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SHADES OF MAN - WOMAN RELATIONSHIPS IN *LITTLE LIZZY, THE LIFT THAT WENT DOWN THE HELL, SAVED AND SUNSTROKE*

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Abstract

Humans have evolved in so many ways, we have so many religions, schools of belief systems, creeds of ideologies with their specific idiosyncrasies and irregular regularities. We have developed into myriad social groups with divergent range of naturalized truths, and the same can be said of the man- woman relationships in these diverse settings. What is immoral and unethical may be legal in a place and the same immorality may range from tolerable aberration to unpardonable sin in another settings. Premarital physical liaisons are treated as ruinous in many traditional societies whereas it is absolutely normal in west. Similarly, gay and lesbian relations are still taboo in major part of civilized world. Now one contentious issue is marital cheating or infidelity. Depending upon the nature of work and predilections of the writer, it can be a very unbecoming conduct and on the other end a very mundane activity evoking little reaction. The short stories being taken for the scope of inquiry in this paper touch upon these ambiguous terrains as in *Little Lizzy* the theme of thanklessness, cold and stingingly vindictive attitude and of being exceptionally cruel to a man, ruining him, his self-respect, making a pet dog of him in front of the whole town under the spell of an outsider, thanks to his machinations as against the basic docility and goodness of heart requires in depth analysis. *Saved* is a sort of antidot to the first tale where the question of morality and chastity take center stage as against the evils of debauchery and debasement. Although the male characters are weak and always consumed by their insecurities and inferiority complexes. Such people as depicted are a scourge to relationships they forge. The story has a distinct Indian flavor and should be judged in line with the Indian ethos. *Sunstroke* develops as a saga of feminine sensibility hitting back at the patriarchal rigidity wherein a married woman, as soon as she is assured anonymity and security, surrenders herself to her physical passions and as soon as the night is spent, vanishes into thin morning air like the aroma of scent. But then like moon, every coin has two sides and one may feel dismayed at the poor husband and the teenage kids of the lady whom she has definitely cheated upon without any scruple as if she was a different person in daylight and a different person altogether when the gods turn their eyes elsewhere.

Keywords: taboo, absurdity, infidelity, enigmatic, dismay.

Can ennui instigate amorality or this nonsense of thanklessness and poison-dipped, mockery-stained, Dracula-fanged brutality a part of the design of human subconscious or has it got something of a shadow of the grand absurdity as many a learned men of our age have envisioned, is the subject of inquiry of the current paper.

The wife in Mann's story is a lovely and young lady, quiet and elegant. There is no dearth of enigmatic females in literature who smile as Mona Lisa's smiled, representing an aspect of feminine wilderness which is often ridiculed by high end poets. The exotic personality, slow voluptuous sensuality and lazy movements of such female characters reflect a subordination of reason to the overflowing fountain of passion, a deadly cocktail for filial tragedy. But such personas, howsoever self-indulged they are, always look for a veil to avoid exposing themselves and thus ruining their queen-like demeanor. Of course, a husband is always conscious of their unequal relation in such cases. The people in their vicinity too are always aware of the incompatible match and even the protagonist in this particular case is astonished beyond words at the unconceivable reasons that led to such a marriage. On husband's part usually it is the devotion for the lady, but what leads a beauty incarnation to accept the proposal of a fat, much older, artless and insecure man, is indeed an unsolved mystery that readers of such fiction from generations have pondered upon without much success. Is it parental pressure, or a moment's infatuation which waned in a blink of eye or what so ever it is, the fact is that such couples are utterly opposite; the lady mostly is shown a paradigm of beauty and calmness (a deadly combination indeed!), and the husband is often depicted in such plots as a shapeless, fearful image of subhuman entity. Jacoby in the story is destined to suffer in silence "a plague of conscience" (Mann 189) for being an unworthy husband to such an extraordinary beauty. Mann has displayed a deep psychological understanding of such insecure characters as in the scenes where the husband in his sporadic, cringing and over melodramatic appeals to his wife to never betray him even if she loves him not and which are but a manifestation of his darkest fears. She, a study in repressed emotions gone awry,

