

THE DARK ROOM

R. K. Narayan

(1938)

Story

Even from the title, we have a hint that this will not be one of Narayan's usual light, comic tales. It is, indeed, a dark story about neglect, infidelity, near-suicide and resignation. The novel begins with the far-from-blissful marriage of Ramani, the husband, and Savitri, the wife. They have been married for fifteen years and have three children, but the atmosphere in the house is heavy and oppressive. Ramani rules the place like a dictator, shouting orders and demanding obedience. Savitri looks after the children, feeding them and getting them to school on time, but always afraid that Ramani will object or criticise her. There are a few lighter moments: the family go to the cinema, Savitri's friends come for a house visit and they celebrate a religious festival, when lamps are lit everywhere. But not in the dark room, the kitchen, where Savitri spends most of her time, and where the lights have literally gone out. The story takes a dramatic turn when Shantha Bai arrives as a new employee in the insurance company where Ramani works. She is beautiful, has left her husband and flirts openly with Ramani, who doesn't require much persuasion to begin a love affair with her. Savitri at first notices nothing new—her husband is, if anything, more pleasant than before, perhaps from guilt. But soon she hears the gossip from her friend, Gangu, and her world changes. At first, she blames herself for not being attractive, for failing to please her husband, and tries to convince herself that Gangu made a mistake—'she only saw a beautiful parasol and thought it was a woman.' When she cannot fool herself any longer, she confronts Ramani, they argue and eventually she leaves him. With nowhere to go, she ends up by a river and throws herself in. She is saved by Mari, a blacksmith and criminal, whose wife, Ponni, then nurses Savitri back to health and takes her to their villages. Alone in the house of Mari and Ponni, Savitri refuses food and drink and is on the brink of dying. Mari is afraid he might be held responsible for her death and goes from house to house in the village, asking if anyone would take in this 'desperate woman.' Only the old priest accepts her and puts her to work, cleaning the temple, but the querulous old man proves to be as nasty as her husband. Then she becomes an object of curiosity for the villagers, who come to see 'the mad woman in the temple.' Savitri is homesick, pining for her children, and eventually goes back to her husband and the dark room. There is a semi-reconciliation and her husband appears lenient, but the reader suspects that old habits will emerge.

Themes

Sexism The dominant theme of this dark story is the inferior position of women, and especially wives, in Indian society. Savitri suffers from the self-centred and arrogant behaviour of her husband, who is nevertheless respected in the outside world. When she discovers his infidelity, she launches into one of the most devastating critiques of marriage to be found in pre-Independence literature. At one point, she says, 'The prostitute changes her man, but a married woman does not; that's the only difference; both earn their food and shelter in the same manner.' In the same scene, she adds, 'I am a human being...you men will never grant that. You think you can fondle us when you like and kick us when you choose.' It is the economic deprivation, however, that is the crucial element in Savitri's insight into sexism. During their argument, she says, 'I don't possess anything in this world. What possession can a woman call her own except her body? Everything else that she has is her father's, her husband's.' This point is significant because it returns in the final scene, when Savitri, although back home and superficially reconciled to the dark room, once again says, 'I have nothing.'

Resignation With this searing indictment of a woman's position in Indian society, the corollary theme is the resignation that Savitri (and the author) opt for in the end. Here, we should point out that Savitri

is named after a powerful symbol of wifely duty in Hindu mythology. The mythic Savitri saves her husband from death by fasting and then following the god of death as he carries him away to the land of the dead. This is the deeply ingrained image that many Hindu wives, especially in the 1930s, had of themselves. The alternative presented in the novel is the liberated woman Shantha Bai, who has left her husband and lives a financially independent life. But she is portrayed as self-serving and superficial, not much different to the odious Ramani. In the end, Savitri appears resigned, though unhappily so, to resume her culturally-determined role as a dependent wife. At least, she says to herself, she can gain happiness as a mother. A total break with tradition seems to be unrealistic, in the author's eyes. It may not be irrelevant to add that R K Narayan, aged 27, married a 15-year-old girl whom he had fallen in love with, despite opposition from parents and ill-matched horoscopes. His beloved Rajam then died from typhoid fever a short six years later.

