

**Chapter-I**

**Introduction**

## I

In the history of American fiction, Tess Slesinger is not a name as well-known as Katherine Porter, Mary McCarthy or Eudora Welty. Yet the collected short stories and the only novel of Slesinger clearly speak about her talent and potential. Her keen observation and awareness of social atmosphere, her consciousness of the cross-currents and depth of understanding the human psyche, her analytical approach and most strikingly her feminine sensibility make her fiction worthy of a detailed critical appraisal. As the introductory note to her collection of short stories reissued in 1971 rightly assures the reader :

"One need read only the first lines of Miss Slesinger's title story to know that her's is a unique voice, one that captures its readers right off. It is those who read further will find a wholly feminine voice compelling, shooting off insights, sure of its tone, searching after the feeling behind appearances and everywhere finding it."<sup>1</sup>

A significant aspect of Slesinger which forms a part of this study is that her fiction contributes to the

reassessment of the 1930's. The literature of the decade was formerly considered narrow, dull and therefore devoid of interest. But critics have reassessed it to find that literature of the 30's was marked by a diversity of style, form and subject matter with considerable aesthetic merit. Tess Slesinger is one of those writers of the thirties who offer "fresh insights of value."<sup>2</sup> Like any other writer, her experiences as an individual, the social background, the culture and the cross-currents in the situation of the 30's are the chief thematic motivations.

Also, we find that her experiences as a daughter, wife, lover, writer, teacher and social observer are transformed into her short stories. In her fiction, the impressions she gathered from her childhood, marital life and as an individual are very much reflected. So it becomes necessary to study rather closely the development of her personality in the situational context of her life.

## II

Tess Slesinger was born in 1905 in a middle class third generation Jewish family in New York. "On Being Told

That Her Second Husband Has Taken His First Lover and Other Stories" (1935) a collection of short stories is one of the only two published literary works of Tess Slesinger; the other being a novel "The Unpossessed".

When she died of cancer in early 1945, numerous uncollected short stories and screenplays were left behind as a proof of her talent. A novel about the Hollywood life was about to be finished, but it could not be completed because of her untimely death.

Her family background and personal marital life have gone a long way to influence her writing. Her parents were indifferent to Judaism and the family members had frank attitude in matters of sexuality. The germs of her analytical power probably lie in her parents' concern for literacy and self expression.

Slesinger's mother Augusta had her own unique personality. In the early years of her marriage she engaged herself in the various social welfare activities. As a result she became director of a child guidance clinic and afterwards executive secretary of the Jewish Big Sisters. She also had her share in establishing the New School for Social Research. Augusta had also a book on psychoanalytic techniques.

While Augusta, Tess Slesinger's mother, was a successful woman, her father was not such a unique person. He was working in his father-in-law's business but was unsuccessful in his profession which resulted in a considerable tension between the husband and wife. Though the children, Tess and her three brothers were equally loved by both the parents, they were aware of the stresses and strains between them. All these factors constituted Tess Slesinger's personal values including a desire for autonomy and intimacy and her need to understand the inextricable relationship between individual, family and social structure.

Slesinger took her secondary education in Ethical Culture Society Schools. These schools were rather socialist in orientation. She studied at Swarthmore College for two years. She left Swarthmore in 1925 "having flunked Algebra and received a reprimand for smoking on the campus."<sup>2</sup>

Then she joined the Columbia School of Journalism. She was a student "the professors never knew what to do with."<sup>3</sup> Here, while studying fiction-writing she had the advantage of taking Dorothy Scarborough's (best known for

her controversial novel of Texas life called The Wind) course in short story. After completing this course she got diploma and the degree of B.Litt. in 1927.

In 1928 she worked in various New York newspapers. She worked as assistant fashion editor on the New York Herald Tribune and afterwards she became an assistant on the New York Evening Post Literary Review. She also taught creative writing at Briarcliff, New York, a girls' Finishing College.

