



Is Narayan's Bharati a Crocus of an Ideal Indian Woman?

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Abstract

India is a land with deep-rooted value system. Exhibiting the trends associated with being a 'true Indian', R.K. Narayan, who is celebrated as a pure and simple writer, affirms the values of life and reposes faith in moral order in his novels. At the time when he started writing, Indian society underwent a sea change. Social reformers and intellectuals were busy in redefining the image of an Indian woman. Narayan also felt the pressure of the prevalent ideology and put forward the idea of what it is to be an ideal Indian woman and created a female character named Bharati in his novel *Waiting for the Mahatma* (1955). The novel is seen as a 'liberation fable' with Bharati as the central character who is viewed as a crocus of an ideal Indian woman. Her view of life is considered viable and authentic. Critics opine that Bharati, who is bold, self-dependent, and strong is an example of Narayan's true vision of women's empowerment. Although when her character is studied closely, it becomes apparent that Bharati internalizes myths and accepts roles that afford her no real choices and no real values. She perfectly resembles traditional women who possess neither agency nor any will of their own and spend their energy in the service of patriarchy. Even though Bharati radiates through the novel and finds a space, her attributes as a volitional force reserved for Sriram suggest that she is the subject of the novel who lacks artistic expression and self-assertion. Narayan, despite his awareness about the predicament of an Indian woman and his sincere effort to be judicious towards woman, fails to transcend the forces of history that allows him to look at women with stereotypical vision.

Keywords: Complex Identity, Emancipation, Ideal, Assertion, Morality

Introduction

Women are the only exploited group in history who have been idealized into powerlessness.

- Erica Jong

Mother is a sacred object. It is a commodity whose value we don't realize as long as it is with us. One must lose it to know what a precious possession it is... As long as my mother lived, she said every minute 'Do this, Don't do that' And I remained a good son to her. The moment she died, I changed. Its rare commodity, Sir, Its rare commodity.

- R.K. Narayan, *The Bachelor of Arts*

R.K. Narayan interprets Indian life with striking variegation-sometimes humorously, sometimes ironically. Notwithstanding, he invariably inscribes within the four walls of his culture. His novels are considered to bring forth the changing images of women in the Indian scene in all their fascinating varieties whether through Bharati, Rosie or Daisy. Although not an advocate of women's rights, he is sensitive to the agony of this marginalized group, which is manifested in his work *My Days*:

I was somehow obsessed with a philosophy of woman as oppressed to man, her constant oppressor. This must have been an early treatment of the 'Women's Lib' movement. Man assigned her a secondary place and kept her there with such subtlety and cunning that she herself began to lose all notion of her independence, her individuality, stature, and strength. A wife as an orthodox milieu of Indian society was an ideal victim of such circumstances (Narayan, 2001, p.119).

He has great respect for women, not only in his thoughts, but also in his personal life. Nevertheless, in his literary work, his moral outlook is so subtly stated that it needs a close perusal. Therefore, this paper focuses on examining how far Narayan's happy notes have succeeded in gripping Bharati's existential reality. The character Bharati from *Waiting for the Mahatma* is chosen for this study because much has been discussed about Narayan's 'emancipated' character Bharati. Nevertheless, the intricacies of her portrayal have not been fully articulated. Since multiplicity of discourse is what it takes for identity construction, this paper deals with a number of aspects of how, despite Narayan's understanding of women's plight, his sensitivity, and compassion, he plants Bharati squarely within a male modernist tradition; how he has assigned Bharati a singular identity as a

‘woman’; and how patriarchy is at work based on affinities and love. A predominant feminist perspective has been adopted in the critical analysis of Bharati.

At the time Narayan started writing, the winds of change had started blowing over the societal set-up of India. Women had been struggling for their liberation all around the world. Indian reformers believed that this struggle for liberation would make women give up their values, ethos, and even their unique sense of self for the sake of success. Therefore, womanhood became one of the most important signifiers of social transformation and reformers in India, which launched an indigenous attempt to build a new image of woman. A refurbished image of the ideal Indian woman, culturally loaded against the stereotypical notion of a modern westernized woman was recommended. Living in the age of self-consciousness and criticism, the writers belonging to this era also came forward in developing and creating an ideal image of the Indian woman. Narayan could not also refrain from realizing the tension between prevalent ideologies and put forward different perspectives of what it is to be an Indian woman through his characters. Nothing illustrates this breadth of vision about the Indian woman better than his portrayal of the character Bharati in *Waiting for the Mahatma* where he tries to transmit human values, especially that of a female, which is characterized by a conception that idealizes the feminine condition, romanticizes relationships between a man and a woman, and develops an ideal identity for women. Through the whole process, he projects Indian womanhood with all its complexities, onto the character, often at the cost of betraying contradictions built into their status.

