

NARAYAN'S SAVITRI AND ANAND'S GAURI: A JOURNEY FROM VICTIMIZATION TO CONSCIOUSNESS

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Abstract

Since time immemorial, Indian Society has been a semi-feudal society. There is always a gap between the ruler and the ruled, the haves and the have-nots, the privileged and the deprived. The gap has not been bridged even after sixty seven years of independence. The creative writers of recent times have been dealing with the problem of the downcast and the downtrodden. The word 'subaltern' means 'of inferior rank'; it refers to those groups in society who are subject to the hegemony of the ruling class. The subaltern voices the protest against the established norms and traditions. The present paper intends to present a comparative study of two characters – Narayan's Savitri and Anand's Gauri. The one believes in traditional mould – meek, docile, submissive whereas the other seeks a space in her life, a woman who asks a bit more of life than tradition will automatically give her.

Keywords: traditional taboos, male chauvinism, new woman, etc.

Indian English literature is richly dipped in hues of native cultural ethos. It gives voice to the prevalent malpractices in the contemporary Indian societies. The literary gamut of Indian writers writing in English is imbued with the writers' voice against the exploitation of downtrodden and the destitute, the untouchable and the poverty-stricken poor lot. Women, being one important marginalized class, won the sympathy of these writers as they have always been exploited by their male partner in the name of religion or social customs. The writers like Mulk Raj Anand, R.K. Narayan, Bhabani Bhattacharya, Kamala Markandaya and others vividly depicted such female figures as on the one hand are patience and tolerance-incarnate, undergoing all sorts of injustice and yet uncomplaining but on the other hand, they emerge out as strong individuals challenging all traditional taboos. R.K. Narayan and Mulk Raj Anand are two such novelists who have depicted typical Indian women in most of their novels. Though the former has presented women in their traditional and conventional mould with a few exceptions, the latter has tried to raise a voice of protest against persecution of women in his writing.

Narayan has portrayed Savitri in **The Dark Room** as a typical Indian wife performing her house hold duties most religiously and even tolerating her husband's abuses and tortures without uttering a single word. She is treated in such away as if she were not a human being at all. Her husband, Ramani regards her as an instrument for satisfying his carnal appetite and children producing machine. In his eyes, she is no better than a slave girl to serve him without expecting any appreciation for it. She is no better than a puppet in her husband's hands. When he likes he plays with her and when not, throws her on the ground without having any consideration for her emotions and sentiments crushing her under his iron heels.

Savitri is such a wife who despite her devotion, dutifulness, submissiveness and obedience to her husband suffers all sorts of physical and mental tortures at his hands. She, being a submissive and tolerant wife doesn't speak even a word and lets her husband say whatever he likes. She very patiently bears his rebukes hurled at her. In respect of proper maintenance and upkeep of his office dress, he holds her responsible. When he leaves the house for his office, Savitri comes at the gate to see him off. But he without expressing any word of appreciation for her affectionate courtesy boards the car and goes off.

As Savitri is non-assertive and submissive to her husband, the latter always neglects and does not reciprocate to her sentiments and emotions. In his eyes, she is quite significant and deserves no notice of her husband. Being a self effacing wife, she holds herself responsible for all such behaviour of her husband. She is always apprehensive of her husband's uncertain mood. But when he returns from the office and without any adverse comments on her enters the room and switches on the lights, she feels a bit relieved. When any action of her husband makes her mood off, she enters into a dark room with sullen face and remains there for a long time. She is so submissive that even when her husband stands before her as a defaulter she does not seek explanation from him for his behaviour. Time, being the greatest healer, by and by relieves her of her mental depression and agony.

Savitri, being a typical Indian wife, never opposes her husband. Rather she feels that quarreling with him over his attraction towards other women is not desirable on the part of a wife. So when it is reported that her husband is having affairs with another woman, she instead of lodging complaint about it with her husband, decides to make herself so attractive that her husband loses his interest in other women. She adopts all the possible devices to make herself charming and attractive,

She applies a little scented oil to her hair, combs it with great care and braids and coils it very neatly. She washes her face with soap and water and applies very lightly a little face powder... (**The Dark Room** 104-05)

After fully decorating herself, she eagerly awaits the arrival of her husband as she is confident that when her husband comes he is sure to appreciate her beauty and shower his love. But to her despair, the night turns into dawn and her husband doesn't come. All her enthusiasm is shattered and her mind reverts to its obsession that he does not care even a bit for her. However, inspite of her husband's rude and rough and sometimes even cruel behaviour, she is all attention to his likes and dislikes.