Characters

Ramani Ramani is the middle-aged, middle-class husband of Savitri, who works in an insurance company as a middle-level manager. He is, however, a top-level tyrant. At home and in the office, he takes pleasure in dominating other people, unable to hear their complaints or understand their point of view. We see that he is the paradox of the would-be-strong man who is insecure and weak when he falls, all too easily, for the charms of a co-worker in his office.

Savitri Savitri, the wife of Ramani and the mother of three children, is the central character of this novel. She is a loving mother and gentle wife, a loyal friend to others and supremely unhappy because of her husband's arrogance. Betrayed by her husband, she leaves him but lacks the courage to live an independent life and attempts to kill herself. She is rescued and lives in a village for several months before deciding to return to him and her children.

Shantha Bai Shantha Bai is the polar opposite of Savitri. She is an educated, independent, 'liberated' woman and a stranger to Malgudi with no qualms about illicit sexual affairs. She was married but judged her husband to be 'insufficient' and left him to live her own life by earning her own money.

Janamma Janamma is one of Savitri's female neighbours who gives her advice. She is, in fact, even more conciliatory toward her husband than Savitri is toward Ramani. When Savitri mentions 'problems' with her marriage, Janamma tells her not to speak up because 'that makes it worse. What a husband says and does is right. It's a wife's duty to think that.'

Mari Mari is a village blacksmith, and petty thief, who happens to see Savitri in the river and rescues her. He is portrayed as neither saint nor sinner but as a practical man, who responds by instinct. When Savitri stays in his house, with his wife, Ponna, he is afraid that she might die (she is fasting) and off-loads her to the village priest.

MAJOR CHARACTERS

RAMANI (Self-centred)

Character Ramani is the abusive and arrogant husband of Savitri, whom he keeps (metaphorically) in the dark room of the title. It is dark because he has created an atmosphere of fear and oppression in the house. He does not physically abuse his wife, but he bullies her, insults her and treats her like his personal servant, although without the respect that some people show to their employees. Ramani does show flashes of caring, when he takes the family to the cinema or buys the children presents on a festival day, but otherwise he takes every opportunity to belittle his wife and to control his children. In the office, he is no less belligerent, bossing his subordinates and undermining his associates. He is gregarious and can be humorous, but only to increase his influence with others. This makes him easy prey for the man-hungry Santha Bai, with whom he carries on a love affair.

Activities

When Ramani is not busy ordering his wife and children around at home, he enjoys bossing people in the life insurance office where he works. He spends time with paper work, filing documents,

appraising applications and writing business letters. We feel he is, at least, an efficient manager of paper. He often stops off at his club on the way home to play cards, he sometimes takes his Chevrolet for a drive along the river and he likes to go the movies, especially when there's a Laurel and Hardy picture on show.

Illustrative moments

Insulting Ramani's habit of constantly insulting his wife is illustrated in an early scene. We have already seen his arrogance when bossing the family about in the morning, and now we see it when he arrives home. He sounds the horn on his Chevrolet, which is an order to Savitri that she must tell the servant to open the gate. A second sounding of the horn tells the servant to open the garage door and orders Savitri to make sure he does his job properly. Savitri's ears are so attuned to the nuances of his car horn that she can tell by the sound what kind of mood he is in. This particular evening he was in a good mood, she thought. He had bought a guest home for dinner and when Savitri suggested there wasn't enough food and that he had given her no warning, he got angry. 'Any competent wife would know now to plan these things,' he fumes in front of the embarrassed guest. 'Go, now, don't complain and make us a good dinner.'

Self-centred Ramani's insulting, demanding, arrogant behaviour could be summed up as self-centred. Even when he appears to show some kindness, as when he takes his wife with him to see a movie, this egotistical tendency emerges. A good example is the evening that he proudly announces that he will take Savitri to the Laurel and Hardy film at the local cinema, knowing full well that she prefers the westerns that often come to town. Then, although she tries to persuade him to take the children, too, he adamantly refuses and later we learn the reason for his decision. Narayan describes it like this: 'Ramani sat with his wife by his side very erect. He was very erect. He was very proud of his wife. She had a fair complexion and well-proportioned features and her sky blue sari gave her a distinguished appearance. He surveyed her slyly, with a sense of satisfaction at possessing her. When people in the theatre threw looks at her, it increased his satisfaction all the more.'

