arrival of an important guest and an arrangement of guest house. Ramani is impressed with her exquisite complexion. He promises her "I will see if the probationary period can be cut down, and if the stipend can be put up a bit. But that's all by and by" (56).

Ramani's accountant kantaiengar judges him best as a woman-hunter. Ramani's regular visit to Shanta Bai in late evenings, expressing his unnecessary excuse for his stiff aloofness with her during office hours, car drive round Race - Course Road and then to the river, dusting seat with his handkerchief, taking her for movies with the risk to be seen in public, much bravado for not caring public opinion and wife, chatting till dawn, returning home late night i.e. two o' clock or sometimes five o' clock prove him woman hunter. He does not share few words with good temper at home with wife Savitri and children but offers many concessions to Shanta Bai prove his double standard and affair outside.

Protagonist Savitri is well skilled to adjust with the existing condition of traditional set up. She understands the mood of husband from the horn blowing of Chevrolet in the evening. She takes her liberty with him while he is happy. If he is agree, she tactfully switches their conversation to his official matters and his

business expertise skills in profession. That inspires Ramani to expatiate his works, received offers from other companies. She manages an escape from his eccentric moods. Ramani compares protagonist Savitri with ancient epic women character like Seeta and Savitri for familial responsibilities and sacrificing roles for family members. She takes food only after husband has finished. She is devoted to family and husband. She considers husband a sheltering tree like Vanitamami in Shashi Deshpande's *That Long Silence*.

Husband Ramani is strict and dominating house. His entry in home spreads a dead silence. Children stick to their books and Savitri retires in kitchen. His mild mood relieves the house. His aggressive kindness allows the children and Savitri to take some liberty. He affects the house atmosphere like any husband in traditional set up.

Protagonist Savitri is straight forward and doesn't know the activities beyond the four walls. She takes her husband fully engaged in his account-books and business. Her friend Gangu informs Ramani's presence in talkies with someone. It sows the seeds of suspicion in her minds of his affair outside. She tries to attract him in possible ways. She decorates herself pathetically as per the choice of husband Ramani to attract his attention with scented oil, face-powder, perfume and jasmine and red flowers.

Protagonist is full of unpleasant thoughts and it sapped her energy but suffers in silence for the sake of re-establishing peace at home. Protagonist Savitri dares for open confrontations on the issue of Shanta Bai. She asks him: "This sort of thing has to stop, understand?" (Narayan 85) and declines any compromise on the issue firmly. She says: "I'm not going to (bed), till you promise to come to your senses" (85). She denies his choices of love or kick, she adds:

I'm a human being, [...] You men will never grant that. For you we are playthings when you feel like hugging, and

slaves at other times. Don't think that you can fondle us when you like and kick us when you choose. (85)

She denies to be soothed down. She sticks with the issue: "Now, will you promise not to go near her again?" (86) Protagonist Savitri decides to leave house with a terrific indignation welled up in her. She wants to take children with her but he denies doing so. He takes her to bed but she roars: "Don't touch me! You are dirty, you are impure. Even if I burn my skin I can't cleanse myself of the impurity of your touch" (87). Ramani asks her to get away the moment, she expresses her determination:

Do you think I am going to stay here? We are responsible for our position: we accept food, shelter, and comforts that you give, and are what we are. Do you think that I will stay in your house, breathe the air of your property, drink the water here, and eat food you buy with your money? No, I'll starve and die in the open, under the sky, a roof for which we need be obliged to no man. (87-88)

This represents a suppressed voice of all female victims of patriarchal system. It is a spark of rebellion for individuality. Protagonist Savitri returns all her necklace to husband i.e. diamond earrings, the diamond studs on her nose, her necklace, gold bangles and rings after an eye-opener moment that a woman possesses nothing except her body. He doesn't allow her to touch children or talk to them. He asserts his right over them. She says desperately:

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 that a woman owns nothing? (88)

If woman cares for her self-respect and self-identity, she has to live her home midnight and has to walk through the town at midnight. P. S. Sundaram doesn't feel Savitri's revolt could change something but only result in vanishing herself. He writes:

Refusing to be a discarded drudge, Savitri goes out of the house, not dramatically banging the door like Nora, but fleeing like a hunted animal...freedom is a fine concept but creatures like Savitri can do only one thing with it ...commit suicide. (Koperundevi 47)

The despairing hours make her conscious of importance of education: "No one who could not live by herself should be allowed to exist" (Narayan 93). She finds her inability to earn something her own at the lack of education. She has to depend economically on husband. She thinks it big mistake to miss the opportunity of taking formal education at the proper age. She determines to give better education to her daughters Sumati and Kamala so that they will not hovel about somebody and not have to depend for their salvation on marriage.