not just ridicules her husband in her affectionate affirmations in ridiculous singsongs as if she were playing with her pet animal but is also cheating on him with little intent to be secretive. In fact, the world always knows of such cunningness and it is only the doting, cuckold husband who remains in delusion of his wife's purity. The lovers of such ladies, as always happens invariably, are young, debonair and elegant, in short everything that the husband is not and the lady feels satisfaction and completeness of being a woman only in his embrace. Such lovers are usually depicted as easy going, not so scrupulous, merry making fellow who know how to use their talent to add to their personal charms and attract female attention.

Mann delves deeper than mere infidelity of a seemingly pious, goddess like wife and presents before us the real grotesque elements of human character and situations as he develops the climax. He has shown the husband as completely unsuspecting and easily cajoled. The malevolent wife is an utmost cruel replica of lady Macbeth, completely bereft of any milk of human affection even towards her husband. Mann introduces an on-stage performance on an absurd sounding jingle *Little Lizzy* to establish the motif of the absurd in human life and existence. The audience is thunderstruck at the absolute horror! As the prey starts his performance, the moment of reckoning arrived. The word Lizzy is author's tool of invocation of the theme of absurd and the big man in his 'hairy ape moment' became unmovable as he looked at the scandal struck audience; the moment of silence becomes the moment of revelation. His sudden death is symptomatic of modern man's inability to face the 'real' and the 'absurd'. Mann conveys a spectrum of messages, prominent among which is the grotesqueness of human relations and also how a moment of epiphany can turn into man's moment of deliverance from the cruel and immoral designs of life.

The Lift that went down the Hell portrays a poignant drama of a female narcissist. In such cases, the husbands are relegated to a place of a stranger whereas a stranger, owing to his wealthy status, becomes the receiver of the womanly love and attention of females who do so without an iota of

guilt. The cold apathy of such ladies is often too much to bear for their husbands who, as the ambiguous narrative suggests many a times commit suicide in parallel universes, a vision of repercussions out of multiple possibilities. Such ladies are frivolous enough to vouchsafe their personal life to such rich stranger as the lady keeps asking "You do love me, don't you?." (Lagerkvist 287) Of course, such people lack any emotional quotient as his wayward response to her consistent refrain asking if he loves her reflects. These women characters are rudderless, fragile and have misplaced notions of life and fulfilment. Incompatibility in couples is one of the major causes of infidelity, be it physical or emotional. Although we are not given sufficient background of the conjugal life of the couple but it can be safely inferred from their reported talk that the husband is quiet man, caring and sensitive albeit the wife is given to self-appeasement and search of materialistic pleasures. There is nothing wrong in looking for happiness but how sensible is it to disregard one's marital vows and be a habitual offender for petty pleasures with uninterested strangers in unknown places. These ladies are no doubt unnerved and insecure about their escapades but still out of habit spend their evenings in arms of men showing total disregard to their marriage. This narcissism is not without a price though. These kinds of supposed lovers create their own hell on earth through their immoral actions emanating from unguarded thoughts as if being seduced into eating the forbidden fruit by the *Satan*, only they being experienced enough to be aware of the gravity of their sins and yet are unaffected by it and it's repercussions on their lives and the lives of the people near them. Such apathy and negation of the feelings of others in pursuit of momentary and illegitimate pleasures is the hallmark of such people who are not as the psychologists say molded by their circumstances but rather are drawn in such molds as would act in such degrading manners at the smallest provocations or will find excuses to fall into sub human conduct very too often.

