

Raji Narasimhan's Short Stories: A Study

Abstract

Raji Narasimhan is a contemporary Indian English woman writer. By profession she was a reporter and feature writer but left her job in the early '70s to take up fulltime creative writing. So the impact of her earlier profession is visible in her writing. She has written four novels: *The Heart of Standing is You Cannot Fly* (1973), *Forever Free* (1979); *Drifting to a Dawn* (1983), and *The Sky Changes* (1991). She has also written critical articles and reviewed books for *The Hindustan Times* and *Indian Literature*. *The Marriage of Bela and Other Stories*, a collection of short stories, was published in 1978. The short stories in this collection deal with women's issues. She also highlights the problems of educated middle-class Indian woman. Through her short fiction she presents the predicament of women in the Indian context. The present paper offers the reading of the select short stories of Narasimhan dealing with women issues.

Keywords: Woman-in-Transition, Traditional woman, Exploitation, Humiliation, Divorce, Probation.

Introduction

Raji Narasimhan's short stories deal with the woman - in - transition in the '70s. Narasimhan is also a representative of the English educated urban, upper middle-class of India. She tends to write about people, mostly women, like herself. Her short stories are marked by suffering, small disasters, careful observations and ironic endings. By profession she was a reporter and feature writer but left her job in the early '70s to take up fulltime creative writing. So the impact of her earlier profession is visible in her writing. She has written four novels: *The Heart of Standing is You Cannot Fly* (1973), *Forever Free* (1979); *Drifting to a Dawn* (1983), and *The Sky Changes* (1991). She has also written critical articles and reviewed books for *The Hindustan Times* and *Indian Literature*. *The Marriage of Bela and Other Stories*, a collection of short stories, was published in 1978. The short stories in this collection deal with women's issues. She also highlights the problems of educated middle-class Indian woman. Through her short fiction she presents the predicament of women in the Indian context. Like those of Deshpande, her short stories revolve around woman-in-transition. Her short stories show a conflict between old paternalistic order in which roles are extremely limited, and on officially proclaimed freedom.

In "End of Probation", for example, a young woman is driven out of her brothers home by his inability to believe that she can work and be promoted i.e. earn as much as he does without becoming a whore. Her alternative: a squalid working Woman's Hostel and the greasy attention of her boss, who pursues her with speeches about the new freedom.

Through this story she highlights the predicament of career woman Narasimhan is showing this that there is no place for women in patriarchal society. Whether they are educated / employed or not but they are exploited at every step. In ironical way she proves this fact that there is no identity of woman, her identity is always in relation to man (father, brother, husband, sons and employer). This short story also highlights woman's relationship with family members and employer.

In "Their Woman Colleague" a woman bureaucrat, unmarried and running to fat, receives a small promotion and the right to be paid by cheque:

It meant that now she was a woman earning Rs. 500 a month, and with a house in her name. Of course, she would have to pay the toll. She waited for her male colleagues to break into her room with their congratulations. (TMOB 29)

Mohd. Tariq

Assistant Professor,
Deptt. of English and M.E.L.,
Lucknow University,
Lucknow

Her colleagues take her to her favourite restaurant in order to watch that she eats too much. They take her home to pry into her unfinished life and humiliate her by letting her serve them tea and she is sure about their behaviour and psychology. She also knows this fact about them, though they are engaging an excuse to skip work. This short story is marked by the element of humiliation. Narasimhan is trying to show that whether woman is educated or not, she is humiliated in male dominated society.

"A Toast to Herself" was first published in *Indian Literature* in 1986. It is about a woman writer Priya. Her fifth book has been published and she is expecting a review of it in the newspaper but she is anxious and nervous. Like every writer she also wants to be read and recognized. Books are like her children, stripping away from the full set of her books, she sees them huddled like children separated from their mother. Drinking a toast means wishing happiness, success etc. to somebody or something while raising a glass of wine. Here the central character wishes herself success and happiness drinking lemonade in the company of her mother and Dr. Kesavan. But her writings bring pebbles. Her mother tries very hard and persistently to make Priya realize that writing is for those who are economically sound and for her it should only be a hobby. But she refuses to understand this bitter reality. Her books are more precious than any money she may get and writing alone can sustain her now. Economics, however, plays a vital role in today's life. Her mother is waiting for pension and Priya is also conscious about her worldly possessions and what it may mean in a moment of crises. This short story focuses on economic condition of women in Indian society.