Later Slesinger married Herbert Solow, an intellectual political journalist who was assistant editor of the Menorah Journal. The journal was an attempt to create a Jewish humanism in America but during the early period of Depression it reflected leftist leanings. Through Herbert, Tess Slesinger became a part of intense, young group which was increasingly involved in left-wing politics. The group comprised Elliot Cohen, Lionel Trilling, Clifton Eadiman, Henry Rosenthal, Anita Brenner, Felix Morrow, Albert Halper and others. The group's constantly percolating discussions "broadened her range of knowledge and sharpened her analytical abilities."<sup>4</sup>

From childhood she was determined to become a writer. As she herself said :

“I was born with a curse of intelligent parents, a happy childhood and nothing valid to rebel against, so I rebelled against telling the truth. I told whoppers at three, tall stories at four, a home-run at five; from six to sixteen I wrote them into a diary.”<sup>5</sup>

And slowly Slesinger transformed her youthful tall-tales into elementary sketches and then she wrote them as short stories.

Her first short story was published in Menorah Journal in 1928 and later on her work went on appearing in reputed magazines such as American Mercury, Pageny, This Quarter, Modern Youth, Vanity Fair, Story, Forum and Scribner's Story Magazine. Her only novel The Unpossessed was published in 1934 and some of her short stories were collected and published in the volume Time : the present in 1935, later published under the title "On Being Told That Her Second Husband Has Taken His First Lover and Other Stories" in 1971.

After publishing her novel in 1934 and her collection of short stories in 1935, she came to Hollywood to work on the screenplay of "The Good Earth".

Fascinated by this new art of script-writing she stayed there from 1935 until her death. As Slesinger found radical theorising and intellectualizing insufficient to give meaning to life, she divorced Herbert Solow. In 1936 she was married to Frank Davis, in collaboration with whom she wrote numerous original stories for the screen, out of which seven were produced. "Girls School" (Columbia, 1938) was based on her novella 'The Answer on the Magnolia Tree', "Dance, Girls Dance" (RKO, 1940) and "A Tree Grows in Booklyn" (20th Century Fox, 1945) are her screens for examples.

Apart from the steady employment and financial independence, with its hospitable atmosphere Hollywood also provided her with a political activity suited to her temperament. She took part in a lot of activities such as picketing, strikes etc. Earlier Slesinger picketed the premises of McCaulay, the publishers in 1934 and was jailed with eighteen other writers and editors for a day. But the period of formation and dissolution of Screen Writers



Guild was the most active period of her life from political angle. Here she worked shoulder to shoulder with members of Hollywood. They had to organize secret meetings in order to avoid getting blacklisted. This period of her life, full of activity with specific objectives left a deep impression on her mind. Unfortunately, Tess Slesinger's checkered but promising career was cut short tragically by her untimely death in 1945. Within a short life-span of barely forty years however she wrote a collection of short stories and a novel - works which deserve to be better known than they are at present.

### III

The foregoing biographical sketch shows that Tess Slesinger was unmistakably a product of her times. In what follows, therefore, an attempt is made to describe the forces and cross-currents of the 30's so as to accentuate Slesinger's relationship with them. In this context, what Leo Gurko says about the 30's is highly significant. Gurko writes :

"The 30's were preeminently an age of social consciousness. It was an age of interlocking currents and sudden tears in the social fabric of strange alliances and frequent crisis de nerfs, so much happened to it that the mere presentation of sanity was in some ways its most notable achievement....anyone who asked what he had done during the 1930's could reply adequately - 'I survived'."<sup>6</sup>

The 1929 debacle sent severe shockwaves through the US, but the country faced it with optimism for the future, because ups and downs in business and economy were quite a usual phenomena and it was accepted that you had to face it with resilience and patience. But soon the temporary slump deepened and the hopes for speedy recovery and renewed good life were shattered. The assurance of President Hoover that "prosperity is just around the corner" turned into a chorus of mockery.