Apart from her ubiquitous presence in the novel, Narayan’s Bharati is cast on the lines of typical gendering of society and she spends her energies in the service of patriarchy. She is a culturally constructed emancipated woman who is restricted from enacting her independence because of gender-biased rules related to limitations on expression, communication, and movement. Her character remains fixed and her autonomy is compromised. Being an orphan girl, she is brought up in an *Ashram* and becomes a freedom fighter not by choice, but by chance. She has never afforded a choice to show her interest, to choose her profession, and to talk about her preferences. It is a well-accepted feminist dictum that ‘real’ empowerment is something that women can only do for themselves (Rowlands, 1997). This axiom is not true for Bharati as she does not have the capacity to make independent choices and follow them through.

There is absolutely no doubt that she speaks Tamil, English, Hindi, Urdu, and many other Indian languages fluently. Does possessing knowledge of sundry languages necessarily guarantee freedom? Living in a multi-lingual society and as a part of Gandhi’s cavalcade, she travels immensely across India with him and comes in contact with people from different parts of India. Since

her task is to propagate Gandhian ideology, she learns these languages in order to fulfil her duty of disseminating Gandhian ideology. Her knowledge about different languages cannot be considered as a marker of her independence. She herself acknowledges, "I do whatever I am asked to do by the *Sevak Sangh*. Sometimes they ask me to go and teach people spinning and tell them about Mahatma-ji's idea. Sometimes they send me to villages and poor quarters" (p.49). Although Bharati is an active freedom fighter, she is found to be less willing to engage in self-promoting and self-assertive behavior and has grave problems discussing matters on an intellectual level.

Narayan has assigned Bharati a singular identity as a 'woman'. Thus, when one singular identity, i.e., being a 'woman', becomes more meaningful than other identities, it falls in the trap of mythical construction. Carrying a singular identity does not perturb her, rather she accepts roles that give her no real choices and no real values; she never re-evaluates her relationship with others; she does not ever think about taking control of her own body nor does she ever struggle to establish her identity. Her consciousness is not divided because she is not bothered about being victimized neither does she have the sense of identity that leads to empowerment. Amartya Sen also confirms the same when he states: "singular affiliation", which takes the form of assuming that any person preeminently belongs, for all practical purposes, to one collectivity only- no more and no less'(Sen, 2006, p.23).

Saritha Batliwala defines empowerment as 'control over material assets, intellectual resources, and ideology' (Batliwala, 1994). Also, in *The Second Sex*, Simone de Beauvoir argues that economic liberation is the *sine-qua non* of every other form of liberation (Beauvoir, 1952). Beauvoir's uncompromising message is crystal clear when she says that motherhood and marriage alone cannot make a woman happy. Therefore, paid work alone secures her independence. Despite her arduous work, Narayan has made Bharati a woman who has no financial security or financial independence. For every single need, she is utterly dependent upon the male centric *ashram* people and has absolutely no share in decisions that are made for her since she is only there to carry out the orders she receives. Her grass-root-level participation does not help her reach a stage where she could be identified by her unflinching dedication and uphill tasks. Although she works for a bigger cause, she rarely exhibits the quality of self-confidence and self-assurance as she does not have good reasons to possess such a level of confidence. Woolf (2016) emphasizes that such assertion comes from being financially independent: 'what a change of temper a fixed income will bring about' (p.41).

It is possible that Bharati does not question her existential reality in favor of broader, civic and national focus and willfully sacrifices and surrenders for Mother India. However, 'rejection of self-interested behavior does not indicate that one's actions are necessarily influenced by a sense of