Blacksmith of Sukkur village Mari rescues protagonist Savitri from deep drowning in middle of the river and his wife Ponni brings her home. Protagonist Savitri denies accepting any charity from anybody. She says: "I am resolved never to accept food or shelter which I have not earned" (122). She denies the offer of food and place to live and chooses lesser charity in temple. Her emphasis is on doing some work. Mari finds out cleaning temple work for her after discussing with most of the men of village. Savitri is happy with the work and the dignity of work never touches her mind. She expresses her satisfaction:

Any work which will keep my life in my body, though why it should I can't say, is suitable for me. I don't want to depend on any one hereafter for the miserable handful of food I need every day. (131)

She hopes for a new beginning of her independent life. She determines:

She would dedicate her life to the service of God, numb her senses and memory, forget the world, and spend the rest of her years thus and die. No husband, home, or children. (132)

Protagonist Savitri has to face social humiliations. She feels uneasy while old priest looks at her in his first meeting. He puts her number of unrelated questions which afresh her wounds. He speaks sarcastically to Savitri as if he is offering job as a very special charity.

Savitri is offered a dark, airless place with the iron sheet and wooden boards, free space for rats, birds above with flapping wings and a gilded pedestal in corner. It is not a place worth human being should reside in. She is offered very less than her ability by priest in return of her service in temple is a half measure of rice and only a quarter of an anna a day.

Protagonist Savitri left home and children but she can't resist this temptation. She prays God for protection of children while her one leg in hell. She spends night in temple all alone. Her mind is dejected by oppressive air and monstrous shapes of the surrounding objects. She compares herself to a bamboo pole and gets furious with her wretched condition and weakness. A bamboo pole can't stand its own. It needs support of any wall or standing object. She contemplates:

What despicable creations 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 support it...(146)

Protagonist Savitri compares her present worst condition of fear and terrible state with homely comfort and security. Her terrible growing homesick mentality compels her to accept defeat and to return home. She resolves to return home, to fulfill her duties as a mother. Moreover, this acceptance is motivated by the tradition



which produces fears in people's hearts. A heavy price has to be paid for this acceptance in her life. (Koperundevi 22)

Protagonist Savitri returns home for nostalgia for children, home and familiarized ease of surroundings. Her attempt to stand her own on economical front is worth appreciation but bad treatment by priest disappoints her. The alteration of set makes her realize the biggest security in the life of woman is husband and home. She submits herself to husband and avoids any clashes literally and diplomatically. She merely completes her responsibilities with minimum talk with husband. She maintains a safe distance from him. She avoids shouting for Ranga to open the gate after listening hooting of his car and tells Babu to open it himself. She tells husband frankly without any fear about her tiredness and feeling sleepy and can't even stand when he pleads for a little talk about half an hour. Protagonist Savitri retires in more silence. It is an attempt to escape the struggle with husband and lead a peaceful life. Hari Mohan Prasad (1981) says:

Savitri does not submit to Ramani: She submits to her obligations. It may be a failure on the material plane, but spiritually she comes triumphant ...It is in keeping with both her character and her cultural heritage. (28)

Prof. K. R. S. Iyengar doesn't like Savitri's passive submission to existing conditions and husband. He criticized the ending of the novel as: "cynical conclusion" (Devi 53) but R. Chitra Devi states in her thesis *Feminism in the novels of R. K. Narayan and Shashi Deshpande - A Comparative Study* and presents the reality:

Narayan has portrayed an Indian woman of thirties to whom the options are less. As she is a semiliterate, the choice before her is very limited. Her condition is worse. Her husband is more feeling and indifferent. (53)

On the other hand, Ramani never imagined walking off by Savitri. He only expected Savitri's sulking in the dark room for a few days

or more than usual. Her walking off brings the revelation in Ramani of hard responsibility of running the household and difficulty of managing children with their moods.

Protagonist Savitri's absence from home changes the scenario of the home. Both Savitri and Ramani understand the necessity of each other to run house and their life. It results into Husband Ramani's accepting protagonist Savitri without questioning.

Novel has other two female characters Pony, wife of Mari, a blacksmith and Shanta Bai. Both belong to low class of Indian hierarchical society. R. K. Narayan shows them independent with self identity and self confidence.

Ponni dictates her husband Mari. He saves protagonist Savitri and left on shore out of fear of her shouting and being caught. It is Ponni who orders to bring her home and lends a hand to a helpless and unaided woman.