The inevitable effects of such a miserable situation started showing. The number of unemployed started mounting; faith in economic cycle vanished. Slowly it started becoming clear that this was not an ordinary crisis

11

and that since the disease was new, the remedies had to be new. The initial optimism turned into uneasiness and then into fear. The parks and subway stations filled with thousands of migrants - 20 percent of them minors - who flocked in the cities in search of jobs and money. They were instigated by the communists to stage demonstrations in the major cities like Los Angeles and Chicago. Hundreds of shopkeepers and store-owners were bankrupt with placards on the empty window - "opened by mistake". Hundreds of banks died taking with them all the savings and also the last hope left in the face of reduced salaries and imminent lay-offs. The female members in the families dismissed their maids and took the work to themselves. They stored in large supplies of canned food expecting revolution - only to start using it a few weeks or months later when the head of the family lost his job. Some pessimists projected a dark future ahead and certainly the statistical evidence supported their view. The national income was severely hit and so were wages, stocks, dividends. Taking advantage of the situation the big firms ruthlessly effected lay-offs and salary-cuts and even in the depression period showed profits. In fact this added fuel to the fire, which

was used by the communist agitators. As a result vast American population remained unemployed, lived on insufficient and undernourished food and somebody wryly suggested that "Brother, can you spare a Dime?" be made the new national anthem.

But more than all their material problems, most disastrous was the mental state of the people. For people who were used to earn money, and support their families, being an unemployed person a loafer and a social disgrace was too humiliating. The unlimited confidence felt in the country's economic security disappeared and, frustrated, they either fell prey to the calls given by communist agitators or resigned, they ended with a nervous breakdown or a broken mind or sometimes even suicide. It was a crisis of faith; faith in one's own capabilities; faith in law, faith in leaders, faith in American progress.

Twenties were the years of hope and gusto, which gave enormous self confidence to all individuals. Thirties presented a completely different side of life.

As Edmund Wilson has noted in his 'The American Earthquake', between 1923 and 1933 "the whole structure of American society seemed actually to be going to pieces."<sup>7</sup>

In this Depression period the American writer had to face the situation which was "unnatural" because the financial and moral collapse had called all the values into question. Depression had a tremendous socio-cultural and psychological significance and it naturally influenced the creative minds of writers, poets, novelists, film producers and so on.

The situation caused the idealists to search for a better world. In this pursuit they turned to socialism and communism. They believed that "the planned economy and classless society of the Soviet Union was perhaps the only way to achieve the economic order."<sup>8</sup>

The communist party officials never paid particular attention to writers or regarded their work as of any importance to the movement, but in the first years of the 30's communist editors nevertheless made a serious attempt to discover new writers and to recruit them to the cause. These editors helped to organize writers' and artists' societies like the John Reed Clubs and they published the work of unknown young writers about the industrial strikes, lynchings and monotonous poverty.

In this age of unrest a group of writers produced the most distinctive form of literature which was called

"Proletarian Literature". The term "proletarian" was almost used to suggest a literature "produced by a member of the working class about the working class".<sup>9</sup> A proletarian writer was one who "concerned himself with what was once known as the seamy side of life."<sup>10</sup> By the definition of the times proletarian fiction dealt only with the central distinction between the experiences of the working class and those of the bourgeoisie. They fought for the right of national minorities, the Negroes in particular and by dramatising unemployment secured as an imitant to the conscience of the nation. These proletarian writers described "not only the physical consequences of the depression. They also point up the psychological shock, the sense of failure, the loss of self-respect."<sup>11</sup>

But experiences of other group were not so much relevant to them. Therefore the issue like the uneven division of household labour, the sexual double standard, male chauvinism and general female experience had no place in proletarian literature.

The terrific shock of unemployment shattered the dream of economic equality for women. There were no chances and opportunities for promotion in the economic world. Even

the domestic life was totally disturbed. The economic pressure of insufficient income caused terrible psychic tensions.

