

# Women at Crossroads: A study of a Darkroom and Gauri

Dr. Alka Sharma

Associate Professor, S. D. College Ambala Cantt

## ABSTRACT

The man-woman relationship has been the earliest of the social relationships. Literature is the inter-relationship between social transformation and creative imagination. The society inspires literature in establishing its various norms and literature in turn reflects the traits nurtured in a society. Therefore, in order to understand a society, it becomes important to study its literary works which give an insight into its culture. Indian women's challenges are different from Western women due to the historical realities and traditions of India. In India, the individual is typically just one aspect of the broader social community. The definition of "self" in the West is focused on competitive individualism. A large number of many writers have therefore depicted Indian women as suffering women and mothers who are silenced by individualism. Man - women relationship could be traced to the earliest desire on the part of humanity to apprehend its predicament in terms of love and marriage.

**Keywords:** Transformation, Imagination, Suffering, Social Norms, Culture, Love, Marriage, Aggression

The Man-Woman relationship has become the dominant theme of many works from time immemorial and has been adding to the richness of literature. Two chief Indian archetypes of this relationship are: the Radha-Krishna motif where the woman is the playmate as well as the beloved (sometimes Radha is Meera, the devotee) and the Rama-Sita relationship where the woman is the submissive sufferer, who through her suffering enhances the nobility of her husband. These archetypes appear time and again.

This paper attempts to study the man-woman relationship in the modern Indian fiction as portrayed in R.K. Narayan's *The Dark Room*, Mulk Raj Anand's *Gauri*. We find in each of the select novels the Rama-Sita relationship presented as structural parallel in different ways Savitri in *The Dark Room*, *Gauri*, walking out of her house and family in which she feels stifled for one reason or the other.

There is a gap of about twenty two years between the two novels, *The Dark Room* (1938) and *Gauri* (1960). These novels demonstrate no radical change in the condition of the Indian wife in the family even after a lapse of about so many years. She continues to groan as she encounters the unfair male aggression in different shapes and forms; sometimes, groaning inwardly.

Savitri's 'senior' (59) neighbour, Janamma, quotes several instances. She never dared to oppose her husband or argued with him at any time in her life. She adjusts herself to the life wherein a wife's duty is to feel that what her husband does is right. Her aunt who was beaten every day by her husband had never uttered a word of protest for fifty years.

Another friend of her mother was prepared to jump into a well if her husband so directed her. Her own grandmother slaved cheerfully for her husband who had three concubines at home (59-60). After listening to these instances of the patience of wives, Savitri feels very foolish at the thought of her own resentment over the way she has been treated by her husband, Ramani. But she cannot digest it when he takes a mistress, a young trainee insurance agent in his office.

She calls him dirty and impure: "Don't touch me Even if I burn my skin I can't cleanse myself of the impurity of your touch." (112) She cries and moves away from him and asserts her elementary rights as a woman: "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." (113) She walks out. It is midnight. When she tries to take the children with her, she is dragged away from them.

Similar is the life of the village housewife *Gauri* of the second novel. Though she is devoted to her husband Panchi, her aunt insinuates that the drought is due to *Gauri*'s evil influence and so her husband Panchi beats her and drives her away. Then she is sold to a lecherous merchant. She escapes from him, becomes a nurse, repulses a lustful doctor before she is taken back by her husband. Again, the pregnant *Gauri* is asked to prove her chastity. Her husband strikes her resounding blows with his open palm. When she falls down in a heap, he kicks her, calling her a bitch and the daughter of a whore. She gathers all her strength and stands up to caution him, "And if you strike me again, I will hit

you back." She declares: "I am not Sita that the earth will open up and swallow me. I shall just go out." (263) She sobs, feels a quiver in her womb, but compels herself forward and rushes out towards the lane without looking back.

Thus these women-protagonists take to the road. They are at the crossroads. It is here that their creators lead them in different directions.

Savitri, the rebel, tries to drown and is saved by a villager. For a handful of rice she works in the village temple for only two days when a nostalgia for children, home and accustomed comforts seize her. Her soul is 'racked with fears' (195) of social mores. And, she sobs: "I am like a bamboo pole which can-not stand without a wall to support it." (189) She retraces her steps like 'a bird with broken wings. This is clearly a cynical conclusion, as Srinivasalyengar says. Dieter Riemenschneider observes, a woman's rebellion against her husband's ill-treatment and indifference is treated as her personal problem rather than as representing a woman's oppression by the male in a patriarchal society.

Savitri comes back defeated and starts living again with her husband who is not going to sever his affair with his 'temptress' assistant. Hetacism is the continuation of the old sexual freedom-in favour of men. It is condemned but is tolerated at the same time. And, this condemnation does not hit the men who indulge in it. It hits only the women. Thus hetacism is directly traceable to group marriage and the rise of property differentiation.

Ignorance of this historical background makes even women critics comment that traditional and ideal mother like Savitri needs a home and children more than independence; she attains "a new awareness of her own radical femininity.

What is 'radical femininity' that is devoid of 'independence'? When the rebel's undignified retreat is analysed as being drawn back to the accustomed comforts of the home, how can the novel be treated even as "ancient testament of the 'Women's Lib' movement". And, considering the case of Gauri of Anand's novel, she does not retrace her steps to sulk and moan like Narayan's Savitri. Gauri's is a case of transformation from the 'gentle cow' acquiescence to an individual with a will of her own. (284) Even though tears well up in her eyes, she still looks defiant. The pregnant village woman is determined to go and work in Doktor Mahindra's Hospital and have her child there. As Premila Paul notices, when Narayan stops with a realistic painting aspect of Indian womanhood, and projects a picture of what one Indian woman would do.

The paths shown by the authors to the protagonists reflect the authors' stance: Narayan is a traditionalist, Anand a humanist or a semi-Marxist.

## REFERENCES

- [1]. Meenakshi Mukherjee, *The Twice-Born Fiction* (New Delhi: Arnold-Heinemann, 1974), p. 133.
- [2]. R.K. Narayan, *The Dark Room* (Mysore: Indian Thought Publications, 1986).
- [3]. Mulk Raj Anand, *Gauri* (New Delhi: Arnold-Heinemann, 1986).
- [4]. K.R. Srinivasalyengar, *Indian Writing in English* (New Delhi: Sterling, 1983), p. 372.
- [5]. Frederick Engels, *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* (Moscow: Progress, 1977), pp. 66-67.
- [6]. D.V. Rajyalakshmi, "Malgudi Women," *Triveni*, July-Sept. 1984, p. 42.
- [7]. M.K. Naik, *Critical Perspectives on Indian Writing in English* (Madras: Macmillan, 1989), p. 20.
- [8]. R.K. Narayan, *My Days: A Memoir* (Delhi: Orient, 1986), p. 119.
- [9]. Premila Paul, *The Novels of Mulk Raj Anand: A Thematic Study* (New Delhi: Sterling, (1983), p. 119.
- [10]. William Walsh, "The Big Three," *Indian Writing in English*, ed. Ramesh Mohan (Bombay: Orient Longman, 1978), p. 27.