

Chapter-II

Socio-moral Themes

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The social circumstances always make their imprint on contemporary literature. Every writer is the product of the age in which he is born and bred, therefore his writings carry the impressions of the social surroundings. Most of the writers feel the social problems but their ways of expression differ. Some pose themselves as social reformers. These are some who grow cynic towards society and fault-finders. Tess Slesinger has her own unique way. She holds the mirror to the problems in the society from different angles : social, moral, economical. To give verdict is not her role, what she does is to present facts with stark realism.

Tess Slesinger's stories pose a clear picture of the social structure of her times. As she saw America, it was still a victim of the evil of inequality. The Negroes were still looked upon as inferior. Racial exploitation and prejudice and antagonism could be traced back to capitalism and the sense of self-superiority. Narrow considerations flourished in all stratas of human life. Instead of building bridges man was still engaged in constructing walls around him. Slesinger's satirical eye does not spare these issues.

One of the worst problems of the 30's was unemployment and uncertainty of jobs, which is focussed in Slesinger's fiction. The strong suppress the weak and the weak, yielding to the circumstances, surrender themselves to authorities. Though there is a meak attempt to fight against the situation, it becomes futile and the weaker section is pressed down completely. Sometimes the discontent is quietened by playing "cheap tricks".

Exploitation, either of women by men, of the Negroes by the Whites, of the employees by the employer, or of downtrodden by the upper class is exposed as the worst crime in her stories.

As a moral observer Slesinger has also ironically written about vanities and appearances in human behaviour. She has put forth all these as questions "though she has not given authoritative answers to them."<sup>1</sup>

The story 'White On Black' deals with the deep rooted feelings of 'color' in American society. It shows how attempts are made at various levels for the nourishment of human values and how this endeavour becomes futile. At school in weekly ethic lessons basic principles are being

imbibed, but practical behaviour there remains a large gap. Narrow considerations survive leading to widen the gap between the black and the white thereby expressing hollowness of human behaviour. The under-current of the story is the ironical perception of the principle of equality.

The narrator goes twenty years back and records the reminiscences of her school days. The school is open to students from all strata of society. Naturally along with the rich and the poor, the Gentile and the Jew, the Negro students are also admitted. In weekly ethic lessons it is taught that "all men are equal". But very soon the irony of the principle is gradually seen exposed as the story progresses.

Paul and his sister Elizabeth, two Negro students join the school. In the preliminary days the teacher gives attention to both of them. As a result of their own merit they take over the class. "They proved marvelous athletes and they were born leaders."<sup>2</sup> Paul is elected as the captain of the basket-ball team. "Both of them were gifted with an overpowering jubilliancy and a triumphant

bullying wit which inevitably made them czars."<sup>3</sup> Even the teacher hands over them the job of controlling the class. Paul has a special place among his girl classmates.

But after two years the picture changes. When another section of the same grade joins the class, a white boy snatches away Paul's presidency and as a result Paul's dominance, his special place in the class start declining. The fact that Paul loses the captaincy of the team brings about a total change in the minds of classmates. Though he remains the best player, they start the propaganda that "he was no good as a captain."

The school complex itself comes before us as a miniature picture of society, wherein there is rapid awareness of 'color'. Thus the pupils become bold enough to nullify the human values to the extent of costing down Paul irrespective of his merits. The treatment given by the classmates brings about a remarkable change in Paul and Elizabeth. Though helpless, Paul manages to be aloof and indifferent to the reproaches of his classmates. Elizabeth also admits herself in the company of her lonely friend Diana.

Other members also help to imbibe and maintain the racial discrimination. They try to forward a futile logic by giving far-fetched, irrelevant justifications. The girl classmates stop inviting Elizabeth to the parties because someone's mother settled the problem "by saying that it would be unkind to the little colored girl to invite her to a home where there would be none of her own people."<sup>4</sup>

The repeated bitter experiences make Paul and Elizabeth more alert and compel them to alter their attitudes. In fact society makes them realise that they are only a forced element in society. Elizabeth also effectively learns that her position with the white is ended with the school door. In the third year Paul leaves the school. Paul who has once been "undisputed king" now becomes a vague memory of the vanished past. Paul and Elizabeth undergo the bitter experience of separation for no fault of their own. The shock of reality brings Paul face to face with a new world. The education offers him maturity through experience. Like Paul Elizabeth accepts the reality and carries out unpleasant jobs for the class cheerfully and effectively "like a servant".

