

A Socio-Psychological Study of R.K. Laxman's Short Story Woman at The Window

Dr. Reenu

Asstt. Prof.

Department of English

VSP Govt. PG College Kairana, Shamli

Dr. shailendra

Asso. Prof. and Head

Department of English MMDC, Khehra

RK Laxman is known for his cartoons in the Times of India. His cartoons comment on the social issues and in a way they are satires on the vices of the society. The common man is the best created cartoon ever. It represents the hopes and fears of ordinary Indian man. Along with cartoons, RK Laxman wrote short stories, Travelogue, novels and political satires. His cartoons provide moral lessons as well as a true picture of the society.

Laxman published numerous short stories, essays, and travel articles, some of which were collected in *The Distorted Mirror* (2003). He also wrote the novels *The Hotel Riviera* (1988) and *The Messenger* (1993) as well as his autobiography. In addition, numerous collections of Laxman's cartoons were published. His legacy is immortalized through the statue of the Common Man, located near the Symbiosis Institute in Pune, India. (R.K. Laxman. *Britannica*)

A socio psychological study provides us a platform where we can understand the relation between the individual and the society and how one affects the other. Individual is the product of the environment and the society as well as the society is also the product of the individuals. A lot of personality psychologists like Freud's psychoanalytic perspective, like Self-actualization by Carl Rogers, Some traits perspective, social cognitive perspectives and even the behaviourist perspective gave us the idea that a person is the product of the environment and the social values around him. A person is never isolated. He is always under the pressure of something. Or we can say that a kind of the pan-ideology is always there. So whatever he is doing, he is doing unknowingly under the pressure of all those circumstances. In the current short story, we will discuss how some ideologies and how some surroundings change our psychology and the way we look at the outer world. To establish that we will dive deep into the inner meaning of the current short story.

As time went by, I began to look forward to Ambi's stories in the evening. He seemed to have an inexhaustible supply of subjects with an astonishing range from horticulture to glimpses into the private life of ministers and officials, from native medicine to a journey on foot to Badrinath from Thanjavur. Of course, there was absolutely no way of checking his facts or knowledge of things. All the stories, he recounted, had an enriched flavour. He described any event, even the most obvious, with such verve; it took on the quality of having another dimension, like something extra added to the mundane colour, shape and substance of reality. It seems to be so, perhaps, because he gave himself over in no small measure to the task of narration. He mimicked, jumped about, contorted his face, enacted, flailed his arms like a windmill, all to convey the atmosphere of a small tea stall at the foot of a hill or the impressions of a nasty old school master. When telling a story, he was anxious to preserve the tempo and effect. He would carefully build up the stories and would not like them to be ruined by interruption, even if he was factually wrong or his observations biased. I always sat listening with fascination to whatever he said; I had conferred the poetic licence on him for the excellence in entertaining me evening after evening tirelessly. (89-90)

There are two characters in this story – one is Ambi and other one is a junior auditor. The story covers the issues as – the societal view of women, religion, faith, supernaturalism, and conditions of poor workers. Ambi is the story teller in the story and auditor is the listener. Auditor shows the power of surroundings ideologies and how his own ideology is shattered. He is captive-listener. Through Ambi, the writer shows the different ideologies at work.

One important ideology of story is the societal perspective of women. Women are considered subordinate to man and as a sex toy, even in the film industry. When a woman is doing better than a man, she is labelled as a characterless so that she can't relish the fruits of her hard-work:

He showed me Kanakapriya sprawling seductively across the glossy centrefold of a magazine; a sexy dame nearly bursting out of the page with the curve of her front as well as her rear.... She makes lakhs and lakhs in the films, he said and added mischievously, 'and also outside them'.... 'Raghu, her brother, was dead against her joining films', he went on. 'He was so opposed to it that he even toyed with the idea of poisoning the director to save his sister's honour'.... Kanakapriya was one of the girls picked for this scene. She managed to outshine the others by rolling her eyes coyly and giving a provocative forward thrust to her figure.... She has built a huge mansion for herself in Madras. Her parents also left their village and joined her there. (88-89)

Ambi's perception on woman is shaped by the society in which he lives. In Indian society woman is always considered as inferior to man, somehow in every patriarchal society, the situation is the same. Women are seen as a sex toy and slave to men. When they brought a name and fame, they are tortured as characterless. The same thing is with Ambi, he is hiding his failure under the societal perception of woman as a characterless. This is a satire by the writer on the men's mentality:

The subordination of women to men originated in early societies in which women were used as tokens of exchange between clans....situation of gender inequality is sustained by culture. Most traditional religions such as Catholicism, fundamentalist Protestantism, Islam, and Orthodox Judaism assign women to secondary roles, and some forbid them from participating in public activities with men (Ryan 131-132).

