

Indian Woman as Traditional Wife and Mother

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Abstract : The paper has shown the role, position and duty of a traditional Indian wife and traditional mother in the characters of Susila, Chandran's wife and Chandran's unnamed mother in R.K. Narayan's *The Bachelor of Arts*. Susila, the female protagonist, is an ideal woman who performs various roles – as a wife to her husband, a daughter-in-law to her-in-laws, a daughter to her parents. As per the norms of Hindu culture and tradition, the concept of duty is paramount for Susila as she socializes, educates, loves, feeds and supports every individual in the family with full devotion, affection, sincerity and obedience. Her position in the novel as traditional Hindu wife is opposite to that of the western woman and is generally believed to be passive by nature. Like most traditional wife, Susila continues to be motivated by Hindu conception of the woman as dutiful wife and performs her yearly ritual for her husband's long life. Thus, Narayan has portrayed the character of Susila with significant features of an Indian woman as traditional wife to her husband and all in the building up of a happy family life. The paper has also depicted the role of a traditional mother in the character of Chandran's unnamed mother. She plays a very important role in building up Chandran's future. No money and power can cast the dehumanizing effect on the relationship between Chandran and his mother. She represents the age-old customs and traditional values. Her role in the family remains confined to the fulfillment of the interest of the family. Besides her orthodoxy, she is noble, kind and a well-wisher of near and dear ones. She strongly believes that a woman is to translate and refine the principles of orthodoxy into codes and etiquettes. Thus, the role of woman as traditional wife and mother in the Indian society is synthesized by Narayan just to bring harmony in the family as well as in the society.

R.K. Narayan is a novelist who holds traditional views about women, especially in his earlier novels. The traditional concept of woman in the Indian society projects her role in relation to others as wife, mother, sister, daughter, daughter-in-law, mother-in-law and grandmother. Of all these roles, the role of a wife is very important in the Hindu society of India. The roles women play in society and their images have developed not simply from the exigencies of biology and social institution but from a rather deeply rootedness in the myths and legends and the religion of Hindu culture. Since time immemorial woman has been playing the role of a wife as meaningfully and inevitably in running of the family as well as society. Kanta Grover asserts that: "Women have been viewed as the highest gift of God to man" (*Burning Flesh*, p. 19).

Indian woman in the midst of traditions does not stand alone. Her identity is wholly designed by her relationship with others. The dominant psycho-social realities of a woman's life can be condensed into three stages. Firstly, she is a daughter to her parents. Secondly, she is a wife to her husband and daughter-in-law to the husband's parents. Thirdly, she is a mother to her children.

In the Hindu society, the ideal woman is represented by Sita, the quintessence of wifely devotion, the heroine of the epic *The Ramayana*. Sita is the epitome of a true traditional wife who accompanied her husband in his exile in the forest for fourteen years. She overcame danger, discomforts and deprivation of a queen's life in the forest. She was determined to share her husband's fate, averring that death would be preferable to separation from her husband. The ideal of womanhood in Sita cannot be destroyed or disturbed by anyone in the universe. Her story is held up as a prime example of the length to which a wife should go in aiding her husband. The true and ideal wife saved her husband from death, followed him anywhere, proved her wifely virtue and remained a traditional wife throughout his life. The position, duty and bond of relation of a wife to a husband is an eloquent statement of the dhrama of the Hindu wife as mentioned by H.P. Shastri:

*For a woman, it is not her father, her son, nor her mother, friends nor her ownself,
but the husband who in this world and the next is ever her sole means of salvation.
If thou dost enter the impenetrable forest today, O descendant of Raghu, I shall
precede thee on foot, treading down the spiky Kusha grass. In truth, whether in*

palace, in chariots or in heaven, whether the shadow of the feat of her consort falls, it must be followed (Ramayana of Valmiki, Vol. 1).

The Hindu conception of the “female” places the Hindu woman in a position opposite to that of the western woman and is generally believed to be passive by nature. The paper will show the significance of the role, position and duty of Indian woman as the traditional wife and mother.