Sometimes, when Savitri is in a pensive mood, she ponders over her unfortunate and miserable lot in the house even after fifteen years of her married life. For this, she holds

herself responsible. She feels that if she had asserted herself a little more at the beginning of her married life, then all would have been well. At this moment she recalls to her mind the instances of such ladies as taking charge of their husbands just after their marriage. The rough and rude behaviour of her husband has torn her inner soul to pieces. She quite often faces his indifferent attitude towards her. To give vent to her highly injured feelings accumulated in her heart, she says,

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. (110)

Indeed, when her husband remains calm after hearing her angry words, the mercury of her resentment comes down. Finding him in a good mood, when she tries to persuade him to give up his relations with the another woman, he flares up and bluntly says that he is not going to do so. Her husband's blunt reply proves the last straw that breaks the back of the camel. Her patience and endurance give way and she decides to leave the home forever. When she is preparing to leave, the brute in her husband raises its head and he comes to her and instead of putting soothing balm on her bleeding wounds pierces her with the pointed spear of her brutal words and behaviour. She, bearing all the tortures calmly and cutting off all the loving family lies finally decides to put an end to her life. What else a tortured and tormented wife could have done !

On reaching the bank of the river, Sarayu, she sits on the last step with her feet in the dark moving water. During the tense and dark moments of committing suicide, the events of past life pass through her mind like reels of a picture. She recalls the events of her life one by one. The brutal behaviour of her husband implores her to jump into water and gain freedom from tortures forever one the one hand, while her affection for her children and also her considerations for the well-being of her brutal husband, on the other stand in hour of doing so. Thus she is placed in an acute psychologically tense mood. It is very difficult for her to choose between life and death. Pondering over the futility of her life and perpetual economic dependence, she finally decides to end her life. Even while stepping down the stairs of the river she thinks that after committing suicide, she is sure to be burnt in the cauldron of boiling oil in the hell for talking back and disobeying her husband. Thus we find Savitri a typical Indian wife who cannot think ill of her husband even in her dreams. She bears all the tortures of inflicted on her by her husband without uttering a single word.

Mulk Raj Anand, one of the founding fathers of Indian English literature, raised a voice of protest against persecution of women in his writings in general and especially in the novel **The Old Woman and the Cow**, later published with the title, **Gauri**. In his novels, they have been portrayed with delicacy and they speak their lot in the contemporary society and forces of their exploitation. Leilain Two Leaves and a fixed speaks a lot about how the capitalistic set up of pre-independent India exploited the mutability and sexual modesty of the women among the undergoes. Particularly during the powerful Zamindari regime, poor Indian women, were subjected to sexual exploitation of Zamindars and landlords against which there was no legislation at their resoue. Of course Anand is not as concerned with women as Premchand. It is natural that the problem of Indian women does not loom large in his novels.

It is true that he focuses his main attention on men but it is equally true that a few women figure prominently in this novels.

Anand's women always play a minor and subordinate part. They are passive but firm with innate goodness and strength of endurance. They are defenceless before any unknown enemy and equally unknown and inexorable forces. His female characters are for setting the idea of chastity and purity, love and beauty, discipline and abstinence against lasciviousness, cruelty and hate. Most of Anand's women are women soliciting our sympathy. They are the bearers for all. It may go against male egotism, but it has been disguised to free the race from the insidious clutches of cruelty and illusion. Their steadfastness. Love and loyalty, are controlled by some inner psychological force.

In traditional and conventional Indian society, a woman is supposed to be docile, an apostle of love and sacrifice and silent sufferer of patriarchal rage, male chauvinism, sexual oppression, colonial mind set of males and so on. She becomes a victim not only of man's inhuman attitude but also of a system – the Hindu Dharma, which maintains that a wife is her husband's property or his possession and she has no individuality outside that system. But the spread of education and economic independence have provoked women to raise their voice against this exploitation, fight against the present social set-up and assert their rights.