identity with others. It is quite possible that a person's behavior may be swayed by other types of considerations, such as her adherence to some norms of acceptable conduct, or by her sense of duty- fiduciary responsibility- toward others with whom one does not identify in any obvious sense' (Sen, 2006, p.23). Bharati finds herself in a situation where she is expected to behave in a certain way and fulfil demands of the time. She lives in the age when grassroots conscientization and mobilization takes place in India and 'such process engages people in making sense of their worlds, their relationships, their assumptions, beliefs, practices, and values, while questioning that which they have come to take for granted, with potentially transformatory effects' (Batliwala, 1993; Kabeer, 1994). However, Narayan does not allow Bharati to question the existing paradigms and thus fails to focus on the individuality of Bharati. Moore (2001) states that challenging a tendency is the discourse of the day and this tendency of challenging norms is missing in the character of Bharati who is believed to be a crocus of an ideal woman (p.321-329). She has no share in power politics and her venture does not challenge the existing power structure that sustains inequitable gender relations. Bharati does not even get the equality of opportunity and accepts life as it is. Her task as a freedom fighter is nothing but a mere extension of her familial duty. More so, the task that a woman performs is so sacred and done with so much love, care, and affection that it cannot possibly be put in the realm of paid workforce. She never questions her subjugation. Bharati talks a great deal about Gandhiji and India, but when asked from where she has learnt all this, she simply replies, "from wise men". Bharati collects money and takes care of Gandhiji's needs. She herself admits, "I attend to Mahatma-ji's needs" (p.59). She is a master spinner who wins prizes in a Khadi competition and teaches people spinning. She also attends to visitors and takes good care of orphan children:

She was always attending on children, changing one's dress, combing another's hair, engaging another group in dance or play, and continuously talking to them; besides this, she had a great deal to say to a lot of miscellaneous men and women who came in search for her. Hers was a full time occupation. She gave the children a wash, fed them, put them to sleep on mats in various sheds, drew their blankets over them, said something to each one of them, and finally came back to her own room, sat down on her cot and stretched her arms (p.241).

For this reason, Gandhi crowns her with the name 'mother', which is a traditional certification of Indian womanhood. Gandhiji says, "I hope your children are flourishing. You are a mother of thirty already. What a blessing" (p.250). In the words of Swami Vivekananda, 'The ideal of womanhood in India is motherhood - the marvelous, unselfish, all suffering, ever-forgiving mother' (Vivekananda, 1900, p.10). To render it in the words of Rehana

Ghadijally, 'In a patriarchal culture, what we get is a masculinist definition of ideals and images of women' (Ghadijally, 1988). Since discrimination against a woman is weaved so intricately in the fabric of social customs and traditions and it is done with so much love and care, she hardly thinks that the task that has been assigned to her is demeaning and therefore, not acceptable. Luce Irigaray aptly argues, 'When women's movements challenge the forms and nature of political life, the contemporary of powers and power relations, they are in fact working toward a modification of women's status. On the other hand, when these same movements aim simply for a change in the distribution of power, leaving intact the power structure itself, then they are resubjecting themselves, deliberately or not, to a phallogocentric order' (Luce, 1985, p.81).

The cultural, economic, and sociopolitical determinants that produce discrimination against a woman is conspicuous in the very beginning of the novel. According to Simone- de- Beauvoir, the central project for both men and women is to transcend the natural limits of being human, but they have different relationships to it and this sexual dichotomy is evident right from the beginning in *Waiting for the Mahatma* (Beauvoir, 1952). The novel begins with the sentence, 'His mother who died delivering him and his father who was killed in Mesopotamia, might have been figures in a legend as far as Srirama was concerned' (p.5). Since the beginning of this novel, it is evident that Narayan's patriarchal mindset does not allow him to come out of the world of binary oppositions when he presents two distinct arenas for two different sexes. Bharati is restricted from enacting her independence because of this sexual dichotomy. Hence, 'natural difference' is used to restrict her to limited roles and spaces. She is unable to have effective and pragmatic interventions in the public sphere. Her movement is further restricted and controlled by 'Chalak' who decides the visiting hours for her and also the kind of people she should visit. 'Chalak' symbolizes Jeremy Bentham's 'panopticon' (Miller, 1987). Michel Foucault, a French philosopher, dubs the panopticon as 'the eye of power' and uses the panopticon as a way to illustrate how the proclivity of disciplinary societies subjugates its citizens. According to him, discipline is viewed as a kind of power which infiltrates the very body and psyche of the individual and transforms it into a malleable and obedient subject. It produces a specific type of sexuality that conforms and propels the functioning of the entire system of domination (Foucault, 1979, p.200-201). Bharati is good to the extent that she believes her obedience will make her ethical without ever realizing the fact that her automaton conformity shows the lack of courage in her personality. She is certainly a part of this social system of domination and one who rather naively takes pride in being dominated, which is quite evident in her exchange with Sriram:

I am practicing kindness, otherwise I should not be speaking to you at all. If I didn't want to be kind to you, I wouldn't have gone in and taken my *Chalak's* permission and come right away here. We must have permission to talk to people at this hour. There is such a thing as discipline in every camp. Don't imagine that because it is Mahatmaji's camp, it is without any discipline (p.57).