Cruel Ramani is also cruel to his children, berating them and sometimes beating them. A harrowing example occurs when he comes home one evening and finds that the electricity in the house is out. Even before he gets into the house, he is angry because the electrical mechanism that controls the garage door has failed. But when he finds out that his son has inadvertently caused the power outage, he rounds on the young boy with fury. 'Why did you need to turn the lights on in the kitchen?' he demands. 'Are you a girl? Tell me, are you a girl?' His son cowers, but Ramani slaps his face repeatedly until welts appear and Savitri intervenes. This is the display of a true tyrant, beating someone, even his own child, because that person is defenceless and because something has gone wrong in the world he likes to control.

SAVITRI (Resigned)

Character Savitri is a typical middle-class Indian woman. Not highly educated, but not illiterate either, she is a loving mother to three (somewhat unruly) children and a caring wife to her husband. The problem, also not atypical, is that she suffers horribly from her husband's arrogant and sexist attitudes and behaviour. She is sometimes bored but never complacent and bears his boorishness with resignation. But when she discovers that he is being unfaithful to her, she explodes in an extraordinary display of anger and acute perception of women's oppression. Although she understands what has happened, and why, she is ill-equipped to change the situation or herself. Instead, she chooses suicide, and when that fails, she tries to starve herself to death. Slowly, inevitably, she comes to the realisation that she wants to return home. She is reunited with her children (who only know that their mother has 'been away in hospital') but not with her husband. In the final pages, she appears to be resigned to playing her role, but now things are different because of what she has understood and experienced. If we compare her with Narayan's other important heroines, she has neither the independent spirit of Bharati (*Waiting for the Mahatma*) nor the courage of Daisy (*The Painter of Signs*), and yet we feel that she has gained an inner strength that will enable her to endure.

Activities In the first part of the story, Savitri is kept constantly busy with household chores. She looks after three children, two girls and one boy, whose bickering, rivalries and unending need for her love are almost as demanding as her husband's selfish desire to have his meals on time and his

clothes always pressed. The only thing she does for herself is go into the 'puja' or ritual room, prostrate herself and pray to the goddess. She is rarely outside the house, except when the family goes to the cinema or she visits a neighbour. She also spends a lot of time in the kitchen, the 'dark room,' where light is poor and eventually the electricity fails altogether. Later, after a failed suicide attempt and rescue, she lives in a village, cowering in the rescuer's house and later in a priest's house, where again she spends time cleaning the dark temple.

Illustrative moments

Bullied Savitri is bullied by her husband in the very first scene of the novel. It is morning, time for children to leave for school, but Savitri has let Babu, their young son, lie in bed. When her husband sees this, he ridicules her for indulging the boy and ruining his life. 'Go do your work, and leave this to me,' he screams. 'Let me bring up the boy. It's not a woman's job.' When Savitri dares to repeat her belief that the boy is ill, her husband does not even deign to respond. Then she serves him breakfast, and he criticises every item on his plate. It is not cut correctly, it is too thin, too wide, too salty, too cold. When he has finally left for work, Savitri sinks down and says to herself, 'What can I do?' She sits immobile, inert, in the dark room of the kitchen and begins to cry.

Defiant All the hurt and anger that has been suppressed inside bursts out when Savitri discovers that her husband has been carrying on an affair. As they prepare for bed one night, she confronts him with her information and demands an explanation. When he prevaricates, she becomes enraged and (like Nora in Ibsen's 'The Doll House') is transformed into an articulate, rebellious woman who accuses her husband of mistreating her. He tries to placate her but she defies him with these words: 'Do you think I am going to stay here? We women are responsible for our position. We accept food, shelter and comforts that you give.... 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 will starve and die in the open, under the sky, a roof for which I need to be obliged to no man.' The reference to the 'open sky' strikes a contrast with the dark room of the kitchen, where she has been trapped for the fifteen years of her marriage. Her speech represents one of the earliest expressions of feminism in Indian literature.

