

A Book Review

‘Maidens of Trafford House’: A Passionate Collage of Diverse Emotions

Reviewed by - Dr. Anita Sharma

(Author: Dr Harsh Vardhan Khimta, Shimla (HP) India

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Dr. Harsh Vardhan Khimta is a freelance writer ,story teller, teacher and a linguist who has been referred as ...`a talented author’ by none other than the renowned writer Shashi THaroor. At present he is teaching as an Assistant Professor at Rajkiya Kanya Mahavidyalaya(RKMV) Shimla (India). This debut fictional work *Maidens of Trafford House* is a beautiful collection of eight stories somewhere touching the levels of novella. But author specifies them as ‘Eight Stories’ only. These long stories intricately present the suppressed desires of life like love, sexuality, fascination, attraction and divine human bonding. The emotional and sentimental desires of different characters in these stories wrap readers and protagonists into a thick mist of hope and delusion. The narration flows like a fresh stream of water with a new discovery at every twist and turn gushing freely towards a deep beautiful mysterious river or sea. This short story collection is a ‘true labor of love and passion’ (The Hindu) by this ‘bard from the Hills’ (The Times of India) with poetic words and a powerful fleeting imagination. The major theme of his short stories revolves around the most important concept of life that is LOVE, care and compassion. Love is the innate desire of every living creature on earth varying in hopes and desires. The people all around us orchestrate the emotional odyssey in us to bring tempest of emotions which straightway influences our thought process and give a new perspective towards life. Love brings in despair and desires simultaneously with a sense of moral obligation resulting into intellectual humility beginning a journey into a realm of contentment and grace. Always remember prosperity in a relation comes only after adversity, just as these literary pieces bind emotions, desires and sentiments laced with a free flow of brilliant diction.

The first story of this rich collection is titled *Caroline* which can be called a novella rather than a short story. The story takes you around Shimla, Solan, Dharampura, Kasauli and then to the heights of Kinnaur and Kalpa in the beautiful hilly state of Himachal Pradesh. The

story narrated in first person form is more like a travelogue revolves around a French scholar cum tourist Caroline as the letter from French embassy to Mr. Mehta opens up, ``...she is over with her tour of the south of India and now looking forward to coming to Shimla...,she is anxious about her stay ,,since she cannot communicate in any Indian language including English.’’(2) Perturbed by the suspicious nature of his girl friend Shubra, Raman felt emancipated to go along with young Caroline to Barog Station.``The station master TNA Aiyer was ``delighted to see us enter his office, owing especially to the company of a young and a white woman.’’(11) Caroline was looking for an unknown theatre on the station where once her ancestors had their best theatrical performances .The old Guard Ramsukh led them to ``old and abandoned’ ’theatre not ``more than thirty feet by twenty’’ with huge windows, faded curtains, some old paintings with a huge portrait inscribed underneath Malcolm Stanley Taylor. Caroline conversed through the telephonic translator Stephanie to her guide cum companion Raman requesting to search for the theatre library and want photocopy of the manuscripts and notes of the plays before getting too late. Their search and readings of plays like *The Early Songs of Dawn*’ the role of Vanessa played by Dorothy, letter to a colonel, the fifteen other titles of plays, collection and piling of papers ,books , manuscripts and making notes engrossed Caroline till late night forgetting about food and lodging. The lonely darkness of a night in a colonial building, smoking with young beautiful Caroline, filled both of them with `` an unquenchable desire’’(28) and nostalgia of being in unison, ``frozen in fire.’’(35) The morning sun compel led them to run away from the theatre invisibly to Station Master downwards to the country side like two innocent blessed souls. Their only way to communicate was LOVE as both knew no common language. From there the couple like two love birds romantically travels to Dharampur, Kasauli and then back to Shimla in a winding toy train. At home he discloses their relationship to his mother and friend Ketan who passes the information to Shubra. As a result she insults Raman and his Carrie/ Caroline before breaking off the relationship. Somehow Raman feels safe to be with only Caroline and plans a trip to Kinnaur and Kalpa getting more close to her emotionally and physically. The story/novella ends with Caroline leaving India and disclosing her family lineage through her hand written letter in English to Raman promising him to come back in November on a long trip,`` I am the great granddaughter of Malcolm Stanley Taylor...doing a course in theatre in Cardiff..I had no idea I could ever have had a guide like you...let me tell you I enjoyed every bit of my time with you...I hope you aren’t hurt by the revelations.’’(71-73)

Like RK Narayan's *The Guide*, this story takes you through the rough patches of love and sensuality perfectly silhouetted against the tough romantic terrains of Himalayas.