Bharati and Sriram, the protagonist of the novel, seem to enjoy each other's company. She revels in when he caresses her, but at the same time never encourages him and rather grows angry at his advances and admonishes him: "This is enough to irritate even the Mahatma. Now what will he think of me if he realizes I am encouraging a fellow like you to hang about the place, a fellow whom I have not known even for a full day yet" (p.71-2). Why is Bharati's behavior so ambivalent? Luce Irigaray formulates the possible reasons behind such ambivalent behavior of a woman when she says: 'Woman, in this sexual imaginary, is only more or less an obliging prop for the enactment of man's fantasies. That she may find pleasure there in that role, by proxy, is possible, even certain. But such pleasure is above all a masochistic prostitution of her body to a desire that is not her own, and it leaves her in a familiar state of dependency upon man. Not knowing what she wants, ready for anything, even asking for more, so long as he will "take" her as his "object" when he seeks his own pleasure. Thus she will not say what she herself wants; moreover, she does not know, or no longer knows what she wants' (Irigaray, 1985, p.25). She further says, 'Woman's desire would not be expected to speak the same language as man's; woman's desire has doubtless been submerged by the logic that has dominated the West since the time of the Greeks' (Irigaray, 1985, p.25). Bharati wants to marry Sriram only if Gandhi permits her, and therefore she exhibits the typical trait of a traditional woman who desires nothing and at the same time everything. She is undoubtedly the other in herself. On the other hand, when Sriram plans to marry Bharati, he never bothers to seek the permission of his grandmother who has brought him up and avowedly tells everyone about his love. He does not even hesitate to confess his love for Bharati before Gandhi: "I like to be where Bharati is" (p.70). When Gandhiji asks about her consent to marry Sriram, she bows her head and simply fidgets. Gandhiji says, "Ah, that is the sign of a dutiful bride" (p.252). Mary Ellman in *Thinking about Woman* rightly argues that, 'when men are searching for the truth, women are content with lies, but when men are searching for diversion of variety, women counter with their stultifying respect for immediate duty' (Ellman, 1968, p.93-94).

Bharati emulates the path of Savitri, a female protagonist in Raja Rao's novel *The Serpent and the Rope*, who 'rejoices in the rejoicing of others' (Rao, 2003, p.369), and achieves the mark of female adulthood, marriage, and

secures her future with a man. She has to go through various trials and invariably passes all of them before being adjudged worthy of marrying the protagonist of the novel, Sriram. Throughout the novel, she proves that she is a virtuous woman and is as untouched and uncorrupted as a girl who has never crossed the four walls. In the end, she retreats to the four walls because her work as a freedom fighter is over after independence and she is all set to reach her next goal in life, which is to be a virtuous wife of Sriram. Wollstonecraft tries to persuade women about their existential reality while addressing the women whose final goal is to get married and settle down: 'I wish to persuade women to endeavor to acquire strength, both of mind and body, and to convince them that the soft phrase, susceptibility of heart, delicacy of sentiment, and refinement of taste are almost synonymous with the epithets of weakness, and that those beings who are always objects of pity and that kind of love, which has been termed its sister, will soon become objects of contempt' (Wollstonecraft, 1983).

A woman exists only to be acted upon by men as a sensual object irrespective of her character, orientation, mood, and interest. She is invariably observed as an object of 'male gaze'. In spite of his best effort not to be a sexist, Narayan could not restrain himself from depicting Bharati along the same lines. The whole novel is replete with Sriram's observations of Bharati's physical appearance while all we know about Sriram's appearance is that he is of medium height. Sriram feels thrilled when she comes close to him, he ogles her, measures her body, and her figure arouses wild emotions in him. This could perceptibly be felt by the following statements made by Sriram:

What a dangerous thing for such a beauty to be about
(p.23).

Whether it was the wearer who was enriching the cloth
or whether the material was good in itself (p.31).

She had the lightening-like motion of a dancer, again
the sort of pirouetting movement that she had adopted
while carrying off other people's coins in a jingling box
(p.56).

He struggled in the grips of unholy thoughts when she
stooped over him, held his hand, and taught him the
tricks. He concentrated until his mind was benumbed
with the half whispering movement of spinning wheel.
His fingers ached with holding a vibrant ever-growing
thread, and his eyes smarted (p.98).

He could see her left breast moving under her white
Khaddar *Sari*. She seemed to be unaware of the feelings
she was rousing in him (p.131).

