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INDIAN SENSIBILITY IN P. RAJA'S *KOZHI GRANDPA'S CHICKENS*

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Every creative writer has his or her own way of building the material in creating the work of art. It includes a letter, poem, short story, essay, fiction and so on. In fact, writing a short story demands more commitment than writing a novel. It is defined as brief fictional prose narratives usually shorter than a novel. The creative potential of a story writer can be seen in the framing of characters. The characters can take part in the action directly or indirectly to move the action forward. Stephen King writes about short story that "a great short story is a snapshot, vivid, and engaging which can often have more of an impact than access to the whole album". (Introduction)

A familiar name to reckon with, P. Raja is a poet, critic, translator, short fiction writer and a freelancer. A retired professor of English from Kanchi Mamunivar Centre for Post-Graduate Study & Research, Pondicherry, he has published articles, short stories, poems, interviews, one act plays, reviews, skits and features in more than 200 newspapers with a rich haul of 3000 publications, both in India and abroad. He has been a recipient of several awards that include notably International Eminent Poet award (Madras, 1988), Michael Madhusudhan Academy Award (Calcutta, 1991), Academy of Indo-Asian Literature Award (New Delhi, 2003), Indian Literature Golden Jubilee Translation prize (Sahitya Akademic Award, New Delhi, 2001), Rock Pebbles National Award (Odisha, 2013), and a literary award from Central University of Pondicherry, 2011 in recognition of his writings (2011). He has authored 55 books for adults and 8 booklets for children.

P. Raja has contributed significantly to the field of Indian writing in English. A calm, composed and critical mind, Raja is gifted with creative sparks that illuminate the rich legacy of Indian writings in English. As a writer, his creativity is an epitome of Indian sensibility and culture. As a story writer he has made name and fame with a distinct feature of Indianness. The story collection *Kozhi Grandpa's Chickens* is taken for my critical evaluation in terms of Indian sensibility. It is a wonderful production consisting of 13 stories deeply artistic in humour, irony and Indian sensibility. Through this collection, Raja has enlarged upon experiences and passions typically Indian in sensibility to create a vision of stability and profundity. He moves from apparently unimportant aspects through a labyrinth of emotional inlets and reaches a quaint but unforgettable vision as in the stories of Chekov and Maupassant. Raja is adept in

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building climax to each of the stories in the collection. All the stories touch the gamut of life, and common incidents in his characteristic style, giving the touch of humor and often irony to entertain and reform the society. As simple narratives written in native Indian customs, language and style, Raja looks at the variety, vivacity and innovation. As a story writer, he has excelled in humorously recounting his personal experiences and they flow naturally with the narrative. Raja conveys it in a subtle way. Each story conveys a message, a moral instruction for the readers at the end. He is not merely an entertainer but ultimately emerges to be a philosopher. Humour and irony are undoubtedly his chief forte. Though Raja does not say explicitly, each story carries such implication. Perhaps Raja firmly believes a story told or retold in whatever manner should convey some meaning to the readers.

The story ‘The Day of the Minister’ is full of humor, irony and superstitions from the Indian context of life. The minister’s visit excited one Manikam who anticipated a felicitation from him. In his curiosity, he claimed that he would be the first one in the village to be honored by the minister. “I’m the luckiest fellow in the whole village. All because of our little daughter” (98). The news of visit by the central minister accompanied by the local MLA tempted the curious Manikam and his wife. It is media hype that Manikam was seriously interested in. He wanted to be in the news when the minister visited them. The minister used his tricks and in his bid, he asked Manikam to work for the party in the ensuring election. The Indian sensibility was seen in a typical manner when the baby of Manikam began crying. The couple thought it would be because of jealous eyes of the people that their baby was crying. A typical Indian superstition can be seen in the following statement.

“The baby has got a fever, My God! What wretched neighbors! What evil-eyed monsters are they? They have given the child the evil eye ‘Jealous fellows, Let an epidemic gouge out their eyes. Let a streak of lightning make them grope in darkness forever” (103). The much awaited visit of the minister becomes the news item for the media people who made it a catchy headline in their papers. “The minister comes surrounded by the MLA and his men, police officials and administrative officers. The TV crew was extremely busy. Photographers now and then clicked their cameras. They shuffled their way towards the crowd” (107). All this reflects the much – hyped minister’s visits in Indian Scenario. The ironic side showed the minister in a drunken state. “The stench of country liquor that emanated from his mouth many to stand off” (109). The minister dropped the baby on a stony floor which irritated Manikam who later, in a fit of rage, ran his towel round the neck of the minister and beat him on his cheeks. The minister left the place in utter shame. The morning newspapers printed a photograph and the caption of the news item reads it as *Madman Manholes Minister*.

The story is noted for Indian sensibility in terms of superstitions, much hyped publicity, greed for individual fame and finally man’s downfall. Raja conveys the moral element through the story that the sensibility is typically Indian and the message is significantly universal.