Women in Indian society have been treated as the other self or man's subordinate. She is thought to be a plaything in the hands of man. In the novel **The Old Woman and the Cow**, Panchi, the male protagonist is overjoyed with the prospect of marrying a girl who "is like a cow, very gentle and very good" (11) and "whom he could fold in his arms at night and kick during the day, who would adorn his house and help him with the land" (11). Gauri silently suffers and ungrudgingly "puts up with everything at her husband's home and settles down patiently to a life of unremitting toil, hunger, and pain" (Sinha 68)

The orthodox family of Panchi holds Gauri wholly responsible for the calamities which befell the house and the village but she ignores everything. Her meekness makes Kesaro, the aunt of Panchi sure that she is able to arouse any suspicion in Panchi against her. Even her chastity is doubted. Her husband puts the blame of the quarrel between him and his uncle on Gauri,

... Only after I married, all my troubles began (32)

The tyrannical behaviour of her mother-in-law and the beatings at the hands of her husband arouse the spark of revolution in her and she whispers,

Patience-how long can I go on being patient against the nagging of that woman and your shoe beating Son her behalf! (44-45)

Everybody was surprised at this changed attitude in Gauri. She who always remained shy and hesitant and was afraid of her husband and who believed that a woman was all for her husband to take or to reject her just as he liked, now has fits of anger. She shouts at Kesaro, Get out of my house ... You oppressed me enough when I first came as a bride. Now don't come interfering in our lives ...(95)

Gauri sparkles with this sudden flashing power that had come into her, turning her into Kali, the divine destroyer.

The Old Woman and the Cow portrays the two diametrically opposite virtues of Gauri's personality. She, on the one hand appears to be self-sacrificing, self-effacing woman who

concedes to her subjugation with a spirit of nonchalance while on the other brings forth the image of the black against Goddess who fights justice. She believed in the worship of her lord and master and wanted ultimately to conquer him with her devotion like an ideal Indian wife (100). But Gauri was also conscious of her individuality. The revelation of Gauri's pregnancy plunged Panchi into a "veritable whirlpool of doubts" and kicking her badly, he said : "Go to your mother's home, you of the evil stars!" (102). And finally despite her requests, she was sent back to her mothers' home in the village of Piplan Kalan. His uncle Amru sold her to Seth Jai Ram Das, a rich old man of Hoshiarpur. However, she resisted the advances of his uncle who caught hold of her by the plait of her hair, dragged her down from the bed. Gauri became red with rage "like that of Kali in anger" (126). She shouted as she had the flames of the Goddess Kali in her :

"Go away and eat the ashes!... Monster! Don't torment me!..." (127)

Gauri emerges as a new woman who does not follow the age-old traditions of the society blindly. She reacts pungently to the hypocrisy of the people who cover their sexual desires under the garb of religion. Gauri did not surrender to the love advances of Seth Jai Ram Das and when once he tried to molest her she resisted angrily, sought shelter in the clinic of Colonel Mahindra. But her miseries didn't come to an end. Dr. Batra, the Colonel's partner, attempted to rape her. Once again she saved herself by her strong resistance. Colonel Mahindra made her a nurse and restored her to her husband. But Gauri's stay at Panchi's house raised the brows of the villagers, as a result Panchi asked Gauri to prove her chastity, if she could. But Gauri was not ready to do it. She decided to walk out of Panchi's life. She said defiantly, "Acha, if I am a curse upon you, I will go away... I shall go and work in Doktor Mahindra's hospital and have my child there. And I will not come back again" (263).

Gauri is the "incarnation of Sita", but she is not self-sacrificing like Sita. When her self-esteem is hurt, she becomes a rebel as she registers her protest against Panchi's injustice and calls him a coward who pretended to be a lion among the men of the village. She retorts angrily, "They are telling him that Ram turned out Sita because everyone doubted her chastity during her stay with Ravana!... I am not Sita that the earth will open up and swallow me. I shall just go our and be forgotten of him..." (263).