The second story titled *The Dying Letter* 'discloses metaphorically the complexities of human relations weaved around the weakest moment of the most powerful human desire Love. The protagonist Mrs. Mehta is an old widow, who through a chain of letters, get apprised about her husband's extramarital affair with their child's school teacher and their illegitimate child who is based at Dehradun. It is really shocking and unbearable to Mrs. Mehta to live with such undisclosed secret at the sunset of her long happy married life. Like Thomas Hardy's literary socialism, the story is carried forward and backward with unexpected copies of letters. "...I am dying Manji...after I left Dalhousie...joining a school in Dehradun...Arindham was born less than six months later....he has inherited everything yours....in your sixties...you have a son ...almost thirty...well in life. I have lived all my life with guilt. I don't want to die with another... I know it would have been unthinkable for you to turn your back on Maya....your wife...child...Punya. (79-81). The other letter talks about the growing years of Ary at Delhi in the company of his grandparents who used to talk about his imaginary father to him. "Ary's father...on a weeklong break...drown somewhere in the Arabian Sea."(83) After reading through the letters Mrs. Mehra "did not leave her bedroom for three days and three nights,...She asked many questions into the vacuum...there was no one to console her...she gradually decided she wouldn't behave querulously."(89-90).Next day in the morning after breakfast she pasted a note on the letter box "All Well. Going to Dehradun"....with the dying woman's declaration, "Say it in silence, so that only God may hear."(99).Rattan, the postman, stands tall as a supporting character in it.

The Tiger ' is an amusing story with honest reflection of soul's anecdotes when the protagonist rubs his shoulder with furious Death. The story runs breathlessly like Shankar Mahadevans song, on an unexpected encounter with a Tiger in a nearby orchard after the vehicle skids off the road near Shimla at Fagu,"This was my death..My spine go missing...my eyes were burning...The first thought...Was my two year old daughter...being reduced to ...an orphan...I summed up the miseries of my life...my ageing parents...my wife and my only child....my memories, my thoughts, my aspirations, my responsibilities and my regrets had all been encapsulated into a pack of fractions...before....my unfortunate end...The merciful giant had disappeared.(103-11) This deathly encounter reinvents the author to do best in business as well

as in family matters. The story is a lesson for life that is learnt through death in a descriptive sensibility of a talented author.

The following narrative is a superstitious cum religious fiction /story titled *The Consignment*. Like Gita Mehta's *A River Sutra*, the story hopes against hope, in quest of cure against cure of a dreadful disease of temple singer's eighteen month old son. "the child gained consciousness only for a few minutes...each day...remaining hours of the day the child would lie...lifeless."(114) born after three daughters ...the child's condition brought immense grief to his mother,"(115) who sold flowers outside the Mahakal temple in Ujjain. Her husband, a bhajan singer takes away the ailing child for better treatment to AIIMS Delhi exhausting all his money and resources. His only help and hope was the elderly Sikh at the Gurudwara sahib.. Tragically mother Yamuna accepts the still child into her mysterious water and father returns empty handed to his village by train. "He was overwhelmed by his suffering which was too insignificant against the sorrowful might of the universe; too inconsequential amid the cosmic scheme of existence. (124) It's tragic story which would give tears to readers.

