

Chapter-IV

Conclusion

I

The foregoing study is an attempt to present a comprehensive critical statement on the thematic concerns of Tess Slesinger's short stories. Infact, Tess Slesinger is not a well-known name in the history of American fiction. But if her published works are any indicators of her hidden talent, then her ~~only two~~ published works are like the visible portion of a ~~float~~ floating iceberg, with lot of talent remaining latent and unexpressed.

The writings of sensitive writers like Tess Slesinger, in sensitive periods like the Depression are like windows open to the then - existing socio-moral, economic and psychological problems. This is one angle from which her work is assessed in the present dissertation. There is one more angle, which is more relevant especially today - with her compelling voice, sure of its tone, Slesinger poses herself as one of the early pioneers of feminism.

II

Social circumstances always have their strong influence on the contemporary literature and the Depression period was certainly not an exception to this.

The crisis of 1930's, soon engulfed the entire America and as the decade progressed, the crisis deepened shattering all the hopes of speedy recovery and renewed good life. The effects of this debacle were miserable. With the fall in economy the whole American industry came on the verge of shutdown making millions of people jobless. Financially bankrupt and morally frustrated people lost faith in the very system itself.

With all values called into question, the Depression era had a tremendous socio-cultural, economic and psychological significance, which influenced the creative minds. In the pursuit of a better world, these idealists turned to socialism and communism. Among these politically active writers were a number of women writers. Tess Slesinger was one of such women writers. These women writers saw, through their activist mode of life, not only

the social and personal conflicts of their times, but also the complex problem of the status of woman in the 30's. Slesinger, too, was not merely a silent spectator to the situation. Her activities with left-wing orientation naturally gave a social dimension to her stories. She recorded in her stories the economic insecurity, the pervasive sense of uncertainty that characterized the psychology of the people and the moral perversity that generally exists in the society.

III

While the turbulent thirties provided plentiful material for her fiction, her personal life was no less fertile in that sense.

Her education in school with rather socialistic orientation, the frank attitude of the parents in matters of sexuality, the strong personality of her mother as against her meak father, the stresses and strains between them, her journalistic experiences in various newspapers,

her marriage to Herbert Solow - an intellectual political journalist, her association with an intense, young group involved in left-wing politics were the basic raw materials for her short stories.

But whereas each of the short stories deals with one or few of her discrete experiences, her novel The Unpossessed presents a complete, integrated vision of her experiences as a daughter, wife, journalist, writer and social observer. The novel deals with one of the rare issues of the time - radical urban intellectualism and sexual politics.

IV

In order to explore the thematic concerns of Tess Slesinger's as seen in her short stories, collected in the volume 'On Being Told....', the stories have been divided into two convenient groups in the present study.

Chapter II offers a detailed analysis of the social and moral theme while Chapter III deals with the theme of feminine psyche in pre-marital as well as marital context.

Chapter II analyses stories like 'White On Black', 'The Friedmans' Annie', 'The Mouse Trap' and 'Jobs in the Sky'. These have dealt with the problems of inequality and unemployment - two of the worst problems of Slesinger's times. Exploitation either of the Negroes by the Whites, of women by men, of employees by the employer or of the downtrodden by the upperclass is exposed as the worst crime in the stories.

'White On Black' delineates the problem of racial discrimination exploring the hollowness of human behaviour. Slesinger has exposed how the basic human principles and values are trampled in practical life. 'The Friedmans' Annie' speaks about the exploitation on another level. An innocent rural maid-servant is shown as being exploited by her society lady. In the story she focusses on the selfishness and pretensions hidden behind the appearances, and exposes the human follies and snobberies. Whereas 'The Mouse Trap' and 'Jobs in the Sky' show her intense awareness of the problem of the Depression era - unemployment and uncertainty in jobs. She also has written about this issue of exploitation on two levels. (I) The relationship between the employer and the employee and (II) The relationship between the man as a boss and the woman as a slave.

One can find in all these stories Slesinger's interrelatedness with her own time in terms of the system of society, class-structure, man, woman relationship and desires and failings of the common people. The stories not only reveal her broad perspective of socio-economic aspects, but also her masterly skill in dramatizing human emotions and relations as a moral observer.

The stories which are analysed in Chapter III are clear indicators of Slesinger's close study of feminine mind. On two related thematic levels the chapter shows various stages in the developmental process of feminine psyche (I) themes concerning pre-marital life and (II) those concerning married life.

In the first group 'The Answer On The Magnolia Tree', 'Relax is All' and 'The Times so Unsettled' - these stories have been analysed.

The delicate, innocent, romantic feelings of adolescent girls with all the minute observation are portrayed in 'The Answer on....' All these teenage heroines are shown standing at the crossroads of life with their early

intimations of sexuality. On the other hand Slesinger depicts the characters of teachers with their cravings for lost youth and the resultant feelings of sadness and emptiness. The story 'Relax is All' exposes the weaknesses of a spinster as 'female'; formerly living a life of boredom, deprived of the most common outlet of her sexual instincts and therefore finding ecstatic pleasure in her sudden sexual intercourse with a cowboy. In 'The Times so Unsettled' Slesinger has raised the basic issue of the relationship between love and marriage.

The stories in another group exclusively deal with the feminine psyche in the context of married life. With a keen observation of the workings of the psychological process, Slesinger has depicted the problems of married women by showing them in different complex situations.

'Mother to Dinner' draws upon the psychology of a newly married woman and her wavering between two different roles : daughter and wife, whereas 'After the Party' depicts the incompatible partners coming together and separating. The wife is shown leading a meaningless life without her man.

The uncertainty in a woman's life even after her second marriage in the patriarchal system of society is focussed in 'On Being Told....' Though knowing her man's infidelity the woman is shown tolerating the mental torturing and adjusting herself with the situation. In 'Missis Flinders', mental sufferings of a woman because of the suppression of her maternal instincts are depicted with a superb mastery using stream of consciousness technique.

In dealing with the fundamental issues concerning the marriage institution, such as the fidelity of the partners, the temperamental incompatibility of them, the trapped mentality of a newly married woman, the relationship between marriage and love and the complications on all these thematic levels, Slesinger's stories are highly authentic.

Tess Slesinger had all the prerequisites needed to make a good writer - a keen and observant eye, a sensitive mind, a deep knowledge of the human psyche and intense awareness of social problems and consciousness of the cross-currents; and most importantly - the feminine sensibility ever-occupying her mind. All this, added to the turbulent social atmosphere of the 1930's contributed

to her growth as an artist. Her premature death saw the abrupt end of a brilliant career in American fiction writing. As her friend and the distinguished American critic Lionel Trilling has written in what is perhaps the only insightful tribute to her talent :

"She was, I have no doubt, born to be a novelist. Her talent, so far she had time to develop it, invites comparison with Mary MacCarthy's. She had a similar vivacity and wit, although rather more delicate, and similar powers of social and moral observation, which....were at the service of the impulse to see through what was observed."¹

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