

Teaching Paralanguage Through Literature: A Case of R K Narayan's *The Dark Room*

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ABSTRACT: *Paralanguage is a topic that a teacher of English comes across when teaching courses like Business Communication, Business English, etc. Paralanguage is used to describe a wide range of vocal features that can assist in understanding the speaker's attitude, state of mind and temperament. Paralanguage is concerned with 'how' something is being said, and not 'what' is being said. Teaching such a topic by deploying literary texts like the first chapter of R K Narayan's The Dark Room will not only be a hand on case for the students of communication but would also motivate the students to further read the novel. Such an exercise will also benefit the students of literature and alert them to the multiple interpretations that are attached to a single verbal code.*

Key Words: *Paralanguage, voice, Savitri, Ramani, dark, room.*

The word 'para' means 'like'. Paralanguage means like language. Anything that executes the function of communication as a language without taking recourse to language in the conventional sense is paralanguage. It is non-verbal because it does not consist of words. It is concerned with the manner in which a message is conveyed. According to SK Chaudhary,

Paralanguage is one of the most powerful complementing media that oral communication possesses over the written. How a particular message is said is to a great extent its measure of importance. Paralanguage shows the main purpose for which an utterance is made. In some ways, we may call it the 'highlighter' of oral message, since it uses certain physical aspects of language articulation to emphasize the central focus of the message. (p. 28)

Paralanguage includes vocal qualities like tone, pitch, volume variation, stress, pauses, silences, inflections and non-fluencies. All these are inseparable aspects of language system. There is no denying the fact that listeners pay attention to the way words are said than to the words themselves. To a large extent, paralanguage indicates the situation and position of the speaker. Paralanguage assists in adding further meaning to the oral communication.

R. K. Narayan *The Dark Room* (1956) is a story of conjugal discord, conservatism and reform. Set in the fictitious town of Malgudi, we are introduced to Savitri and Ramani. The novel narrates a pathetic story of Savitri, a typical uneducated, simple minded, middle class submissive housewife of her times and Ramani her husband, who continually insults and humiliates her for no reason. Ramani, secretary in the Englandia Insurance Company lives in the fashionable South Extension in Malgudi with his wife Savitri and three children, Sumati, Kamala and Babu. Ramani is haughty, domineering, egotistic, cynical and always finds faults with everything that Savitri does. Since Savitri occupies a secondary position in the house she dares not contradict her husband. Though they have been married for fifteen years, there is no warmth in their relationship. In the inner sanctums of Ramani's house is a dark room into which Savitri retires when her heart is weighed down with sorrow and misery. She tries to escape from her subservient position but fails miserably and has to reluctantly come back home defeated and heart broken.

The first chapter of the novel is significant from paralinguistic point of view. The domestic conflict begins without much ado and the readers are made to witness an ugly domestic scene of conflict and insult at the very beginning. According to David Abercrombie,

Paralinguistic phenomena are non-linguistic elements in conversation. They occur alongside spoken language, interact with it, and produce together with it a total system of communication. They are not necessarily continuously simultaneous with spoken words. They may also be interspersed among them, or precede them, or follow them; but they are always integrated into a conversation considered as a complete linguistic interaction. The study of paralinguistic behaviour is part of the study of conversation: the conversational use of spoken language cannot be properly understood unless paralinguistic elements are taken into account. (p. 55)

It is Ramani's attitude and nuanced speech that brings to forefront at once his disrespectful, inhuman and brutish behaviour vis-a-vis Savitri. For this paper the paralinguistic features that would be studied are: Ramani's dismissive voice / his car's hoot, pitch and stress in juxtaposition with Savitri's submissive voice punctuated with silences, pauses and non-fluencies. We shall also see that her inability to voice her feelings furthers her suppressed position.

Voice

The first signal that we receive or use is voice. An intelligent listener will be attuned to gauge a lot from the speaker's voice. A voice can be of many types; it can be: harsh, sweet, soft, nasty, rude, etc. In *The Dark Room* Ramani's voice is mostly rude, dismissive, nasty, sarcastic and angry. Even when his voice is sweet it is apparent to Savitri that his sweetness is a pretext for having sex. Savitri's voice on the contrary is soft (indication of powerlessness and passivity). Voice is the vocalization of words and various other dimensions of voice like tone, stress, pitch, pauses and non-fluencies are further discussed.

Tone

The novel opens with Babu, the eldest child, falling ill and Savitri's decision to not send him to school. Ramani at once finds this subversive of his authority as Savitri never bothered to ask him about it and this sends him in a rage. The way he questions and talks to Savitri is clearly dismissive of her and is very insulting. He says:

What is this? (p. 1)

Are you deaf? (p. 1)

Go and do any work you like in the kitchen but leave the training of a grown up boy to me. It's none of a woman's business. (p.1).

In paralanguage tone is an indicator of mood. Ramani was in the habit of finding fault with everything that Savitri did. He finds fault with the food his wife served him, he also finds faults in Savitri's general demeanour. He relentlessly oppresses her in every possible way.