R.K. Narayan has presented two female characters in his novel, *The Bachelor of Arts*. One is the protagonist, Chandran’s wife, Susila and the other is the protagonist, Chandran’s unnamed mother.

The character of Susila is more important as traditional Hindu wife. She possesses qualities stronger than those of her mother-in-law. Like every traditional Indian Hindu girl, she accepts the arranged marriage made by her parents. Even after marriage, she is obedient, faithful and loyal to her husband as well as her-in-laws. She has full respect for the family members. She has the Sita-Savitri image of fulfilling every need for her husband.

Susila is a perfect traditional Hindu wife. She completely changes the life of Chandran. After marriage love becomes a reality for Chandran’s life; more secure than he has learnt how to make the world of his dreams correspond to the world of reality. Thus, Susila is the only person who matures Chandran into the adult world. Her life is completely dedicated to her husband.

Susila is the picture of a warm and appealing woman who epitomizes the best in Indian womanhood. Pointing out the ideal qualities of Indian woman, Mary Wollstonecraft remarks:

Women are told from their infancy, and taught by the example of their mothers, that softness of temper, outward obedience, and or scrupulous attention to a puerile kind of prosperity will obtain for them the protection of man”(A Vindication of the Rights of Woman, p. 23).

Susila is also a pious woman. Everyday she offers flowers and incense sticks to God and prays for the welfare and well-being of her husband and in-laws. Interpreting and commenting on the role of a true wife, Susan Wadley lays down as: “*The Wifely role is of subordination of devotion in any circumstances of dutifulness*”. (*Women in Indian Society*. p. 33).

In Narayan’s *The Bachelor of Arts*, I would like to appreciate the character of Susila, the female protagonist. She is a friend, a companion, a servant, an advisor, a well-wisher, a nurse, etc. to her husband. She is also the playmate, the partner, the guide, the beloved, the discipline and learned one enough in fine arts to teach her husband. Giving his own opinion on the roles of woman who remains confined to the fulfillment of interest of the family, William Walsh rightly comments: “..... the woman rather than the old represents Custom and Reason and knows what is and what is not proper”. (*A Critical Appreciation*. p. 194).

A family is constituted of two sectional halves –female section and male section. A society is a composition of many families comprising only the above two sections. So the role played by a wife in the family is not less than that of a husband in the family as well as in the society. A wife is also equally responsible as a husband is to the society which is larger form of family.

Women’s ritual practices emphasize kinship and family relationships, reinforcing the view of woman as wife. Most Hindu women probably will continue to be motivated by the Hindu conception of the woman as dutiful wife and will perform her yearly ritual for her husband’s long life.

As per norms of Hindu tradition, the concept of duty is paramount for Susila. She socializes, educates, loves, feeds and supports the individual of the family with devotion, affection, love, sincerity and obedience. She is the foundation stone of the family in particular and the society in general. In this regard what Pandit J.L. Nehru had observed is worth mentioning: “*To awaken the people, it is the woman who must be awakened. Once she is on the move, the family moves, the village moves and the nation moves*”. (*Indian Woman*. Vol-1).

Susila is an ideal woman who performs various roles as a wife, a daughter-in-law and a daughter. She does not have a single moment to think about her own self as her life is fully dedicated to her family members. Caring for and looking after her family was her sole concern. Rehena Ghadially, assigning true Indian Woman’s identity to Susila, remarks: “*Indian women’s identity is deeply embedded not in the marital twosome, but in the entire family, caste, creed and community*”. (*Woman in Indian Society*, pp. 15-16).

Thus, Narayan portrays the character of Susila with significant features of an Indian woman as traditional wife to her husband and all in the building up of a happy family world. His portrayal of such woman character attempts at establishing human values, in an insensitive age, within the existing background of Hindu metaphysics.