However, women in this period continued their search for their own rights and position. There was rather more intense awareness in them about social reality. For the fulfilment of their own suppressed ambitions women participated in the larger struggle for social justice. In this new generation women who might earlier have been called feminists became social activists of a broader stamp.

As the old individualism gave way to concern for eliminating unemployment, preserving home life, and collective survival, women began to turn to available political movements for ensurers. Some moved into New Deal Agencies, hoping to find a cure for despair in government social programmes. Others chose to organise workers into the newly militant trade union movement. Many turned to the socialist and communist parties of the left.

In the left-wing groups like communist party, women were given scope for activities, but in handling womens' issues these groups were rather ambivalent. In the 30's

the left wing formally supported sexual equality, but in practice the problems of gender were not so much considered and they engaged in organising the working class and fighting fascism. Though the party subordinated womens' issues with its language of equality women got chances for debate and the other political activity provided them with the experience for leadership. A number of politically active women wrote in this period. These women writers of the left were concerned with the issues which were not considered in the framework of male dominated conventions.

Among the politically active women of the 30's were Fielding Burke, Agnes Smedley, Meridel Le Sueur, Tillie Olsen, Clara Weatherwax, Josephine Herbst, Leane Zugsmith and others. Though political action limited the issue about which they wrote, their participation in it "provided depth and insight into the critical social and personal conflicts that underlay activism."<sup>12</sup> Many of these writers were particularly sensitive to the complex status of women in the patriarchal thirties. Tess Slesinger was one of them. As a result, her fiction is rooted in a sense of crisis generated as much by the personal facts of her life as by the turbulent thirties. She was certainly more than a sensitive witness to the Depression period. As an active



participant with left-wing orientations, she recorded in her stories the economic insecurity of the period and the pervasive sense of uncertainty that characterized the psychology of the people. In terms of class structure, her stories cover the rich upper middle class as well as the lower class members struggling to eke out their lives in huge, threateningly impersonal departmental stores. In the midst of this crisis, Slesinger also noted, long before "feminism" and "sexual politics" became fashionable terms of debate, the emergence of the new woman in terms of sex, family and society. Because of this complex relationship to her time, invariably reflected in her art, Tess Slesinger stands out as a remarkable creative presence and therefore deserves to be better known - at least in the Indian context of American studies - than she is today.

#### IV

The present dissertation concentrates mainly on the short stories of Tess Slesinger. However a brief critical analysis of her only novel - *The Unpossessed* - is necessary because it reflects almost all the major aspects of her creative talent we have noted so far. The novel

exemplifies Slesinger's ability to transmute the raw material of her life in authentic art, her complex relationship with the 30's and her "unprogrammatic feminism."

John Chamberlain in New York Times has remarked :

"The Unpossessed has a ferocious drive, a wild and unflinching rhythm, a quality of malice and understanding, a complete grasp of most of the characters concerned in the plot, a terrifically effective denouement and construction that is impeccable." <sup>13</sup>

and in the book review of New York Evening Post Herschel Brickell has written :

"A brilliantly written book - Its characters are real people and will be remembered. It could be admired for its display of technical skill alone, or for her satirical gift, but actually it has much more especially poetic insight and wisdom."<sup>14</sup>

In this novel she has utilised her experience after her first marriage - of the place of intellectual, of the

relation of politics and sexual politics. In terms of subject, it is one of the rare novels of the period, to deal with radical urban intellectuals. The book reveals Slesinger's profound understanding of her own time. "The people she depicts are readily recognisable; some are caricatured and some are not; but they all have their counterparts in the life of New York. She sees their aimless roundabout of empty rationalising, their lack of anchorage, their tired descents into the life of pure sensation, their constant inward turning and alteranate rushing to escape themselves."<sup>15</sup> It seems that her own experience as well as her post-marital experience at magazine, where her first husband worked, provided ample material for the novel.