Defeated Savitri's defiance leads her out of the dark room and into the open world, but once there she finds she has nowhere to go and attempts suicide. This is one kind of defeat, which she survives and later recuperates in a village. There, she is free of her husband, but her attempt to break free and live an independent life is defeated a second time, when she only finds refuge in a dark temple run by an irascible priest. She returns to her husband (only in order to look after her children) because she has no money and (she thinks) no role outside marriage. She swallows her pride and accepts that the world outside her home is as dark as it is inside. This is the story of a defeated woman, as shown in the final scene of the novel. In the final scene, she is at home, looks out the window and sees the blacksmith who saved her. At first, she wants to speak to him and ask about his wife, but then she decides against it. 'They gave me food,' she reflects, 'but why should I call him here. What have I to give?'

SHANTA BAI (Bold)

Character Shanta Bai is the 'other woman' in this novel, the free and sexual outsider who draws Ramani into a love affair that causes Savitri to leave her husband (temporarily). As a type rather than an individual, she is a less complex character than either Savitri or Ramani, but in Narayan's hands, she still does have layers beneath the superficial surface. To begin with, Shanta is everything that Savitri is not. She left her husband (having married him at 12 and then finding out that he was a drinker and a gambler); she is a college graduate; she comes from the big city; she earns her own money; and she sleeps with whomever she pleases. If Savitri is the dutiful wife, Shanta is the dangerous siren. Nevertheless, Shanta is likable, if not entirely admirable. She may be 'a butterfly character,' as one critic described her, but, in keeping with that image, she is light-hearted, colourful and harms no one.

Activities Shanta Bai is introduced to the reader when she is interviewed by Ramani for a new position in the insurance company he works for. She is hired, largely because she flirts ostentatiously with Ramani, but then shows no aptitude for the work and is nearly dismissed, until Ramani steps in

and saves her job. She likes to go to films, to ride in cars, to read romantic novels and poetry (especially the *Rubaiyat* of Omar Khayyam), and she is never happier than when dancing.

Illustrative moments

Bold Many commentators have described Shanta as 'flirtatious', 'seductive' and 'assertive,' but perhaps a more gender-neutral and accurate adjective would be 'bold' or 'assured.' This spunky trait is on display when she first enters the novel as a candidate for a job in Ramani's company. Ramani asks the standard questions, including 'are you married?' She replies that she 'is and she is not.' Before the embarrassed Ramani can discreetly move on to another question, she tells him her full story: married at 12, husband a drunkard, leaves him and now earns her own keep. Ramani is shocked, but pleasantly so, to hear such a candid, bold account told by a woman in a job interview. When he expresses sympathy for her 'situation,' Shanta looks him square in the eye and says, 'I don't need sympathy and I don't want it. I'm an educated woman, I can look after myself.' Needless to say, Ramani is impressed, and makes unflattering comparisons with his wife, in both physical appearance and outlook on life.

Fun-loving Shanta is also a fun-loving person, who likes to be taken on long drives at night beside the river, who likes to dance under the stars and who likes to watch romantic Hollywood movies. Her care-free attitude is illustrated one night, after she and Ramani have begun their love affair. He visits her room, where she is lounging around bored to tears. 'What's the matter?' Ramani asks. 'I wish you were Omar Khayyam,' she answers. 'Who is that?' 'A great Persian poet. His philosophy is my guide: "Dead tomorrow, unborn yesterday." The cup of life must be filled to the brim and drained in one gulp.' Ramani is dumbfounded—he has heard of neither the poet nor his famous *Rubaiyat*, and he never reads anything except the newspaper—but Shanta continues to explain her way of life. She bubbles over with exuberance, which Ramani finds 'unladylike' and then we see the difference between the two lovers. As a result, we are not surprised when, soon after, Shanta becomes tired of the dour Ramani and leaves him.