Another important character in *The Bachelor of Arts* is the protagonist, Chandran's unnamed mother. She is a typical tradition bound, orthodox, conservative and a homely Indian woman. As a mother, she abounds in love for her son. She always thinks for the welfare and well-being of Chandran.

The role of a mother in building up of the child's future and personality is extremely important. The relationship between the mother and the son in the Indian tradition is a sublime one. The influence of materialism and commercialism is not noticed in the relationship between the mother and the son. Money and power cannot cast their dehumanizing effect on the relationship between the mother and the son.

Chandran's mother is the representative of mother Goddess Earth who bears the burden of both fair and foul and good and evil. She does everything for her family and her children Nissim Ezekiel has presented the selfless love of mother for her children in his poem, *Night of the Scorpion*, as: "My mother only said, Thank God, the Scorpion picked on me and spared my children". (pp. 28-29).

In *The Bachelor of Arts*, Chandran's mother represents the age-old customs and traditional values. She has a firm belief in superstitions. Like every womenfolk of the Hindu family, she is against the marriage of Chandran with Malathi when the horoscope of the two does not match. She insists upon observing the set of code of marriage and religious ritual. She wants to do everything perfectly in accordance with the customs and traditions in Hindu society. She was the conventional image of the mother who loved and cared for her children. She loved Chandran so deeply that she could not bear to see him in miserable condition.

In the middle class tradition ridden ambience, the role of woman remains confined to the fulfilment of the interest of the family, what William Walsh has said about the role of women in Narayan's novels, applies fully to Chandran's mother. He says:

It was, as Narayan shows, the duty of women to translate and refine the principles of orthodoxy and correctness into codes and etiquettes covering the basic drive for food, shelter, sex and company. (W.W. p. 19).

Chandran's mother is a God-fearing and saintly woman keeping herself busy with prayer-beads. She utters the name of Sri Rama, at the same time, her husband, home, children and relatives.

Chandran's mother, like all Hindu mothers, is willing to marry her son to the most desirable young girl with the best dowry. She insists that the settlement of marriage is to observe certain well-set procedures and principles of social prosperity. She thinks that a girl's parents should have good social status. She wants to take rich dowry in the marriage of her son. She scorns when she hears the dowry which Malathi's father proposed to give for his daughter was not good and costly. She gives references to her own marriage many years ago. She wants to marry her son to the daughter of a rich man of high social status as she is very much aware of her status. She strongly believes that marriage is made in heaven long time before the birth of the bride and bridegroom on earth physically.

Chandran's mother is the symbol of pathos in Indian tradition. She is also a good mother. She always keeps herself busy with the welfare and well-being of her children and husband. She does everything for her son. Her relationship with Chandran is totally emotional rather than sentimental. In an attempt to define what a "mother" is Krishna Kant Singh writes:

"the very word 'mother' is an inspiration for children from the very beginning. The labour pain which a mother feels at the time of childbirth has both biological as well as philosophical significance. Such a role taken by the mother for the children is a sublime one." (Social Perspectives. p. 38).

She can disregard all her conservative ideas when she finds her son's happiness at stake. She is also a good relative of the near and dear ones and she cares very much for them. Though, she is orthodox and

superstitious, yet she does not impose any undesirable and unnecessary conditions on anybody for her selfish ends. Despite her conservative thinking and orthodox nature, she is a noble, kind and gentle lady always busy making her husband, children and family happy. She believes that the duty of a woman is to translate and refine the principles of orthodoxy and corrections into codes and etiquettes covering the basic drives for food, shelter, sex and company.

Thus, mother always provides inspiration and helps in understanding the complexity of human existence. The Indian mother, though fettered by domestic injustice and tyrannical custom, has been placed on pedestal and is worshipped as Goddess in literature, history and society. So also, Chandran's mother is the sole giver to her son. Meena Shirwadkar has rightly pointed out that the image of Indian womanhood is that of the mother in the following words: "*Indeed, the mother-image shines like an unbroken ray in the whole of Indian Culture*". (p.79).

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