On the one hand, Narayan epitomizes woman as a sex symbol with such sensuous descriptions and cleverly adds to the interest of the novel and on the other hand, emphasizes the sanctity of her virginity and chastity

Symbolic devices such as the attribution of defilement make women insecure, diffident and portray them as inferior objects. Bharati says, “Mahatmaji had advised women as a last resort to take their lives with their own hands rather than surrender their honor. There was no sense of fear when Mahatmaji was. But...if any unexpected thing happened, I was always prepared to end my life” (p.245). Bharati casts out her fear and steps out of the four walls. At the same time, her task is to resurrect the whole body, which she must preserve, even to the extent of killing herself. Committing suicide after being raped is believed to be an act of courage, bravery, and reverence, rather than punishing perpetrators. Rajinder Singh Bedi beautifully presents the agony of a rape victim in his short story ‘Lajwanti’ (Kumar, 2015, p.60). The female protagonist of this story is Lajwanti who is a victim of rape. She and other victims are rebuked, chastised, and frowned upon by their own people and they brand them as ‘cowards’ for clinging to life so tenaciously. They never realize how much courage they possess just to survive. Virginia Woolf (2016) rightly points out: ‘...chastity may be a fetish invented by certain societies for unknown reasons- but were nonetheless inevitable. Chastity had then, it has even now a religious importance in a woman’s life, and has so wrapped itself round with nerves and instincts that to cut it free and bring it to the light of day demands courage of the rarest’(p.54).

Dr. D.V.Vijayalakshmi observes that ‘Bharati, the heroine of *Waiting for the Mahatma* is a sensible Malgudi Portia who turned her Bassanio (Sriram) from a mere irresponsible romantic hero to a self-disciplined leader capable of sacrifice, altruism, and charity’ (Malgudi Women, 1984, p.41). Nevertheless, Bharati does not bring any kind of transformation in Sriram’s character. In psychological terminology, ‘transformation’ is taken to mean a deep change in the existing personality structure. Sriram’s personality remains the same throughout the novel. Besides being the lover of Bharati, Sriram is involved in other activities and roles such as painting the walls, working with Jagdish in his calamitous schemes, and going to jail. Narayan is pretty sure that his character Sriram cannot afford to be passive. Therefore, he must have different shades to display and different roles to play because if his male character were presented otherwise, his novel would be incredibly impoverished. Virginia Woolf (2016) has pinpointed, ‘Suppose, for instance, that men were only represented in literature as the lovers of women and were never the friends of men, soldiers, thinkers, dreamers; how few parts in the plays of Shakespeare could be allotted to them; how literature would suffer!’ (p.88) His actions, whether constructive or destructive, are solely for the purpose of having Bharati as his wife. His yearning for a relationship with

Bharati has motivated him to do whatever he does, which is evident from his statements like, “if she had married me, I should probably not have died or something like that” (p.155). He wishes “Britain would leave India, so that he might return to Kabir Street and live in peace with Bharati and Granny” (p.162). Furthermore, Sriram’s patriarchal mindset is reflected in the statement that he utters towards the end of the novel: “Trust. Who wants her trust? I only want her” (p.241). Bharati also acknowledges that Sriram has not changed a bit when he puts his arm on her shoulder: ‘What a strange man! She cried. You have not changed at all’ (p.242). Setting a goal to marry Bharati, waiting for five long years thinking of nothing else and working single-mindedly towards one single objective, Sriram displays an incredible amount of tenacity and acts with the confidence of one who knows his destination very well. He is seen as a man who knows how to rule over one’s own self and therefore wins the scrimmage to have Bharati as his wife.

Narayan states in *My Days*, ‘I wish to attack the tyranny of love and see if life could offer other values than the man-woman relationship to a writer’ (Narayan, 2001, p.119). In spite of his genuine effort to create his character Bharati outside the realm of man-woman relationships, he could not cross the boundary of patriarchal set up. Thus, all he could do is assign his character Bharati a role that is certainly not ideal. Although Narayan does not reiterate the old hierarchy set by gender, he tries to define his character Bharati in relation to values rather than overtly patriarchal ones of male domination and female subordination. Nonetheless, in the whole process, whether consciously or unconsciously, he imposes on her his own brands of femininity and betrays his limitations. He tries hard to be sincere in his feelings for her and despite all his talk on women’s rights, he falls within the trap of unconscious bias and reinforces many of the old patterns and paradigms in a different way. Bharati is portrayed not as an ideal Indian woman, but as a constituted fictitious creature that never exhibits a mind of her own. She possesses values in deference to the opinion of others. This is on account of the affinities and love that she gets from the people around her, and she aspires for excellence by audaciously acknowledging the limitations of her sex.

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