

Redefining Roles: An Exploration of the Emancipated Self and Combatant Spirit of R. K. Narayan's Daisy in *The Painter of Signs*

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Abstract

A new era dawned with the recognition of the competence and innate strength of women. The social awakening in both men and women helped to come a long way from the traditional status and roles of women. The novels of R. K. Narayan offer a meeting ground of the ancient Indian culture and the new unconventional modes of behavior. Narayan's delineation of Daisy in *The Painter of Signs* (1976) as a fascinating and independent modern girl suggests the refreshing change gradually creeping into the middle-class Indian women. Western influence and industrialization have considerably changed them. This paper presents the concepts of women's emancipation and birth control. It reflects Daisy as the new woman who steps outside the scripts of traditional behavior with her mission as a population control officer, her new ideas on marriage, her confrontation with the traditional socio-moral codes and such other unconventional ideas and interests. The research methodology used in the study is analytical, and consultation is carried out on the basis of primary as well as secondary data.

Keywords: change, marriage, modern, values, women

Introduction

Modernization, advocating a departure from traditional styles and values, started in India in the nineteenth century at a slow pace and gathered speed during the twentieth century, especially after independence. The process included development of scientific attitude, industrialization, secularism, extension of education, increase in the means of transport and communication, improvement in medication and health etc. The spirit of modernity paved the way for mental enlightenment, progress and freedom. As a result of these changes, a redefinition of women's roles in family and society took place. This led to the crumbling of the old stereotype roles and the dawning of a new awareness in Indian women. R. K. Narayan (1906-2001), one of the prominent Indian English writers of fiction, has been a witness to every developmental activity concerning Indian women prior to independence till his death in the subsequent era. His awareness of the social and political changes in India gets echoed in his fictional world of Malgudi which changed along with its creator's vision. He provides a subtle reflection of the changing social and historical context in India, which paved the way for the quest of the individuality of the female. In addition to the portrayal of traditional and conservative women protagonists, R. K. Narayan presents unconventional and modern figures in his novels. The women bearing new ideas emerge as distinct and significant figures with their inner strength and combatant spirit. Being a voracious reader, he was familiar to the feminist theories. Narayan records the changes in the Indian society as an impact of the new ideas. Daisy in *The Painter of Signs* (1976) represents a completely emancipated woman. She sacrifices the established institutions in the name of individuality and rationality.

Aim of the paper and methodology

This paper is an attempt to explore the redefined role of the new woman in the character of Daisy. It deals with the modern concepts of the post-independent era such as women's liberation and birth control. The paper uses analytical methodology to study the character of Daisy and her principles of liberty and equality in addition to her combatant spirit keeping in view the women's voice that was gradually dawning in India in the period. It also tries to underline the various aspects of feminism in the protagonist leading to disparity, opposition and rift between the traditional Indian values and the new ideals.

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The background

Indian women were greatly influenced by the various movements of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The dawn of independence brought about great changes in the hearts of Indians. Since the end of the World War II, the idea of women's emancipation gained global importance. Feminism perceived the wrong treatment meted out to women by the society and desired to bring about a consciousness of being victimized. "Feminism as a philosophy of reform envisages profound changes in traditional social structures such as the family, in the economic role and power of women, and finally in fundamental attitudes and personal relationships leading to a just social order" (Singh, 2004, p.32). The struggle for women's rights were marked by books such as Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792), Margaret Fuller's *Woman in the Nineteenth Century* (1845), John Stuart Mill's *The Subjection of Women* (1869), Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* (1929), Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (1949), Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* (1963), Kate Millet's *Sexual Politics* (1969), Shulamith Firestone's *The Dialectic of Sex* (1970) etc. The feminist criticism was geared up with the Women's Liberation Movement of the 1960s. With the U.N. declaration of 1975 as Women's Year and the period from 1975-1985 as Women's Decade, women's issues have started gaining even more importance.

The appointment of the National Committee on the Status of Women in India in 1972 and the publication of its report in 1975 marked the first official attempt in contemporary times to study the status of Indian women and recommend changes to improve their position (Prasad, 1996, p.342).

As a result, awareness among all sections of people about women's problems and possible ways of their emancipation had ultimately taken place. Women in India too discovered a world of financial and emotional independence. They become aware of their interests leaving behind traditional blind faiths and narrow-mindedness. They learn to protest against the cruelties on them and realize the need to play their multifaceted role in the changed society. Daisy suggests the refreshing change gradually creeping into the lives of such women in India.

