



REALIZATION OF AGENTIC SKILLS : RESISTANCE IN R.K. NARAYAN'S *SELVI*.

English

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ABSTRACT

R.K.Narayan's short stories delve deep into the expectations and dreams of ordinary individuals, the timeless value of memories, the uncertainty of future and presents them before us in realistic words. During the times of R.K.Narayan's creative endeavors, writers were not very keen on focusing on the afflictions and hardships faced by women within their families. Narayan was one among the pioneers to portray opinionated women in his fictional world. This paper looks at how the short story, *Selvi* occupying the *Later Stories* section of *Malgudi Days* (1943) offers a stirring critique of the husband-wife power relationship based on inherited beliefs and run by domination/consent dichotomy. A permanent resolution achieved by Selvi, a trained musician results from her husband, Mohan's indifference to Selvi's and her mother's want of each other and her subsequent realization of self-destruction within the order set by the husband. The story discloses how patriarchal cultures stun the rational growth of women and their agentic skills.

KEYWORDS

Patriarchy, domination, motherhood, independence.

INTRODUCTION

Jhumpa Lahiri states, in her *Introduction* to the *Penguin edition of Malgudi Days*: 'While other writers rely on paragraphs and pages to get their points across, Narayan extracts the full capacity of each sentence, so much so that his stories seem bound by an invisible yet essential mechanism, similar to the metrical and quantitative constraints of poetry'(p.1). Enthusiasts of Indian short stories would agree with Lahiri, having tasted the peculiar flavour of R.K.Narayan's short as well as long fictional narratives. Narayan looks into the expectations and dreams of ordinary individuals, the grip of memories, the uncertainty of future and presents them before the readers in a platter of crystal clear language. So pictorial and realistic are Narayan's stories that they have influenced readers from various walks of life through decades.

During the times when R K Narayan wrote, stirring the reader's thoughts to consider the secret afflictions and hardships faced by women inside and outside the family was not a frequent practice among writers. Still, authors like R.K.Narayan and Mulk Raj Anand attempted to mirror certain aspects of man-woman relationships that stood in conflict with the patriarchal ideologies prevalent in the Indian society of their respective Ages. Narayan was one among the pioneers to portray opinionated women in his fictional world.

The short story, *Selvi* occupying the *Later Stories* section of *Malgudi Days*(1943), offers a stimulating critique of the husband-wife power relationship based on inherited beliefs and run by domination/consent dichotomy. A transgression achieved by Selvi results from her husband Mohan's indifference to Selvi's and her mother's need of each other and the subsequent realization of her self-destruction within the order set by the husband.

Supremacy of the Alpha-Human

For Mary Wollstencraft, the so called womanly virtues conceal women's 'craven adaptation to a subordinate position'(Meyers p.8). Wifehood is often mistaken as a 'toxic capsule' of intertwined norms that 'lodge intact in the psychic structure' of individuals, once swallowed(Meyers p. 10-11). One of the most enduring ideas which men have passed down through the centuries in order to bolster their own feeling of superiority is the notion that women are intellectually inferior (Figs p. 23). It was Mohan who planned the course of every concert for Selvi. He would suggest 'gently but firmly': "Wouldn't you like to start with the *Kalyani varnam*-the minor one?...The second item had better be Thyagaraja's composition in *begada*, it'll be good to have a contrasting raga....Don't bother to elaborate any *pallavi* for the audience, but work out briefly a little detail in the *Thodi* composition. Afterwards you may add any item you like, light *bhajans*, *javalis* or folk-songs"(Narayan 2019 p. 238). At the culminating session of every concert, when Selvi gets surrounded by swarms of 'autograph hunters', Mohan would deliberately walk away from them to the exit point from where he would yell out: "Selvi, hurry up. You want to miss the train?" Selvi detests the habit of 'contradicting' her husband through words or actions. Thus, Mohan finds pleasure in exhibiting his 'authority' over

Selvi by 'order'ing her in public(230). Mr. Varma, who considers Selvi as the divine singer, longed to meet her and provide gifts. But 'he' takes all gifts away and protects his spouse in a 'fortress of invisible walls' and pleasantly feel 'gratified at the role of a gaoler'. Selvi is never left alone with anyone or allowed to talk with anyone 'except in his presence'(232). The palatial house in which they live belonged to Sir Frederick Lawley during he heyday of East India Company. The building, abandoned since 1947 is procured by Mohan with the money earned by Selvi for 'lending her voice to a film star'. The subsequent offers for filmic singing are 'shut out' as he doesn't want his wife's voice to ill-suit 'a fat cosmetic dummy' within the screen(232).

The idea that a woman who does not find total fulfillment in submitting herself utterly to the will of a husband (Figs p.25) is not wife or woman-enough, rules Selvi's consciousness throughout her life with Mohan. She 'went through her career like an automaton, switched on and off her music as ordered' by Mohan (Narayan p. 241). The husband's control or his responsibility over the wife's acts is accepted as a norm in the societal set-up of human relationships. The identity attached to a woman in the name of a man through the addition of 'Mrs' to her name signifies the conceptualization of husband and wife as two manifestations of a single entity. While the marital relation symbolizes a predetermined union in most of the unwritten religio-cultural belief systems in the Indian society, it turns problematic as man alone enjoys lasting domination over the woman.