Gauri, though meek "like a cow, very gentle and very good", had the seeds of a new woman in her who has learnt not only to discharge her duties as an ideal wife but also to assert her rights. She, like an ideal Indian wife, loves her husband and stands erect like a rock before all crises. The novelist vividly describes her struggle which she makes to conquer her own weakness when she resolves to leave her husband's home : "Her face shone from the pressure of her stricken heart, transfigured from the gentle cow's acquiescent visage of the time when she had arrived in Panchi's house, to that of a woman - with a will of her own, though her heart palpitated with every step" (264).

Gauri's stay at Doctor's clinic had made her wise and also aware of Malpractices, prevailing in the village. Gauri, when she first came to her husband's house, had no tongue in her mouth. But gradually she underwent a tremendous change in her personality. Now she was fully able to analyse the present state of villagers. She thought that gambling, drinking and the wife beating are the great enemies of man. She seems to believe,

There is neither Devi nor Kali ! there is only one's own strength... (115)

Moreover, her decision to work as a nurse in Doctor's clinic and be economically self-reliant equips her with moral strength and she deserts her husband which indicates that there was a change in her earlier views. She fights back against the traditional attitude of society where people like "son's and son's son and considers girls a curse".

Gauri is thus a symbol of strength. She faces boldly all the blows of destiny and time with equanimity. She does not bow down before the brutalities either of her husband or of the society itself. She retains her individuality. Moreover, Gauri suffers at the hands of her mother, mother-in-law and her husband. Almost all who come in touch with her, exploit and maltreat her. With her body attempted to be befooled and sullied, she is mentally prepared and bold in the pursuits of struggle for existence. Gauri is "an epitome of excellence, strength and virtue and one of the most memorable female characters in the whole range of Indian fiction". (Sinha 70) She is the replica of a modern woman who refuses to be a fiddle and finally emerges as a bold dignified human being. She is far ahead of Narayan's Savitri in **The Dark Room** who is meek, docile and submissive. She remains so from the beginning to the end of the novel. Gauri, on the contrary has different shades in her character.

She preserves the dignity and self-respect of the Indian woman. She, though silently suffers and settles down patiently to a life of unremitting toil, hunger and pain, very soon defies the conventional mode of tradition-bound society and finally walk out of the sacrosanct institution of marriage. And herein lies the difference between Narayan's and Anand's treatment of women. Narayan's women in general and Savitri in particular can think of leaving their husbands but finally they cannot as they are reminded of their Indian roots. Anand's women, in general and Gauri in particular moves one step ahead by revolting against the patriarchal set-up of the society.

The Old Woman and the Cow is thus an old folk theme in which a woman is not generally shown to be a lowly creatures struggling for existence. She is rather shown as an object of prowess and chastity. There is a psychological implication in the drawing of Gauri's character. This is a leap towards the concept of women's liberation throughout India in particular and many other Indian writers in English in general. He portrays not women but suffering women. His women are driven by themselves to succumb to the lure of the lives of heroines, to love, to fail, to revolt and sometimes to stick to unshakable firmness. Like most of his contemporaries, Anand is obsessed with social evils but he knows that the evils are not irremediable. The remedy lies not in insularity but in tolerance, not in discord but in harmony and unison, not in hate but in nurturing the sense of universal brotherhood. John Bayley in **Tolstoy and the Novel** has remarked,

The immediate and involuntary sympathy that we feel for both Leila and Gauri perhaps, identification rather than sympathy – stays with us throughout the novels. With Gauri, specially, Anand rises to the highest art, to his practice of letting the individual appear in the light of his point of view. (207)

Thus we find that Gauri is ready to quit her home and hearth for maintaining her purity and chastity but never allows love to be degraded. Savitri in **The Dark Room**, too leaves her house but very soon is reminded of her children and her husband and ultimately she returns.

Gauri, on the contrary, is bold enough to leave her family. She becomes a household word in the village, popularizing that struggling woman who earn her living by her physical effort and sacrifice. Anand himself observes that Gauri, “is my offering to the beauty, dignity and devotion of Indian women”.

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