The ennui and willful sinners of the story can well be juxtaposed with another equally somber tale by Tagore named *Saved*. The writer here deals with the theme of morality of Indian women whose

husbands sometimes, what should be said about them, are men too weak to respect them. In their over jealous and spineless conduct, they doubt their wives even with the house helps. Women do have a natural instinct of reading a man's mind accurately and they soon realize such absurd nature and out of vengeance or anger may start keeping mum most of the times. It is an Indian lady's way of showing her disapproval of his unbecoming conduct. But such quietness often enrages a man, and he is pushed deeper in the fire of jealousy which consumes his heart. At this point one is tempted to find similarity in the plots of both the stories. But Gauri, in psychological terms sublimated her carnal desires into spiritual passions for the search of higher meaning in life under the guidance of her guru. But Tagore knew of such gurus and their fraudulent conducts against the innocent women of respected households. Such gurus often try to seduce the women into meeting with him in a secluded nook knowing well that the husband would be out of reach on the appointed occasion and he could have his way with her unobtrusively. The story has a tragic denouement as Gouri has to sacrifice her life to uphold her righteous self. The difference in both the stories is the female persona meaning thereby the plots have divergent scopes owing to the opposite choices made by the female protagonists in these two tales. Lagerkvist has shown in vein of *The Waste Land*, a representative of disgruntled housewives who is out on the street to have fun and her share of life. However, such women have big falls as they may have to face disastrous consequences. In this immoral pursuit as often reverberated in modern literature through the image of a living hell, the sinners are gleeful and nervous at the same time, well aware of their actions and the possible consequences. Tagore on other hand has portrayed an Indian lady who still holds on to her *Sanskaras* and refuses the impulses of corruption which would tempt even angels. On this score the story becomes somewhat problematic too as looked upon in today's context it is a highly unrealistic, ideal character that Tagore has drawn in form of Gouri 'a loyalty rare indeed in these degenerate days.' (Tagore 85)

These writers have depicted the same old archetypical plot of how a lady who has a family, her husband and sometimes even kids, and lives the routine dull life bereft of any excitement, flowing with the mainstream humanity, somehow ends up spending an afternoon with a writer whom she met on a bus while returning to her city from some assignment. These encounters are rather symptomatic of the deep void in the souls of modern humans. Such momentary relations, often get buried deep inside the participants, hours of pleasure, sensualness with a complete stranger, just like that! A sort of interlude in the general drama of life. These are not immoral women and men but completely routine people who share with others the norms of married life, are shy about the topic of sex and yet have their past and moments of unguarded pleasure. For a woman, such deviation is in fact her moment of abreaction, of letting her pent-up feminine energies release in the arms of an anonymous male harbor, of letting the desired and oft dreamt male passion flood her womb. Once the act is done, she moves on never to turn back but yes, she will keep him in her hearts of heart forever, the heavenly moments of mental orgasms like she never had or would have with her husband, forever thankful to the unnamed man, forever prostrate before him.

This is the theme of Ivan Bunin's 'Sunstroke' in which the unnamed lady who has met this young lieutenant just a couple of hours ago, knows nothing about him, agrees to follow him to some local hotel for a one-night stand. More often a woman surrenders all her charms to her surreptitious love and yet she keeps claiming that she was not this kind of woman and whatever was happening was a one time off, that she was a respected lady of high gentry. For the lady in the story, this experience becomes like 'a sunstroke'(Bunin 213), a momentary letting down of her guard, something which would never be expected of her again. On a psychological plane, such characters are indeed absurd and often vanish without a notice or a talk. They leave nothing behind them, no address, no contact, literally nothing. Maybe they simply glean their moments of supreme pleasures and will remember these encounters of love as long as they live or maybe they

will forget it soon and move on to another escapade. But many a times one of the participants in such awkward rituals is definitely lost and is disheartened at the prospect of futile existence in decades to follow as his love has simply vanished in the clouds. As such people know nothing of the name, city, or locale of their paramour.

These stories are an excellent showcase of various shades of man woman relations where love is not necessarily legal, and ethics are subdued to instant gratifications. The judgement is left to the reader, his response alone would provide the finality of meaning and yet his sensibilities are shaken out of slumber of deathly routine into a new awakening of colorful rainbow shades. The works are a reflection or rather a retake on the fluidity in the relationships and their ever-changing contours.

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