Communication or 'the interchange of meaning among people mainly through language' is essential in the cultivation of lasting relationships. Communication may not necessarily be hearing and retorting to words but having an 'instinctive understanding of feelings behind the words'(Thakur p.2). The language shared by Selvi-Mohan duo is similar in character to a master-servant dialectics of mutually agreed pattern of command followed by silence or one-word answer, most often in the affirmative. Selvi would comply with his words without attempting to distinguish between suggestion and prescription. 'Yes' remains the repeated and re-repeated answer to all 'suggestions' made by Mohan.

Recognition of Mother as Guru and Guide

Adrienne Rich opens her classic work '*Of Woman Born*' with the claim that 'we know more about the air we breathe, the seas we travel, than about the nature and meaning of motherhood' (O'Reilly p.1). As time passed by, as Selvi's public engagements increased, 'others' including her mother were 'gradually allowed to fade out of her life'. When Selvi tried 'once or twice' to invite Mohan's attention to her mother, he remains indifferent: "But where is the time for it?"

'Patriarchal motherhood is neither natural nor inevitable. It is specifically and fundamentally a cultural practice that is continuously redesigned in response to changing economical and societal factors'(O'Reilly p.1). Mohan could perceive Selvi's desire to see her mother only as an 'obsession' and feels happy when he notices that she has 'got over the obsession' of meeting the woman who gave her life,

music and everything that Selvi is at the time. Mohan's impassiveness, though typical, acquires the aura of cruelty when he says: "Only a baby would bother about its mother"(240). Also, Mohan doesn't feel obliged to take care of Selvi's mother or express any concern regarding her old age and her binding relationship with his own partner.

The reputation earned by Sevi through her concert performance over the years is reflected in the favours earned from journalists and music critics. In reality, Mohan's office 'besieged by the organizers of musical events is a product of Selvi's skills nourished and encouraged by her mother. 'Woman is taught to desire not what her mother desired for herself, but what her father and all men find desirable in a woman'(Figs p.17). In reality, Selvi's mother is her guru in music, performance and behaviour. But she has mistaken the husband as a guru, taking the relentless proclamations of orders, as manifestations of security and unnecessary interference in her career, as guidance .

Her mother's death shocks Selvi out of the shell. The realization of her fallibility in understanding the phenomenal role of mother in shaping an ignorant child to the musical prodigy Selvi has become during the past twenty years, makes her think and decide for herself. Love and respect for the mother, a natural part of her being surpasses the socially constructed necessity for respecting the male partner.

When Mohan urges Selvi to return, she disregards his objection and decides to stay at her ancestral home. Selvi says: "My mother was my guru; here she taught me music, lived and died. I'll also live and die here; what was good for her is good for me too"(242). Mohan finds his wife, who had been so 'mild' and 'complaisant' for years, as 'truculent' and 'vulnerable' in her words. He never thought that she could either 'act' or 'speak' beyond what she was 'taught'(Narayan p.242). When Mohan points out the commitments that he had signed on her behalf: "You have the series at Bhopal, shall I tell them to change the dates?" Selvi replies: "Do what you like." When Mohan counters her on the daunting reply, by asking: "What do you mean by that?" She refrains from providing any answer. Selvi's silence, in the narrative, has two significances; one, of obedience and submission and the other, of determination. Selvi, who had remained 'silent' in front of her husband throughout the simultaneous progress of her singing career and their marital relation, opts for a new mode of silence challenging the patriarchal order, thereby turning into an opinionated woman.

Independence

The story discloses how 'patriarchal cultures interfere with women's agentic skill'(Meyers p.9). In *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, Judith Butler provides a definition for gender, "Gender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of stance, a natural sort of being(45). The concept of *pativritha*, as realized in Indian performative tradition(as per Butler's sense of *performance*) is outrightly rejected by the title character Selvi, in Narayan's short story. Narayan has delineated the image of a defiant woman, rejecting not just the authoritative power that her husband had exerted but his very presence in her dwelling place. What she becomes is a woman with an identity of her own, having transcended the threshold of an internalized inferiority. The mirage of status and safety offered by obedient wifehood is forcefully excluded from her thoughts. She finds the village of her upbringing more secure and peaceful in the absence of dictates issued by Mohan on a daily basis. In short, the 'Goddess of Melody' returns to her home, her mother's memories, her self.

CONCLUSION

Above all, *Selvi* shows how internalized submission to the pathi/husband in patriarchal cultures piles up to block even the timely attention needed by an ailing parent. Narayan emphasizes the agency of a woman unrealized in the incessant flow of life. The fact that Selvi has already become an acclaimed artist, being talented, trained and well-received in the art world erases the possibility of considering her as a representative of ordinary women, forced to be mute throughout their lives. Still, the failure in realizing her strength and Mohan's overpowering nature makes her a prototype of traditional Indian women. Narayan had no other choice but to choose a working woman, established as an artist, to materialize the story of self-realization and woman's independence. We are pulled off from comfortably imagining Swami's mother(*Swami and Friends*) or Rama's wife(*The Martyr's Corner*) in Selvi's seat. Ironically, during the post-independent era, even though women endowed with Selvi's talent could be many, those

with Selvi's stature would be rare. Thus, we are bound to look at the *others*, inversely reflected through Selvi, having neither the agency to leave or ask the dominant partner to leave with respect to a living space.

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