In his book Part of Own Time, Murry Kempton surveys the events and personalities of the 30's in detail and he speaks about The Unpossessed as a "document almost forgotten." Lionel Trilling argues that the book deserves to be remembered for more reasons. The book he says, is not only an account of a particular time and place having certain evidential value but it is "pertinent" to other periods also. Trilling says :

"The book could not have been forgotten if the author had continued her career as a novelist. Had there been a considerable of work, The Unpossessed might well have been kept in memory as its auspicious beginning."<sup>16</sup>

The novel revolves around the atmosphere of a magazine which is about to be run by a group of left-wing intellectuals who know that the only tool they have to fight the world is their mind and their words. The novel has many characters who represent shades in the human personalities. The family tradition on one side, the social upheaval that was taking place in the depression years, the recently acquired radical intellectualization, the theorisation and the compromises one goes through - all are different forces acting on the character.

Lionel Trilling's interpretation about the title of the novel is :

"The man who is said to be possessed by an idea or a purpose, unless it is manifestly evil, is usually regarded with admiration. Like the word 'passion' the word 'possessed' has subordinated its bad to its good meaning. And it is the good meaning that Slesinger had chiefly

in mind-those persons in her novel who are not possessed are unfortunate or blameworthy."<sup>17</sup>

Margaret Flinders and Elizabeth are two main characters of the novel. Neither of them is "possessed" by the man she loves. Margaret Flinders undergoes an abortion to please her egotistical husband. Miles Flinders works at a job which he dislikes but is not courageous to leave it. Margaret is a secretary to a business manager, who is resentful of her greater strength and tougher fibre, conscious of being defeated as a man who could have made her a woman. Miles forces her to have an abortion for political and economic reasons. His commitment remains only theoretical because in practice he cannot satisfy the emotional needs of love of his wife. Elizabeth adores her cousin Bruno Leonard, but Bruno fails to give response to the commitment she is eager to give him and she is blamed for living a life of sexual promiscuity.

The men, like their failure in possessing their women, also fail to devote themselves to the ideals they talk about. Miles Flinders, with his pretensions and

selfish ambition, remains engaged in endless intellectual discussions without any commitment to action. Bruno Leonard "half-baked" radical always "fiddling" about his project magazine and is self-doubting and skeptical. Being unable to respond to Elizabeth's wishes he is caught in psychological disturbances and fails to deliver the obligatory speech at the benefit party arranged for the aid to Hungar Marchers and his own magazine. In his speech he disgusts himself and also the total class of intellectuals "These are the unpossessed who have no class, whose tests incline them to the left, their habits to the right, who wander in the wasteland of their own making afraid to perpetuate themselves."<sup>18</sup>

Tess Slesinger has suggested that the politics must begin and circle back to home. If there is no integration of public and private life, of theoretical principles and its manifestation in routine life ideology could definitely fail because it is incomplete. As Janet Sharistanian has pointed out :

"Written out of an unprogrammatic feminism The Unpossessed expresses repugnance at the way ideological absolutes

repress and distort private life and questions the relationship between individuals' political views and ideals and their personal behaviour."<sup>19</sup>

In a story like 'A life in the Day of a Writer' Slesinger shows a similar failure in the integration of the public and private life on the plane of artistic creation. This story is the only self-reflexive work - dealing with the problems of literary creation itself - that Slesinger wrote. But it testifies to her wide range of concerns and themes.

## V

The present dissertation is an attempt to explore the thematic concerns of Tess Slesinger as revealed in her short stories. The major themes which inform Slesinger's vision as a writer are (I) those dealing with social and moral problems and (II) themes related to the world of feminine psychology. Accordingly Chapter-II

offers a detailed analysis of the social and moral themes as seen in her stories while Chapter III deals with the theme of feminine psyche in pre-marital as well as marital context. Needless to say this division between the social-moral themes and 'feminist' themes is a matter of critical convenience. Whenever necessary the interrelatedness of these two thematic worlds is emphasized and analysed.