Brinjals, cucumber, radish, and greens, all the twelve months in the year and all the thirty days in the month. I don't know when I shall have a little decent food to eat. I slave all day in the office for this mouthful. No lack of expenses, money for this and money for that. If the cook can't cook properly, do the work yourself. What have you to do better than that? (p. 2)

As a discerning listener, Savitri can gauge a lot from Ramani's tone, pitch and speed. Even the children had "caught the signals" as we are told. Since Ramani is perpetually irritable, the atmosphere of the house is mostly tense and the inmates of the house remain in a state of terror. Even though Savitri is distressed by Ramani's temperamental upsurge she has got attuned to his demands and crude behaviour.

The Hoot and it's Pitch

The shrillness of any sound is called its pitch. People in superior position use high-pitched voices as compared to their subordinates. High pitch is also associated with anger and aggression. In the novel, Ramani owns a Chevrolet car. Sometimes the hooting of his car was "emphatic", some days it was "milder", and sometimes unexpectedly it was "soft". All these adjectives are nothing but an extension of his own voice displaced on to the hoot of his car.

At eight-thirty Savitri's ears, as ever, were the first to pick up the hoarse hooting of the Chevrolet horn. . . Ramani as a rule sounded his horn at about a furlong from his gate, two long hoots which were meant to tell the household, "Ranga, keep the shed open when I reach there, if you value your life," while to Savitri it said, "It is your business to see that Ranga does his work properly. So take warning." Some days the hooting would be less emphatic, and Savitri's ears were sufficiently attuned to the nuances and she could tell a few minutes in advance what temper her husband was in. Today the hooting was of the milder kind. It might mean that he was bringing home a guest for dinner or that he was in a happy mood. . . (p. 9)

The "hoarse hooting" (p.9) of the Chevrolet car and "two long hoots" (p.9) were clearly warning signals. The pitch of Ramani's voice displaced on to the hoot of the car reveals his frame of mind. Ramani's high pitch indicates agitation whereas Savitri's unchanging pitch indicates her submissive position.

Stress

Words can sometimes be repeated to emphasise something. Ramani marginalises and belittles Savitri. She is doubly marginalised as a woman and as an economically dependent housewife. Ramani calls her a "child" and repeats it again and again. This infantilising of Savitri furthers her marginal position in relation to

Ramani. Savitri is made to feel that she has yet to learn a lot and is naïve, idiotic and possible gullible. Repetition plays the role of underlining in vocalisation.

You have to learn a lot yet. You are still a child, perhaps a precocious child, but a child all the same. (p. 12)

Non-fluencies

Only a single but a very remarkable instance of non-fluency can be found towards the end of the first chapter. As the first chapter reaches conclusion the readers witness a comparatively happier scene with Ramani in a good mood. As he looks at his daughters and then looks at his wife, he says with a wink:

I wonder which of them will grow up like you? In any case, if any of them becomes half so – h'm, h'm! as you are . . . (p. 14)

The usage of "h'm, h'm!" as a non-fluency and the inability or deliberate avoidance to voice what he has in mind regarding his wife as a role model for his growing daughter is also an indication of the fact that he has no respect for the kind of life Savitri is living.

Savitri's silence, pauses and non-fluencies

Pauses when judiciously used can provide a welcome gap for the listener to decode the verbal message. But sometimes pauses can even dramatize a situation. Savitri withholds information when speaking to Ramani. The readers become more attentive to her momentarily. When Ramani asks: "Are you deaf?" She can barely speak and replies with unfinished sentences: "I was just---". She prefers to be silent, knowing fully well that verbal duelling with Ramani is a losing game. And this further infuriates him,

Saving up your energy by being silent! Saving it up for what purpose? When a man asks you something you could do worse than honour him with a reply." (p. 3)

If she dared to answer she would be told, "Shut up. Words won't mend a piece of foul cooking." (p. 3). Savitri feels that she has no say at all in the house and she dares not contradict Ramani. She evinces endurance in the face of verbal violence inflicted on her. She does all she can to keep him in good humour and Ramani does all he can to belittle Savitri in every way he can. He complements his attitude with paralanguage. She chooses to not react to any of the insults heaped upon her by Ramani.

How impotent she was, she thought; she had not the slightest power to do anything at home, and that after fifteen years of married life. (p. 6).

She is painfully aware of her deplorable state. She helplessly compromises with her fate and continues to live in the dark room of male chauvinism, patriarchy and orthodoxy. Not only is the dark room a symbol for the state of women in conservative Indian families but for Savitri the dark room also becomes a symbol of non-linguistic space of perpetual silence.

In conclusion we can say that deploying literary texts in teaching communication can be very useful, interesting and fruitful. Teaching a topic like paralanguage, for instance, by using literary texts like the first chapter of R K Narayan's *The Dark Room* will not only be a hand on case for the students of communication but would also motivate them to further read the novel. Such an exercise will also benefit the students of literature and alert them to the multiple interpretations that are attached to a single verbal code.

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