

LANGUAGE IN INDIA

Strength for Today and Bright Hope for Tomorrow

Volume 9 : 7 July 2009

ISSN 1930-2940

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**An Insight into Pratibha Ray's Women Characters in
'The Stigma' and 'The Blanket'**

Varun Gulati, M.A., M. Phil., Ph.D. (Candidate)

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Pratibha Ray

Pratibha Ray: Life and Career

Pratibha Ray is a renowned educationist and an insightful creative writer. Born in 1943 in Alabol, a remote village in the Balikuda area of Orissa State, Pratibha Ray has an illustrious career. Modest enough to describe her achievements as an M.A. in Education and Ph.D. in Educational Psychology, she is presently a Member of the Orissa Public Service Commission.

Started her literary career at the age of nine by writing a short story, Pratibha Ray has published, so far, 18 novels, 20 collections of short-stories and a travelogue. She has written her first novel, *Barsa Basanta Baishakha* (1974), in her mother tongue Oriya and gradually developed an affinity toward revolt and humanism in her literature. She has not only represented the urban setting of Oriya culture but also vividly portrayed the miserable plight of the tribal communities living a subjugated life.

Pratibha Ray is described as 'the Queen of Oriya Literature' for her contribution to Oriya novel and short story.

This article presents a study of the women characters in Pratibha Ray's two short stories

'The Stigma' and 'The Blanket.'

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‘The Stigma’ – The Saga of a Courageous Lady among the Vultures

Sarami- Duped by the Poverty

Sarami, the central figure of the story, is married to Raghunath Trivadi (known as Raghu Tiadi), an old ugly man in looks, with little left of his manhood. Sarami belonged to a poor family and her father found Raghu to be the best option because of his land and money. For Raghu, it was his third marriage.

“Gosain, you’re a big man. You command respect in ten neighboring villages. Surely you do not lack for anything that you will look for a dowry to fill your house! Please accept my daughter as your wife and I’ll remain eternally grateful to you.”¹ (*Indian Writers Series: Pratibha Ray Stories*, see the reference at the end for full details.)

Raghu was not easy to melt, but Sarami’s gorgeous looks moved his heart and stirred in him a desire to marry again.

Sarami - A Victim of Social Customs and a Target of Lust

Pratibha Ray explores the unjust social customs in this short story.

A woman’s good fortune was/is evaluated by the social status of her husband; personal desires, emotional fulfillments, contentment and so forth of a woman have no independent place in the traditional society. After getting married to an old man, Sarami receives an erotic teasing from the male members of the family. Sudam, her nephew-in-law, and Dibakar, her brother-in-law, reveal their erotic intentions toward Sarami, the young wife of an old man. They take many verbal liberties without any hesitation.

Sarami - An Unenviable Bird in a Cage

Raghu is old, lacking any physical attraction. He could not satisfy Sarami physically. Sarami tries her best to restrain her sexual desires. She knows getting involved with another man might lead to her rejection from society. On the other hand, Sudam and Dibakar leave no chance to excite Sarami physically. Once, Dibakar playfully pulls the sari of Sarami. Yet she keeps her chastity and restrains herself from indulging in a secret sexual relation. Sarami feels volatile and delirious at the touching of her hands by Sudam while serving food; “Why do you have to grab my hands? It’s enough if you speak. I can still hear your very well.”⁽²⁾

Sarami tries to teach Sudam a moral lesson by saying “There’s God above...He’s watching...An aunt is like a mother.”⁽³⁾ Instead of any sort of remorse Sudam, a male vulture, starts rolling his eyes with laughter at the innocent bird in a cage by saying; “...

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Listen, ours is a quiet household and there is no one around to spy on us...”⁽⁴⁾ Sarami suffers so badly that she frequently has a bout of hysteria and no one could help her at that pathetic stage. After the spell, she had only herself to blame for making a hysteric manifestation of herself.

Sarami- A Woman of Principles

Pratibha Ray draws a picture of a bold young woman living under the clouds of insecurity, darkness and anxiety. Sarami could easily find some satisfaction through surreptitious affairs but she didn't cross the threshold of the principles of chastity and fidelity. Throughout the story Sarami sticks to the traditional principles expected of women in Indian society and keeps the male vulture hovering around her crestfallen. With the passage of time, Sarami recovers from the horrible ailment of hysteria and successfully became a mother and then grandmother.

Sarami- Guardian of Downtrodden Females

At the end of the story, the young second wife of old Manu Rath suffers from the same ailment of panic and the whole village puts the blame on the sufferer, and is very critical of her. Sarami comes to her rescue and has some words of truth to the people around: “All you Sitas, all you Savitiris, all you virtuous whores - have you no pity that you dare assemble so here to castigate this poor little thing... Go away. Leave, before I give out all your dirty secrets. Do you think old Sarami doesn't know what each of you has been up to?”⁽⁵⁾

Pratibha Ray represents Sarami as woman of great strength, an ideal symbol. Pratibha does uphold marriage as a serious institution and fidelity as an essential feature of this institution. Pratibha is conservative in this sense, while at the same she looks for changes and to castigate the society for its unreasonable attitudes and treatment of women.