The whole theme is in tune with the reality of the social structure. The idealistic principles are in fact the pillars of the society, but in day to day life no one follows them. Human values are totally submerged in racial distinctions. Paul is a typical representation of such victimisation of social perversity.

In this complex piece Slesinger takes the opportunity to focus on distortions in American society. She tries to pinpoint where the shoe of separatism and racial discrimination pinches.

In "The Friedmans' Annie", Tess Slesinger presents an ironic illustration of the miserable condition of the working-class people and the hidden hypocrisy in the upper middle class. The problem that she raises in the story is the unfair advantage taken of innocent rural maid-servants by the so-called sophisticated upper class. The story is about a girl, Annie, who is trapped between two countries, two cultures and two classes. Annie, a German maid-servant has been working at Friedmans, an upper middle class Jewish American family. While depicting the whole busy day of Annie, the author has focussed on the selfishness and the pretensions of the society ladies and the helplessness of the 'girls' - maid-servants.

In the portrayal of Mrs. Friedmans we meet a typical representative character of a lady. Because of her own troubles and sickness - which is mostly psychological she is badly in need of this girl. Apparently she treats her in such a way, as if she is much benevolent to her, but at the same time she manages to remain her 'lady'. For example when Annie brings a jelly omlet for her, she does not fail to remark "Oh Annie, you're a treasure, what could I do without you?"<sup>5</sup> But while appreciating her, she knows very well to show the maid-servant her right place. Often in her talks she indirectly suggests Annie about this : "Annie, you girls today have it mighty easy, my mother's girl got up at five and worked all day and never had a night off, and you could not believe what they paid for ! A girl knew her place in those days...."<sup>6</sup>

The relationship between Mrs. Friedman and Annie is thus at once characterised by the exploitative possessiveness of the former and the helplessness of the latter.

As a moral observer, Slesinger exposes the human follies and snobberies. An innocent rural girl like Annie tries to change herself by adopting the urban patterns of



behaviour, but this change is a superficial one. The glittering life of New York causes a tremendous effect, as a result of which she even dislikes to remember her old appearance, her past days from Greenhorn in Germany. Through cutting remarks this ironic truth is revealed. Annie does not write anything to her mother because - "afterall how could that old-fashioned old German woman in her wooden shoes, who had never even seen a subway or a movie, understand this smart, new Annie who powdered her face."<sup>7</sup>

Formerly Annie was happy with her simple life and was ready to get married with Joe her boy friend though his earnings were 40 dollars only. But slowly Mrs. Friedman's hammering works out "...don't be in a hurry with that young man of yours ! .... you're nobody's fool; you know what side your bread is buttered on....."<sup>8</sup>

In fact Mrs. Friedmans has turned her into a fool. Instead of realisation of her own identity, her real happiness, Annie's pleasure of life remains located in the service she offers to Friedmans. Joe gets irritated when Annie makes him clear that it could not be possible for them to go out because of the lady's sickness. Time and

again his disgust about the lady bursts out : "the old hag, she makes me sick."<sup>9</sup> Joe almost hates her working for Friedmans : "What do they think, you are a horse ?"<sup>10</sup>

Joe, the immigrant boy-friend of Annie was at a time ambitious, but in the hard economic times of depression he finds upward mobility or the increase in the salary impossible. He now honestly feels that they can live a happy married life in his 40 dollars earning. "Annie, we'll be married soon, we'll have a little house of our own."<sup>11</sup>

But as if in a hypnotic state, Annie goes on mimicking Mrs. Friedman : "We want to wait until we have enough money to do everything nice....Mrs. Friedmans says times are hard, and you might lose your job....and you'd be satisfied to make forty dollars the rest of your life !"<sup>12</sup>

Annie also often dreams about her own life, but the shallow and superficial cravings pull her back. Joe doesn't bother like Annie whether it would be possible to have a new hat for her or not. But for Annie that is a prestige point. In fact Joe loves the innocent Annie

from Greenhorn when she knew nothing more than a handkerchief to cover her head. He doesn't want to marry a "Mrs. Friedmans".