The Redefinition of values

Narayan views the model of women prospering after the Women's Liberation Movement in the figure of Daisy. Simone De Beauvoir (1949) dreams of the emergence of the new woman in future in *The Second Sex*: "The 'modern' woman accepts masculine values: she prides herself on thinking, taking action, working, creating, on the same terms as men; instead of seeking to disparage them, she declares herself their equal" (para. 6). Daisy can be said to be a perfect replica of this vision of a modern woman. She is the new woman, a completely liberated person who is very sure of herself. It is through Daisy and her mission of spreading the message of birth-control that the effects of modernity become clearly visible in Malgudi. Along with a Western name, she brings with her values of the Western civilization. She works in an office, receives Raman in accordance to her need and invites him to her apartment. She even makes arrangements for Raman to accompany her on her tour to the village. Her ideas and interests project her as symbol of feminism. Narayan portrays the new balance she creates between the sexes with her intellect and vitality. Further, she attains a titanic stature over her male partner Raman bringing about a reversal of the cultural boundaries. Hariprasanna (1998a) observes Daisy as a more "dominating character" than her male counterpart, a figure who declares "her independence as a woman, demonstrates that she has a will and mind of her own, and chooses a course of life for herself which takes her out of the confines of the traditional family, its relationships and conventions" (p.80). She proves to be stronger than him, as strong as the legendary Ganga. Narayan (1976) narrates, "Her imperious manner both charmed and frightened Raman. In her previous incarnation, she must have been Queen Victoria, or in a still earlier incarnation Rani Jhansi, the warrior queen of Indian history" (p.405). Daisy challenges various practices of the society. Unlike Raman, she succumbs to her instinctive urges when the moment suits her with a natural sense of ease and queenly grace. Daisy leaves her predecessors far behind in her psychological and sexual sophistication. She claims admiration and fear with her boundless energy. Daisy's behavior is indicative of the unconditional venture and the new traits developing in an Indian woman.

Non-traditional occupation

In the post-independent era, woman's role started changing towards greater emancipation with the implications of the principles of democracy based on liberty. Her status was affected by the changes. She started taking up non-traditional professions and attained fresh dignity and importance. J.S.Mill (1870) strongly advocated for "just equality of women" and "...their admissibility to all the functions and occupations hitherto retained as the monopoly of the stronger sex..." (p.91).

Certain factors that made a tremendous impact on the employment ambitions of the Indian woman in non-traditional fields included the constitutional guarantee of non-discrimination and equality in matter of employment, women's education, development of employment prospects in the tertiary sector etc. (Arya, 1963, p.271). She entered every field of occupation and recognized the dignity of work. Daisy's career as a population control officer is a reflection of her identity carried on with complete dedication. The redefined values echo the prediction made in 1929 in *A Room of One's Own*, "In a hundred years... women will have ceased to be the protected sex. Logically they will take part in all the activities and exertions that were once denied them" (Woolf, 2007, pp.37-38). Daisy arrives in Malgudi to enlighten the people with birth-control program in the district. She lectures on sex education, contraception, family planning etc. and employs Raman to paint propaganda signs for her campaign in population control. Daisy reflects the message given by the government of India to curb the rise in population through various measures. The concept of family planning is taken up in *The Painter of Signs* and it is concerned with changes in society and the shift to modern times. Narayan stresses the need of population education among the innocent and illiterate rural people and through Daisy's campaign, he presents a true picture of post-independent India. Education had favorably conditioned sex-knowledge and practice of family planning that ushered a new era for the modern woman in every part of the world.

Family planning is now called family welfare and it is a mixed programme for women. The Government sees Family Welfare as a remedy for almost every social ill. The basis of the government programme is the assumption that increasing population is responsible for the increasing poverty in India (Desai & Krishnaraj, 1987, p.236).

The Government depended to a great extent on voluntary organizations to carry on the welfare needs of the people. Women volunteer could more easily take up the task of canvassing the advantages of family planning among the rural womenfolk. They could carry on, more easily than men, propaganda against hazards of unhygienic conditions under which the villagers live. In order to curb uncontrolled birth-rate, education and motivation help initially and Daisy plays the role of the most effective agent in this regard. Daisy takes upon herself the task of awakening people absorbed in ignorance. She crosses every hurdle with the help of the latent spirit of social service in her. Daisy works interminably in order to achieve her target and faces countless hurdles in the family planning campaigns. She travels from one place to another all alone. She has a great capacity of adaptability. She is very active and travels long distances carrying all her belongings in a small tin trunk and an air travel bag. She eats whatever food she gets with interest. She even takes bath in the public well and dries her wet dress anywhere. Daisy is, in fact, purely dedicated to her work and does not care for comforts of any kind. She is never shy or hesitant and explains the process of birth and its control, the physiology and anatomy of sexual intercourse to the villagers. Daisy is a replica of an Indian woman who entered every field of occupation and earned as man. Barriers to prove her capabilities were breaking up and social awareness and self-respect were becoming stronger. As a result of the changes in ideas and circumstances, the orthodox habits started getting relaxed. Restrictions on food and eating habits were becoming out-dated. The work-obsessed and duty-conscious woman Daisy exists to perform some service to the society. With true rationalism and scientific mind along with a missionary zeal, she tries to overcome every obstacle that comes her way.