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'*Midnight Knock*' focuses on the Indian custom of marriage and death. Shanta is the protagonist of the story. Her husband Mr. Narasimhan died of heart attack. Here, the rituals of death followed. "The appointed hour was drawing near for Shantha to bid adieu to her '*thali*', that golden ornament which when tied to a maiden's neck promotes her to widowhood' and when removed demotes her to widowhood (115). The rituals of widowhood continue to dominate the Indian family system where a widow is forbidden to put *Kumkum* on her forehead 'The Camera clicked with that sound, shantha's life as a wife came to an end. For the last time in her life, she was using turmeric, *Kumkum* flowers and jewels, and these would be taboos to her hereafter (116). Finally, the usual practice of removing '*Kumkum*' and *thali* were undertaken to symbolize widowhood on shantha. 'They wiped the *kumkum* off her forehead. The eldest of the widows removed the *thali* from Shantha's neck and dropped it into the mug of milk kept ready for the purpose' (116). The death ceremony was over and with it Shantha's life as a wife.

Through the story, Raja has attacked the age old practices of death ceremony. A woman has to be seen as a woman not as a widow as per the blind beliefs. She is discriminated by the society as one having lost her husband. This is a reflection of Indian sensibility when Raja reminds his readers that words are poor comforters when the heart knows its own sorrows (115). *Kozhi Grandpa's Chickens* is yet another story that revolves round Kozhi, a grown – up man and a chronic bachelor whose suspicious actions haunted the villagers. The chicken began to disappear though they were taken great care of. People suspected his hand in the missing chicken. Kozhi used different tactics and collected chicken which used to enter his coconut grove. "Who in all the seven worlds was competent enough to catch Kozhi Grandpa red – handed when he adopted several such techniques, mostly indigenous to him, in stealing chickens? (65). He was adept in catching them. Raja has shown how the art of theft has ruined the Indian life styles. The story has a hidden message that Indians are not just slaves but masters as well.

*After Grandma, Who?* is another story rich in sensibility and full of superstitions. The Indian sensibility is at its best when the situation requires the services of one Rajambal who by her applying herbal medicines cures people of dog bites. Her grandson comments at her magical powers: *On many occasions, I had heard people praise grandma for the wonder paste she used in order to cure the patients of dog bites. Rajambal is the only one in all the seven worlds. Her treatment is painless and tension-free* (Raja, 127). She does not accept anything in return from her patients. She goes highly philosophical when she says about her service: "Rich or Poor... To me a patient is a patient. I cure them of dog bites as a service to God (Raja, 128). She echoes her argument in a traditional Indian manner. "I am only a tool in the hands of God. It is He who cured you. It is a sin to take money for the work He has done." She asked her patient by name Vaithi Naiker to drop the money into the *hundi* in the Murugan temple on his

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way home. The Indians are known for superstitions and blind beliefs. This is seen in Rajambal's diagnosis of people when they were bitten by mad dogs. "Eighteen teeth marks and a deep wound. Flesh is torn and hanging loose. The dog must be a ferocious one and I am sure you had a very tough time with the animal" (Raja, 132). Indians are blind followers of beliefs and rituals. They do not follow any logical thinking.

This is evident when Velu pouring the cold water on Vaithi Naiker's leg thought: "there is a little difference between human beings and animals. Look at the flesh and the blood. They are of the same color. No wonder the human beings behave at times like animals and the animals like human beings. The only difference between human beings and animals is the former eat the latter well-cooked and the latter eat the former uncooked" (Raja, 133). The grandmother cleverly led the patients by her herbal medicine. She advised the patients to pray to God Aiyarappan not to send his sentinel to bite them once again. Ultimately, her grandson wondered how she had learnt the art of removing the poison from the blood stream and healing the wounds inflicted by the mad dogs. It continues to be a mystery to him. Finally, when she was on the death bed, the grandson realized that there would be no one in the family to learn the art of healing. She did not teach the art of curing dog bites. He moaned amidst tears, After Grandma, Who?

In conclusion, I firmly hold that Raja is an established story writer to the core of his writings. A minute observer and a trend – setter, he exposes social hypocrisy, vices and evils. The art of characterization is simply superb and the thematic concerns are distinctly Indian in setting and locale. Indian sensibility is the chief forte of the collection. Raja focuses more on Indian situations, using different modes of narration required for story – writing. Though Raja claims to be a pure entertainer and he has no motive in his writings unlike the committed writers and because of this reason, he could be bracketed as belonging to the school, *Art for Art's sake*, serious readers can dispute his claim by discerning subtle messages that several of his short stories convey. The underlying tone of his humour is subtly conveyed. As usual, there is abundant sarcasm in his stories. His narration touches the readers from the beginning to the end. Common incidents are the hall mark of his selections. One finds no hypocrisy in his stories. It is Raja's dexterity to hold the readers' attention with his absorbing narration; and the readers will never let him down in the middle once reading is done. His diction is simple and lucid. He writes with ease, grace and aplomb.

**References:**

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