

Exploring Different Dimensions of Masculinity: A Critical Study of R. K. Narayan's Select Novels

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Abstract: Indian literary writers produced works on multiple themes and subjects that reflect their vast ideas and outlook towards society. It also shows their broad perspective on Indian society and their acute observation of things. The theme of masculinity also remains one of the significant subjects in the literary world. The writers across the world wrote about different aspects of manhood and also glorified manliness in varied ways. Indian English literature mostly focused on Indian society and its people, and also dealt with many profound subjects. Indian society is strongly dominated with the patriarchal structure, and it can be seen in the daily lives of people of all ages. In such a male-dominated society, men have various rights in different sections of life, which sometimes allows them to dominate societal notions and other peripheries. Masculinity is one of the terms that is defined by the attributes of behaviours, languages, practices and existing particular culture that are often associated with the male group and not included in the zone of feminine groups in their zone. Hence, these things signify the social behaviours and cultural aspects associated with the male world. The other term, hegemonic masculinity, presents the male's social ascendancy in which women's oppression occurs. R.K. Narayan is one of the most prominent Indian novelists who spoke on issues of women and examined the patriarchal structure ingrained in Indian society for centuries. In his novels, Narayan fervently criticises male dominance and also discusses various attributes that we could study through his male characters. Besides his novels also presents male heroes' struggles, hardship and societal ignorance that they confront because of their modern liberal ideas. Many of his novels present male heroes in situations of struggle, and their strong willpower and constant efforts to overcome problems also show their masculinity. Thus, the novels of Narayan tried to examine masculinity in different frames by portraying them into various ways. This paper will study his novels in the context of different dimensions of masculinity and also propose deep insights through his heroes' opinions and outlooks as well.

Keywords: Masculinity, Philosophy, Approaches, Female, Indian English literature, R. K. Narayan.

The notion of masculinity is a wide term in the literary scenario, where writers propose different dimensions of masculine philosophy through the portraiture of societal aspects. Masculinity is widely defined as a term that shows male domination in society. However, other dimensions of masculinity signify the male by demonstrating their hardship, struggle and efforts to challenge the situations and their outspoken attitudes towards the dogmatic laws that subjugates other in terms of gender, class and caste and in other forms. This chapter focuses on the myriad aspects of masculinity in relation to Indian society that are presented by the Indian English writers, specifically with the novels of R. K. Narayan. In Indian society, it is a hard truth that women are seen as physically and emotionally weak and are deprived by the male society of expressing their feelings, ideas and other expressions. The female critic Sushila points out that:

Human experience for centuries has been synonymous with the masculine experience, with the result that the collective image of humanity has been one-sided and incomplete. A woman has not been defined as a subject in her own right, but merely as an entity that concerns man, either in his real life or his fantasy life. (Singh 07)

As far as Hindu society is concerned, women are prohibited to get education and to go outside without a male in the early period of time. Moreover, the scriptures and rituals are also categorised as secondary and worthless without men in this world. Though there was a period of time in Vedic age, women got rights in some spheres, but later again they were overpowered by the male world and subdued culturally, socially, conventionally and both in personal and professional life. Hence, male chauvinism degraded women in different forms of life and treated them as a commodity. Besides, they were not allowed to live life in bachelor form and suffered the male hegemony throughout their life after getting married. The religious text Manusmriti defines women's status in a very deprived manner, as it narrates to them that:

Day and night, women must be kept in subordination to the males of the in childhood to the father, in youth to her husband, in old age to her sons.... Even though the husband is destitute of virtue and seeks pleasure elsewhere, he must be worshipped as God. (Collective 68)

Apart from that, the society is also constructed in a patriarchal form that gives the male group power to rule and control the female in different scenarios and also construes the fact that women are dependent on men and can't do anything alone in life. Because of this patriarchal structure, females didn't receive much respect and honour in the family and outside the family in society as well. They were seen as inferior and as a commodity by the society that relegates their freedom inwardly and outwardly. The critic Krishnaswamy argues over the status of women in Indian society that:

She is a creature who, as a child, is sold off to strangers for a bridal price, or when she grows up, serves as a supplier of dowry for her husband's family, or who as a widow, in a final act of obliteration immolates herself on her dead husband's funeral pyre to be acclaimed as 'Sati-Savitri' as an immortal. (Krishnaswamy)

Subsequently, the Indian English literature exposes the patriarchal structure of Indian society that diminishes women's position in the name of religion and social dogmas. Their novels speak about the multiple problems of Indian women. Narayan is one of the Indian English writers who fervently spoke on the issue of women and also attacked the societal structure that is based on male ideas. His novels explicitly focus on women's problems, gender disparity, suffering, and ill treatment and masculinity that is used to suppress female identity. Though his women persona are presented with both attributes, strong, fiery and independent and docile, submissive and weak. Her heroines like Rosie, Savitri, Daisy and others fall in this category. The married women in his novels are generally portrayed as the victims of a masculine world, as he also spoke on the married Indian middle class women in a letter to his friend that:

I was somehow obsessed with a philosophy of Woman as opposed to Man, her constant oppressor. This must have been an early testament of the Women's Lib' movement. Man assigned her a secondary place.... A wife in an orthodox milieu of Indian society was an ideal victim of such circumstances. (My Days 119)