The pre-marriage protest

The feminists have been in favor of changing marriage from patriarchal institution to equality and companionship. "The Women's Liberation Movement started questioning the existing institutions of patriarchy, family and private and public spheres of life. The feminists saw the roots of the inequality between the sexes in these very age-old social institutions" (Pandey, 1989, p.202). In the traditional social order, women are never expected to play dominant roles. Dominant women are considered willful having no respect for any social code of conduct. It is considered that only by emancipating from the bindings of prejudices, conventions and customs that "stifled her sexual and emotional life, would she really liberate herself from the chains of the past" (Wexler, 1998, p.263). The equal right to satisfaction and happiness in marriage is asserted in the changed era. Daisy faces oppositions from her family due to her unconventional traits. During her childhood days, she used to live in a joint family and so she did not have any chance of individual fulfilment. She develops a sort of aversion towards her family. The seeds of protest against the traditional ways of life grow in her during her girlhood. When her parents search out a prospective bridegroom for her, she conducts herself in a non-traditional manner before the bridegroom. To the disappointment of her parents, she revolts and rejects the match with a man whose only qualification is his wealth and ancestral lands. Daisy shocks everybody by declaring that she would inspect the groom, rather than allowing anyone to inspect her as a bride. Anticipating all sorts of constraints, her liberal spirit makes her exit from her home bidding farewell to the sacrosanct tradition. The feminists believe in abandoning the male invented marriage customs to subjugate women.

Daisy reflects the opposition of every modern woman to get complete freedom in matrimonial affairs. The inversion of the pre-marriage custom prevailing in a patriarchal middle-class society in India speaks of the disparity and rift between the traditional values and the new ideals. Narayan forecasts a picture of liberated female prospering after Women's Liberation Movement.

Redefinition of marriage

Modern ideas have given rise to a revolutionary form of marriage. In such a marriage, the consent of the partners is preferred to the vows taken in a traditional marriage ceremony. The lovers' agreement is the basis of the bond. Both are quite matured and work in their own way of life. Each partner also holds the maximum liberty to break up his or her relation whenever the need arises. Subbamma (1985) elucidates the revolutionary form of marriage:

One does not have any rights or duties towards the other... When the parties to the union find that the fountain of love has dried up they simply separate without much fuss and ado and even social disapproval... In these marriages sexual intimacy is not based on compulsion. It is mingled with mutual experience of joy and exuberance of spirit and enriches the minds and hearts of both (pp.88-90).

The marriage between Daisy and Raman is planned as a penal arrangement. Daisy agrees for the Gandharva type of marriage with Raman for it gives the liberty to snap off the tie any time. She also asserts that she will not change her name after marriage and retain her original identity. "Marriage has no more significance for her than staying together of a man and a woman. Sex is just a biological activity" (Ramana, 1993, p.47). Thus, Daisy breaks herself free from all traditional restraints that have been deep-rooted in conventional Indian women. She believes in the concept of marriage that envisages complete sexual freedom with no notion of fidelity. Daisy also echoes the view of Natasha Walter, author of *The New Feminism* (1998), who remarks that a change in the domestic arena invites men to take a fair part of household work while women are moving out of the home (Walters, 2005, p.138). She makes it clear that her work shall in no way suffer from the marriage. Housekeeping does not seem to be her job and home is of secondary importance for her. Raman understands that in future he will be taking up the primary charge of the kitchen while Daisy, as usual, would be out for work. Daisy is thus portrayed as an early incarnation of feminism in India.