This short story also deals with the problem of divorce and mother-daughter relationship. Narasimhan has also stressed on the generation gap. Priya is a divorcee and her mother hates her for that, instead of sympathizing with her or supporting her. She hates Priya may be for her guts, may be for the refusal to show the traditional line and accepts her destiny. Priya is jobless too and that is why her mother hates her for it actively and openly. She has to repeatedly assure her mother that she doesn't need her pension and she can find for herself. According to her mother, Priya's second marriage is the only solution to the problem. If she somehow agrees to marry Dr. Kesavan at the age of fifty, her economic hardships will end and she can also pursue her passion for writing. Even Priya might have married Dr. Kesavan and happily settled down in life, if he had proposed to her.

Narasimhan has highlighted the attitude of Indian society that marriage is the ultimate goal and solution to every problem of women. Here Priya is depicted as a woman, as a woman writer and as a writer transcending, if only temporarily, all the pulls and pressures of society.

This short story revolves around three major characters: Priya, Priya's mother and Dr. Kesavan. Mother and Dr. Kesavan are on the whole

conventional. They represent conventional world order.

Mother's concern for her divorced jobless daughter is natural. Today she is there to support her look after her but what will happen when she is there no more? But Priya's mother unable to understand her obsession for writing, but like every mother she also wants her daughter to be happily married and settled in life. She represents typical Indian mother caring for her daughter and trying to ensure a secure future in her own way.

Narasimhan portrays Dr. Kesavan as a typical Indian male. He is attracted to Priya but something in her holds back. It may be Priya is a divorcee and divorced women are seen as aggressive, assertive and offbeat. He is not sure she will make a good wife or he would be a good husband.

Priya is presented as a new women and unconventional character. She is a divorcee but don't have any regrets for her divorced status. She wishes to live on her own terms and also knows that this may be hard. She knows that she has to pay a heavy price for her choice but she is mentally prepared for it. She has her moments of weakness and fatigue and anxiety. She needs and is craving for male's physical and emotional love. She is divided between two worlds. She is a new woman divided between her new found freedom and her natural urges on the other hand. She is courageous woman who knows the goals of her life and how to get it. She is celebrating her today without worrying about tomorrow.

This short story draws the attention of readers to the status of the female child in Indian society and the blatant preference for a male child. Here Narasimhan has also shown the world of a woman writer at home and outside. But the protagonist in the short story is a woman of substance, of firm determination and grit. This new woman who defies the social code and convention and she shapes her own destiny. She has a purpose in life – to establish her worth and value as a human being and she achieves it. Her life is hard and arduous but it is satisfying and fulfilling. She takes her own decision and sets her own priorities. Priya is representative of so many other women passing through the same phase.

Conclusion

Like those of Shashi Deshpande, Narasimhan's short stories show conflict with the traditional social order. Her short stories articulate the silence of women-in-transition. Her women belong to middle-class section of India society. Generally they belong to small towns or away from power centres. But women protagonists are highly educated according to their social standards which create problem for them. Their position becomes conflicting position in the family and society and that is why they suffer. So she uses these new women as mouthpiece to present her vision. They act as a motion picture camera and present the picture of society. They show how women are exploited in the family and society. She also presents this view that women are exploited

whether they are educated/ employed or not. Patriarchy dominates everywhere and methods of exploitation changes according to the context. But her women characters are not passive they emerge as achievers and celebrate their freedom and being. To sum up, Narasimhan's short stories deal with middle-class Indian life and the burdens of living through a time of complex transition in an immense troubling society.

End Note

1. *Abbreviation used in the Paper: TMOB*
2. *TMOB: Narasimhan, Raji. The Marriage of Bela. Calcutta: Writers' Workshop, 1978.*

References

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5. *"A Toast to Herself," Indian Literature. 1986.*