In the last scene Slesinger exposes the pretentious mask of Mrs. Friedmans. The real hypocritic disposition of a lady comes out in the mother-daughter conversation. When Mrs. Friedmans talks about the plans of Mildred's - her daughter's - marriage, Mildred asks her mother why she did not hurry for Annie's getting married. Mrs. Friedmans said bitterly - "Do you compare yourself with Annie?"<sup>13</sup> And Mildred's quick, vehement and cutting answer: "Oh no, certainly not....Annie's pretty and she's five years older - "<sup>14</sup> reveals the real facts. The lady who feels that her daughter should get married, because she is twenty two years old, conveniently forgets that her maid-servant is twenty eight years old.

The irony of the situation becomes acute when Mrs. Friedmans applying a 'cheap trick' diverts the subject and settles the matter with offering Annie her own old black hat - stripped of its decorative rose. In the end she is left with the hat instead of with a husband. She has forgotten her self to such an extent that she does not

feel anything wrong in the matter, rather she is happy with her new 'old, black hat'. The end of the story ironically echoes the ending of her novel The Unpossessed.

Slesinger analyses facts regarding social circumstances, conventions on various levels and exposes the weaknesses and shortcomings in them.

Slesinger was also fully aware of the financial collapse of the 1930's and the resultant severe problem of unemployment and insecurity of jobs. Her serious concerns about the problems are clearly reflected in the stories 'The Mouse Trap' and 'Jobs in the Sky'. Here she raises these issues in a broader perspective of human relations. In 'The Mouse Trap' she deals with the problem of exploitation on two levels : (I) the relationship between the boss and the employee and (II) the relationship between the man as a boss and a woman as a slave. The year is 1934, the fifth year after Depression. Everybody is badly in need of a job. The wages are meagre and are often cut down. To keep one's job secure one has to accept the situation as it exists. The employees are coward - as if they are "human mice".

Peter Bender, a shrewd, calculated person represents a business executive's psychology, Bender's dealings with his employees reveal the inhuman behaviour of the businessmen. To fight against injustice the employees determine to unite and decide to go on strike if their terms are not accepted. But their united efforts are totally crushed by their boss - Peter Benders. He assaults their strength and applying tactful, brutal, clever means becomes triumphant in weakening their power. He turns the strike into 'a graceful joke' by making a show of his personal sympathy for them. He creates such an atmosphere that they should be obliged to him :

"....do you think I enjoy cutting salaries ? I cut them so I can afford to run this office; so you can all keep your jobs."<sup>15</sup> He puts forth their problems as if he was totally involved in their personal sufferings. Being very keen and acutely aware of the background of each of the employees, he concentrates on them individually and reminds them of their weaknesses one by one. "I think you have been misled....you don't want to lose your own job.... I think you have got a little sister partly dependent on you. You don't want to let her down like that, do you, my dear ?"<sup>16</sup> With the shrewd knacks of

Blender, the organised group of the employees is dislocated completely. They submit to the authority of the boss and prove themselves "human mice". Except three of them, all others are trapped in 'The Mouse Trap'.

In this story Slesinger focuses on another social evil - the problem of exploitation in the context of man woman relationship. In the relationship of Peter Bender and Miss Betty Carlisle - his secretary receptionist, she reveals the complexes of both the sexes - man as a boss, as a superior and woman as a slave.

Miss Betty is completely infatuated with her boss. In his presence she always feels "a slight and curious thrill : as though it were really rather exciting to remain a slave to Peter."<sup>17</sup> Betty loiters in his cabin flirting bravely with the boss making him aware of the situation in the outer office for she "sensed something" in the employees. The boss also entertains her but he knows the exact 'utility' of this girl. In the operation of 'mouse trapping' he looks upon her as a 'hook' because she is the exact source of getting minute information about the other 'human mice' - "You've got attention value, baby you're the hook - we need you in the limelight."<sup>18</sup>

In the whole operation of breaking the employees' plan of strike and in catching them in the trap, she stands behind Peter as if she were Mrs. Peter Bender. But she is not aware of her own individual destiny.

The ending of the story is the climatic point of such type of moral evils prevalent in different strata of society. After the abortive attempt at strike, nobody remains in the office except Betty and Peter. Peter admires her for giving him a stand in the whole business of breaking the strike. Now Betty hopes that her life is about "to be settled". But here Peter wants to celebrate his victory. The boss in Peter, the man in Peter wants to take the final liberty of her with all force - "she lay there paralysed....unhappily acquiescent as though she were taking dictation from the boss."<sup>19</sup>

Her tragedy - for which she herself is responsible - is that she too turns out to be one of the "human mice". In the end she realises this and manages to escape from the trap. However, it is too late, because in the process she has lost her job.