Ponni controls husband Mari and restricts from his bad company. She presents her philosophy to protagonist Savitri: "I can't believe any husband is unmanageable in this universe..." (Narayan 106) She doesn't mind using any trick for it. She beats husband after his drinking and sit on his back for a little while. Ponni rebukes him time to time. She does not allow him to open his mouth and protest. She uses him as per her requirement and doesn't let him take more liberty. She commands him:

Don't talk now, [...] Don't butt in when women are talking. Stay under that tree. I will call you when I want you. [...] Look here. It is no use your standing here. We are not going to talk to you. You have walked two stones. Rest under that tree. You will hear soon enough when you are wanted. (105)

Ponni intervenes and stops priest for being more impersonal to Savitri. She speaks him fearlessly and straightforwardly. She even

dares to threaten him when she finds priest is taking over benefit of their friendship:

Send someone to fetch all the broken umbrellas and rubbish you have sent for repairs. If you don't send someone immediately I will throw it all into the manure dump...(135)

She calls priest more learned and wise. She reminds him he need not ask hurting questions because there are a hundred reasons to leave home. She reminds him the benefit he reaps of their friendship but denying a small favour. She opens the eyes of priest with her sharp talk and makes him realize unnecessary of his asking questions thereby.

Ponny has her own philosophy of dealing with men and one can realize its success in her case. She suggest to protagonist Savitri:

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. (105)

Protagonist Savitri's another friend Janamma is rotund, elderly and rich. She is wife of a public prosecutor. She is matured with her own philosophy of life. She offers her words of wisdom to protagonist Savitri in the dark room during Navratri festival. She suggests her few words of wisdom and to take better precautions diplomatically to avoid quarrels with husband. She says:

I have never opposed my husband or argued with him at any time in my life. I might have occasionally suggested an alternative, but nothing more. What he does is right. It is a wife's duty to feel so. (46)

Janamma has the faith of more worries and burden for men in day today life. She thinks it is responsible for their constant changing mood, one moment high temper and the very next moment

kindness. Her valuable suggestion to protagonist Savitri about children is: "Men have to bear many worries and burdens, and you must overlook it if they are sometimes unreasonable." (46)

Janamma believes in men's treatment to children and their inculcating good values and habits. She places some examples of peaceful sacrificing wives:

...her own grandmother who slaved cheerfully for her husband who had three concubines at home; her aunt who was beaten every day by her husband and had never uttered a word of protest for fifty years; another friend of her mother's who was prepared to jump into a well if her husband so directed her. (46-47)

Janamma grew up in traditional set up and her mentality is prepared to carry out any reasonable order by husband. It results into her submissive nature to husband and adjusting tone.

Another female character is Gangu. She is full of humor, abundant frivolity and picturesque ambitions to become a film star despite lacking acting ability and striking figure. She also nurses many more ambitions in life. She wants to be a professional musician, wants to be Malgudi delegate for All-India Women's Conference, to become a Congress leader and wishes to be elected on municipal and legislative bodies. She lacks the required ability for all ambitions but hopes to starve hard for them. She enjoys more freedom of talking and wondering through the town assigned by husband.

Novelist R. K. Narayan has best portrayed the predicament of women in Indian male dominated society during pre independent era. Women were less learned and skilled in specific field. They had fewer opportunities available. R. K. Narayan's protagonist Savitri adapts herself to the situation. She adjusts in her married life for the sake of children and largely for the philosophy that husband is a sheltering tree and a big security and protection in the

life of woman. Simone de Beauvoir observes: "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" (Singh 394) It is sent percent true in traditional set up about protagonist Savitri and Janamma. Women have to undergo many restrictions. It changes her behaviour, ideas, expectations and dreams. It chokes her life inside house and finally creates pointlessness in her life. R. K. Narayan quotes in his autobiography My Days about the philosophy that works for the novel:

This must have been the early testament of the women's lib movement. Man assigned her (i.e. woman) a secondary place and kept her there with such subtlety and cunning that she herself began to lose all notions of her independence, her individuality, stature and strength. A wife in an orthodox milieu of Indian society was an ideal victim of such circumstances. My novel is dealt with this philosophy in the background. (Dash and Panda 3-4)

R. K. Narayan confirms the gloomy surface of marriage institution in India. He provides evidence for the dominating image of father in most of the household with anger cum love through Ramani. Novelist points out the exploitation of woman in orthodox society and intends to smash patriarchal supremacy through protagonist Savitri's revolt against husband and final divine success, Poni's self-confidence, Shanta Bai's independent self-identity, Janamma's diplomatic and well matured behaviour and Gangu's hopes for positivity.

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