The Mission

It is seen sometimes that liberated women refuse to take over their responsibilities of marital life and prefer to remain unmarried. Chitnis (1977) elaborates this changed attitude: "The position taken by extremist feminists is particularly alarming. They say that they would willingly sacrifice the institutions of marriage and the family if these prevent the liberation of women" (pp.18-19). Such redefinition of ideas finds clear expression in the character of Daisy. Daisy is wedded to her work and so she does not feel the need of a life-partner. She gives more importance to her mission than to her love. The traditional attitude of being incomplete without marriage is changed completely. New woman like Daisy proves that she can attain fulfilment in life without getting married. She may fall in love, but not necessarily marry the person if it affects her career adversely. She never desires a fixed marriage life bound by the codes of tradition. She sets a new pattern for the Indian woman by making love with the use of her anatomy, yet keeping her goals in mind. At first, she discourages her lover Raman and thwarts his impulsive seduction and even threatens to report to the police. But eventually, she surrenders to the desire of the flesh. She defies the socio-moral codes with an anti-traditional attitude. She promises to live with Raman as a wife, but suddenly declares that she is unable to fulfil the promise, as she has to leave Malgudi due to an emergency assignment. Daisy prefers to lead a busy life devoid of marital bliss. She breaks away from the Indian tradition, accepted beliefs and ways of life. The character of Bim who figures in Anita Desai's *Clear Light of the Day* makes a similar opinion regarding marriage. Bim does not want to get married at all, but wishes to work and become independent. Like Daisy, she realizes that marriage would not provide her the desired happiness. Daisy gives supreme value to independent individuality. Her progress is indicative of the revolutionary changes in the Indian scene. Narayan reflects through Daisy the power of female intellect and vitality. He also reminds us of the sexual revolution of the west. As a woman working to spread information on family planning and living contentedly on her own, she represents ideals different from those of conventional female Indian protagonists. Like Simone de Beauvoir, Daisy feels that marriage fastens women to domesticity. She decides not to have any children of her own and if one comes, she would give it to an orphanage. In this context, she can be compared to the mythological character, Goddess Ganga of *The Mahabharata*. Daisy's decision to give away her children to an orphanage reveals a completely detached and unemotional aspect of her character. She considers her job to be of more importance and sticks to her ideals at any cost. She tries to eliminate emotions altogether from her life keeping at par with her campaigns against the birth of children.

Disparity, Opposition and Rift between values

Changes are also evident in other aspects in the post-independent Indian society. The new awareness results in disparity and opposition between values. Hariprasanna (1998b) refers to the presence of a conflict in Narayan's *Malgudi* as a result of the dawning of modernity, "The conflict is between two sets of values—the old and the new, East and the West, tradition and modernity, illusion and reality and so on" (p.28). A wide generation gap is noticed along with the emergence of new awakening in the modern women. This rift leads to problems in interaction and differences of opinion with elderly people. Reverence to elders in the family is gradually losing ground. "...Daisy, who is named after a non-indigenous flower, is in fact a figure foreign to the India of tradition" (Mann, 2000, p.71). Daisy's feminist views are poles apart from that of Raman's aunt. On learning about Raman's intention to marry Daisy, Raman's aunt leaves him and his house for good. She is unable to come to terms with her nephew's passion for a casteless girl. Such old and traditional characters find the modern women with new values as something incompatible. On the other hand, the new women do not care for the traditional norms resulting in wide generation differences. Religion is also facing a challenge with the development of new traits in modern women. They start growing less orthodox and superstitious and are not much concerned about temple-going or other rituals related to it. When Raman is left alone by his aunt to be married to Daisy, he makes a number of alterations in his ancestral home to suit the needs of his beloved. The puja room of his aunt was converted into Daisy's room leaving no place for the Gods she had left behind. Narayan also contrasts Daisy's rationality with the religious nature of the villagers. The difference becomes more intense in her encounter with the old priest devoted to the temple of Goddess of Plenty where barren women are proved to conceive after praying. Lack of religiosity in modern women as Daisy is the result of the new political and economic environment that paves way for secular, democratic and scientific ethics. Moreover, inadequacy of traditional teaching is also one of the causes of lack in religious beliefs.

Conclusion

Thus, a steady transformation of social institutions takes place as a result of the new economic and intellectual forces. The emancipated self of Daisy has greatly influenced the institutions of religion, caste and marriage. She redefines her role by opposing many conventions that were considered compulsory in the yesteryears. Sharan (1993) examines, "Her strong will-power, her complete dedication to work and her passing weak moments make her the emerging new woman of the Shavian plays who is immensely conscious of her rights, struggles hard to own them and to use them" (p.282). She establishes her equality with men and zealously takes over the strenuous and unconventional tasks that were once considered fit only for men. In addition, she enjoys more liberty and equality showing a remarkable change in her attitude. She goes out of the family fold to live independent lives. Her dedication to an ideal brings out all her hidden abilities, an invincible, combatant spirit and individuality. Daisy's multifaceted role greatly contributes towards the development of the nation. Narayan, in fact, perceived the changing social circumstances and brilliantly portrays possibilities in the lives of women through the character of Daisy. New woman like Daisy struggles to achieve her right by any means. She establishes values of her own developing an inner coherence and a confidence to face life. Thus, she carves out a separate identity and is entitled to a supreme place in her sphere of activity. The new role is the result of the change towards greater emancipation from man's domination. She succeeds in becoming an object of admiration with an elevated social status. Her voice of protest for personal reasons affects the whole society. The age-old social evils of casteism, communalism, untouchability etc. have been thrashed off to a great extent.

Appendix (1)

Ganga: According to Hindu mythology, Ganga is the river-Goddess. Ganga gives birth to seven children and drowns them one after another.

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