“The Blanket” – The Objects of Love and Reminiscence

Nirmala- an Affectionate Mother

Nirmala has brought up her son Manmath (Manu) with care and love toiling selflessly and unceasingly doing chores for others so that her son would have a bright future. Manu’s father left them homeless and Manu studied well in his school. Once Manu buys an English Blanket from his scholarship money and presents this to his mother as a token of love since she had only tattered old cotton sheets to cover herself during winters. But Nirmala keeps this precious possession in her old steel trunk suitcase as a memento gifted by her son with love and care. Later, when Manu is away at his job, the blanket reminds Nirmala the childhood memories of Manu and thus she cares for it as though it were a sleeping child. Once, Manu suggests to his mother to use the blanket at least during bone chilling winters and leave the old torn sheets aside. But Nirmala rejects the idea, reminding Manu about their early days of hardship; “... Do you remember how you’d curl your skinny body against mine and snuggled into the warmth of these sheets - all those years till you passed your high school exams...?”⁽⁶⁾

Mira, the Daughter-in-Law

Mira, the daughter in law of Nirmala, is fascinated by the English blanket. As for her, the blanket does not evoke any emotional memories in her. Mira thinks that such a blanket should not be stored in an old steel trunk. Even if it is used by her mother-in-law, nobody

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would appreciate it in such a remote village. She imagines embellishing her modern bedroom with this blanket but do not reveal her thoughts at the moment when she saw the English blanket. Nirmala's attachment to the blanket comes out beautifully in these words: "...Like Manu, this one has no parallel in the world. That is exactly why I lay it aside in mothballs. Can you ever replace it?"⁽⁷⁾

Nirmala - Carried away by the Pretention of Her Daughter-in-Law

With the passage of time, Nirmala falls ill and often shivers when she has fever. Extreme cold weather affects her and enters in her weak bones. One day, Manu covers his mother's trembling body with the blanket and requests her with full emotions to use it instead of torn and ragged cotton sheets. Nirmala resolves to use the blanket till her death at that request and feels the warmth of her son's love in the blanket. Mira also feels a sense of satisfaction, but is not ready to give up the prized possession into strange hands after Nirmala's death, since as per the traditional rituals and practices all the possessions of a dead person must be given away to the washerman before the pyre was lit. A few days before Nirmala's death, while Nirmala is deep in her sleep, Mira replaces the blanket with a quilt of her own and tells her mother-in-law with false sentiments, "...Your English blanket will not be enough to help control your shivers and keep you warm. So I have stored it away carefully in your trunk."⁽⁸⁾

Mira- An Image of Agony

Mira takes hold of the blanket as her possession after the old woman's death, but strangely packs it with same mothballs and places it in the same old trunk.

Pratibha Ray reveals an interesting aspect of the psyche of Mira who commits wrong doing and then quickly realizes the blunder she has committed. Mira remembers the soft and gentle words of Nirmala when Mira replaced the blanket 'generous, thoughtful girl, my Mira!' ⁽⁹⁾ These words of benediction become more troublesome for her and one day she catches high fever. Mira suffers a lot and recalls many times the blessings of her mother-in-law as well as her own deceit. Her unspoken anguish begins to torment her. But one day Mira takes a bold step by giving the blanket to an old woman, a beggar, seeking some old sheets for her dying old husband. Mira finds this act as the best option to calm down her stormy mind and to find solace for her mother-in-law's soul. "Here, this is my mother-in-law's memento. I am not being generous. But if you are going to bless me, say a prayer for my mother-in-law that she may rest in peace."⁽¹⁰⁾

Pratibha Ray and Her Women Characters

In these two short stories, Pratibha brings out the poignant heroism, poignant love and poignant regret through the lives of three women. The language used is very simple, and the metaphors are down to earth.

While Sarami's story continues to speak well of the traditional values of fidelity in marriage, Nirmla and Mira reveal a different facet of our life. Our attachments to things of the past, not simply because they are from the past, but because these things have continued existential meaning even for the present, are discussed in a subtle manner.

We also see how one could be easily moved by the monetary value of our objects of admiration and love. Mira saw the blanket as a useful decorative piece, but Nirmla preserved it as a piece of simple love. Ultimately, the object loses its monetary or decorative value and a repentant mind is ready and willing to give it away free of charge.

All of us do things wrong, but repentance can resolve the matter and bring in greater peace and satisfaction.

References

¹ Ray, Pratibha. Indian Writers Series Pratibha Ray Stories . Trans. K.K. Mohapatra, Leelawati Mohapatra, Sudhansu Mohanty. Bhubansewar: Grassroot, 2004.

² Ibid, p. 17.

³ Ibid, p. 18.

⁴ Ibid, p. 18.

⁵ Ibid, p. 28.

⁶ Ray, Pratibha. Indian Writers Series Pratibha Ray Stories . Trans. Jayanta Mahapatra. Bhubansewar: Grassroot, 2004. p. 36.

⁷ Ibid, p. 34.

⁸ Ibid, p. 40.

⁹ Ibid, p. 41.

¹⁰ Ibid, p. 45.

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