Narayan's novel *The Dark Room* captures the problem of the protagonist Savitri, who got stuck in married life and lost her identity. In this novel, the writer shows a masculine attitude through the character of Ramani, who cheated and dominated her wife. Ramani presents masculinity through his treatment of his wife and his male chauvinism. He embodies a patriarchal ethos that allows him to subjugate the woman. His typical nature shows the male group's domination of our Indian society. In the novel, he treated his wife like a servant and always scolded her for silly mistakes as well. It is because of his patriarchal mindset that he never tried to make a healthy relationship with Savitri. On the other side Savitri, as a traditional Indian wife, bears everything from her husband's side as part of life and also ignores him by considering him a protector of life. Hence, this masculine mentality that drives him through his social structure causes disharmony in their marriage relationship. Moreover, this patriarchal mindset ingrained in him never made him happy with her partner. He always wanted his wife to play the role of a traditional housewife, while from his side, he never tried to change himself and kept extra marital affair in office. Ramani was a cultural product of Indian society who followed texts like Manusmriti and believe woman only a tool or entertainment object and a burden on a man's shoulder in the marriage institution; "Instead of showing sympathy and searching for his wife, he decidedly remains indifferent, and describes this act as womanly madness, (Room 110)." Meanwhile it also suggests the idea of propagating patriarchal gender diplomatic notions that are also termed as in the feminist world as feminisation of madness, which signifies the idea that in this zone woman labelled as mad and insane because of not fulfilling male desires and demands by the male groups. However, it also signifies the idea that men are naturally logical and strong while female lacks all these attributes. In relation to this, feminist woman Showalter states the idea that; "...madness, even when experienced by men, is metaphorically and symbolically represented as feminine: a female malady, (The Female Malady 4)." Similarly, the other novels of Narayan, such as *The Guide* and *The Painter of Signs* presents such a kind of filthy masculinity of Indian society which thoroughly focuses on the idea of women's domination. Though these novels deal with the stories of women are suppressed and dominated by their male partners, they also express a resistance and defiant attitude to assert their identity. The male characters in these novels are patriarchally designed who seek women's freedom as a crime and a threat to the social decorum, and for their own identity. Hence, they tried to overcome them by not allowing them to follow their dreams and forced them to live behind the four walls of the house. The other aspect of masculinity that Narayan shows through his male character is their struggle with life, hardship and a fervent attitude to challenge the problems. In his novels like *The Bachelor of Arts*, *Swami and Friends* and *The English Teacher*, we find different kinds of male heroes who demonstrate masculine attitude by their struggle, not by suppressing women in the house. The novel *The Bachelor of Arts* speaks about the story of an educated modern man who is stuck in traditional chains and shows constant efforts to break them. His constant attitude towards the difficulties and problems that he encounters in the novel shows his true masculine power. At the outset of the narrative, we find Chandern surrounded by many problems as he says; "In the opinion of this house, historians should be slaughtered first, (Narayan 01)." The writer depicted his masculinity through his defiant attitude towards the traditional marriage institution and other things as well. He didn't believe in the caste and class concept, and this is because he opposed his parents regarding marriage in same caste or community. Besides, he disapproves of

the notion of dowry in Indian society and calls it an evil problem, while on the other side, his parents approve it and consider dowry an essential thing in marriage. As we studied his mother's views, that:

My father gave seven thousand in cash to your father and over two thousand in a silver vessel, and spent five thousand on the wedding celebrations. What was wrong with it? How are we any the worse for it? It is the duty of every father to set some money aside for securing a son-in-law. We can't disregard custom. (Narayan 84-85)

Nevertheless, the unopposed nature of Chandran towards existing social patterns and systems put him in a different category of males and endeavours to show another dimension of masculinity in the novel. The novel *Swami and Friends* proposes another kind of masculine approach through the heroes' aggressive and violent nature. In this novel, the hero Swami presents masculinity attributes in multiple scenes, i.e. in an incident, he rebukes the teacher and disrespects him when he makes a sarcastic comment on his religious god and goddess, as he says; "Did our Jesus go gadding about with dancing girls like your Krishna?... If he did not, why was he crucified? If he were a God, why did he eat fish and flesh and drink wine?, (Friends 05)." Hence, his deep belief and conviction in religion show his masculine traits in the novel. The hero was also the product of a culture and society that is constructed on the pillar of masculine philosophy, and he belongs to a family that ingrained in him deep masculine traits from the beginning of life. It is the masculine traits that make him an angry and violent person, as "he enters the class, a snigger goes around the benches; he looks at the blackboard, his face burnt red. On the board is written in huge letters, TAIL (Friends 45)." Here he beat the boys who wrote the name tail on the board in anger that caused a tense atmosphere in school. He disliked it when someone called his friend a tail. In a way, the reason for Swami's aggression was the violation of the gender identity of his friend, that made him sad and furious, and to show his domination and robust nature, he beat the involved person there. Therefore, all these incidents in the novel signify the instance of masculine dimensions that are personified by the hero, Swami. In the end, it could be said that the novelist Narayan remains successful in portraying the Indian society in the different dimensions of masculinity through his male characters as well. His portraiture of patriarchal male and their domination over women, and also their struggle, anger, and liberal mindset, also suggested the masculinity in his writings.

Work Citation

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