Another story which proves Slesinger's fine understanding of her milieu is 'Jobs in the Sky'. It was

published in Scribner's Magazine in March 1935. It again deals with the worst problem of the depression era - joblessness. The number of unemployees was continuously mounting up. Women and young people in particular had to face the crisis, for their jobs were most uncertain. Jobs in the Sky presents a realistic portrayal of these victims of the Depression. "With a broader perspective, the story explores work, economic status and the connections between individual identity and social role."<sup>20</sup>

The story takes place in M and J Departmental Store. The minute details bring before us a lively picture of a departmental store - "...the perfume girls were drifting in; the floor-walkers adjusting their button-holes and their smiles....the cosmetic girls were mounting stacks of old cream on their counters....the hat girls in their drab black dresses and exquisitely sheer-hosed legs began clapping the hats on stalks like flowers."<sup>21</sup> The clerks and the salesmen are engaged in performing their own functions.

Mr. Marvel ('M' in M and J Departmental Stores), as it is the custom of the stores, comes to give Christmas speech before his employees. A clever, shrewd businessman like Peter Blender, he knows very well, how to play on the



fear of unemployment. In his annual Christmas message he tactfully makes it clear that some of the employees have to be dropped - "we wish we could permanently retain each and every make a permanent member of the family of M and J. ....We will do OUR BAIST if you will do YOUR BAIST....and this is YOUR big chance to prove yourselves invaluable to US, on this last day of Christmas rush when SOME of our friends unfortunately MUST BE DROPPED."<sup>22</sup> The whole speech is hypocritic one. In reality the future of the salesman totally depends on the authorities' decisions and whims. Though Mr. Marvel is one of the authorities, he conveys his speech in such a manner as if to win a permanent job is upto the salesman's only.

"....it is the good-will that counts good cheer in the baist policy the spirit of Christmas all year round is our slogan we are one big femilay and we spread our good cheer our customers expect it demand it PAY for it and now my friends I wish each and every a merry and profitable Christmas. KEEP ON YOUR TOES ALL DAY OUR PROFIT IS YOUR PROFIT IT MAY BE THAT YOU CAN WIN YOURSELF A PERMANENT POSITION."<sup>23</sup>

Joey Andrews, a young boy from the slums, is a salesman in this departmental stores, joined only before three weeks. For the last fifteen years the section book never has any other name at the top than Mr. Keasby who comes regularly at eight forty, but Joey today writes his name on the top at eight eleven for he wants to make a good impression.

The fear of getting unemployed haunts the salesmen all the time. "Remember there are plenty of detectives, remember this is YOUR day." Mr. Marvel's speech is ringing in their minds. With a technique of interior perspective and the shifting in point of view from character to character, Slesinger reveals her characters' inner mind.

Joey remembers his mother's sayings and day dreams about a prosperous future - "Yes my son, and remember Abraham Lincoln was born in a log cabin and Our Lord was born in a Manger....if you've said your prayers nothing can happen to you."<sup>24</sup> In all his life he has never been so happy as when he got this job.

But after Miss Paley's dismissal, Mrs. Summers, who stands like a bird of ill-omen hovering over Miss Paley bears down upon Joey. And now everyone is smiling very

kindly at him. Mrs. Summers saying - "different with you, you are young and life holds many opportunities"<sup>25</sup> and for forgiveness she pleads that the authorities don't let them tell till the last minute. Joe still fails to understand Mrs. Summers' real meaning. He honestly feels that as Mrs. Summers has said, he is really young and he can spend the Christmas eve with Miss Bodkin. But his imaginary flights get shattered when Mrs. Summers says "...come for your pay-check next Thursday"<sup>25</sup> and Joey, realises that he is one of those like Miss Paley, who have been sacked.

'White on Black', 'The Friedman's Annie', 'The Mouse Trap', 'Jobs in the Sky' - though different in content and form, are all stories directly and explicitly related to Slesinger's understanding of the 30's. In these stories she captures not only the socio-economic aspect of the milieu but projects it in terms of its human drama. The tenseness and the insecurity of the period are fully dramatised by her in their contexts of human emotions and relations. What characterises these stories is not a strong, direct, satirical attack on the social evil as one finds it in the "muck rakers", but an ability to ironically seize the

interrelatedness of the individual moment and the general milieu in terms of class-structure, man-woman relationship, and hopes and failures of the common man.