Another issue in the story is the faith. It is dealt with positively and negatively in the story. Religion is the domain of faith and there is no scope of reason there. But to be a practical man, we should use both to live a happy life. Here again, we find the effects of the surrounding and social values. How a person's common sense became dead under the repetition of same ideology. After sometime, he blocks his common sense and accepts that ideology as true. The same thing we find in Ambi's personality when he described how he controlled a mad elephant:

Devi Stotram: a song in the praise of great Goddess Devi. He chanted a couple of verses with no particular care for the melody and explained the meaning. Believe me, no evil will cross your path if you repeat the slokas in the morning and before going to bed at night. You know, I was only fifteen when I bought a rogue elephant to its knees. That is the power of these verses have.... Still keeping an alert eye on the tip of the stick, he spoke, 'The quick of the beast's third toe-nail. It has a deadly effect on the animal. But of course, I was chanting Devi Stotram all the while.' (85)

When faith has brought you too far, it becomes blind faith. No practical man will do the same as Ambi has done. It is a sharp satire on the working of the faith. Indians are full of such faiths or blind faiths. When a child hears such a story by his elders again and again, he develops a kind of blind faith in such rituals and stories. Here again, we see the power of our surroundings to change our personality. And such things create further dimensions of our personality such as a belief in supernatural.

Ambi sometimes starts talking about supernatural and ghosts. But the auditor was not so convinced. He always used his rational power and thought that Ambi's stories may be concocted or fabricated. But Ambi was so much ingrained in his belief that he used to see spirits or ghosts in that area. The reason he told him was the fuel thieves in that area. The fuel thieves used to steal the faggots used in cremating the dead and bury the half burnt bodies in the soft land of the river. He said that he recently saw a woman at the window with her foetus at her back; maybe she was pregnant when she died. But she did no harm to him as he was chanting devi stotram. This story affects the auditor so much that one night he himself sees the same woman at the window:

One night I was suddenly jolted out of my sleep. Ambi was fast asleep to the lullaby of own rhythmic snoring near the door. I wondered what the time was and took out the watch and held it up as usual to catch the light from the project. But no light fell on the watch although on the wall there was the square patch of light keeping the room in a glow of twilight. I became curious and raised my head to look at the source of light far away by the river. A black, wispy form close to my cot completely blocked my view. In the faint light I could make out the shape of a woman, vague and undefined with a hideously underdeveloped body of a child perched on her hips. Four pairs of eyeballs stared at me. In a flash I took in the ghoulish details and immediately discovered all my faculties paralyzed. I could not move, shut my eyes or scream, for something like a tennis ball was stuck in my throat. Even the heartbeats and blood flow seemed arrested. I lay frozen, inert like a corpse. (93-94)

Environment plays a pivotal role in shaping our personality. A lot of psychologists have shown the same aspect in their research. Auditor was living with Ambi and there was no other man with whom the auditor can spend his time, he was a captive listener. So living with Ambi and continuously listening such supernatural stories and issues have a deep impact on his brain working and he started to believe such things in his unconscious. That's why he saw the woman at the window:

The human personality is a compromise between the individual's own impulses and the demands and interests of other people. These demands of other people are represented collectively by the institutions and

cultural patterns to which the individual is exposed, and the process whereby his or her own impulses are compromised by these forces is referred to as the socialization process (Hall 251).

In the end, the writer tries to arouse the feelings of horror in the readers. The writer consolidates his textual ideology of ghosts and makes the piece of fiction as a real incident:

I was preparing to leave when Ambi said: So now at least do you believe there are ghosts around here? 'What do you mean?' I asked startled out of my wits. 'Well, you had a look at the woman with a foetus on her hip last night. I was looking at her too and...' I did not stay to hear the rest. I ran like a mad towards the jeep. (94-95)

Works Cited

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