The fifth story *Gulmohar* is a fine weaving of relations to empower and empathize with lifelong strife of human beings. The story intricately weaves around heavenly relationships based upon the unconditional love and humanity. The story runs like a hilly stream with innocence wrapped in love and purity. Love figures out like a new Born who is to be nourished with utmost care, love and a healthy diet between the protagonist Madhu Sudan Tomar and the baby nurse Meera. In a parallel note symbolically speaking innocent love initiates between the two strangers under the garb of nursing a new born girl child suffering with jaundice after the death of her mother at Lady Reading Hospital, Shimla. This child is named Gulmohar as soon as the two strangers come closer surprisingly in a span of ten days in a grieving hospital." Those ten days!.. .in October was like no other ten days of his life....no other ten months of his life...no others ten years, nor twenty. The latter part of that period had faintly shown the promise of being the unsought answers for the unasked questions of most part of all his forty years."(126) symbolically the story gives hope, desire and a new life to the protagonist through a new born baby girl.

The next story titled '*The Table*' is narrated under four heads '*The aftermath*', '*The Chase*', '*The Funeral and the Beast*, 'and '*A Silent Prayer*'. The allegorical story catches attention of the reader till the end with tricky names Bru, Kuk and Ren. The Innocence, Affection and selfless

love of a mother is narrated passionately despite her being merely a hen /chicken for the master to be served on 'The Table'. It is a story to be read to strengthen vegetarian habits among human beings. One really feels sorry to know towards the end that Bru has been served on the birthday feast of Master's son. "Ren woke up...the wind was blowing. She saw...Leaves were falling on the yard. It was dark. It was cold. The night, for her, was dead. At her door, closing her eyes, she shivered, "O Lord! Bless...all...that you have created."(162)

Cashmere House is the seventh story of the collection. In a Postmodern context it digs deep down the emotional and psychological perspective of lonely old people. The global contemporary arena has fashioned nuclear families where the younger generation is often too busy in their carriers staying either far or abroad away from their old helpless parents. The story is knitted against the backdrop of a small Hill station Shimla in a huge mansion 'Cashmere House' where Mrs. Khan "is left alone".(163) To ease the pain of the protagonist the author lively describes the beautiful spots of Shimla Mall Road. "Cashmere House was built by her famous and celebrated lawyer husband...Intiqab Alam Chaudhary and Anjumman Khannum."(165) The story reads in flashback about the growing children and her husband's busy schedules amongst the family outings, gossips and parties with family friends as visible in the photographs. The poor old lady sick of loneliness is assisted by a caring servant Husna Bibi. She has started neglecting herself, her garden and home because of deprived happiness of being a mother. But thankfully the story ends with a happy note when Mrs. Khan comes back to her life in a real way on getting the news of arrival of her children. Her daughter-in-law Leela calls her, 'There is a surprise. We are coming home next week. Hussein is taking a month off. Murtaza and Anjali are joining us from Pune. They will start a new office in Shimla...the kids will give you company...wanted to give you a surprise...love you, maa.. Mrs. Khan smiled...at the curtains. At the garden and the flowers. At the Forest and the stars..."(181) It's a perfect piece of a Diaspora fiction.

The last long fiction/novella is titled '*Maidens of Trafford House*' which runs across in more than seventy five pages of the anthology. Aesthetically this stands as a masterpiece of all the stories with its interesting mesmerizing narration, precise prose, and poetic diction with a superb thrilling climax. This long story /novella totally justify the title of the anthology. It's a passionate love triangle among Mr. Debon Roy, Miss Jacqueline and Miss Rosalind in the backdrop of Sanawar Boarding School. Thankfully the writer has not included the boarders or students into

the love story but in a mature vein has taken up the story of the art teacher Mr. Roy in relation to the newly joined beautiful friends cum teachers of the school. The attraction, admiration, infatuation, adoration slowly keep growing amidst chaos, confusion and mist into a true love vividly apparent towards the end of the story. The feelings portrayed through appropriate dictum take readers back to the writings of Jane Austin and George Eliot.

To conclude the stories brings you the freshness of a newly arrived spring justifying wherever there are people there are stories as wherever there are spring showers there are flowers. These tales feature characters that we often come across taking either readers into the closet of book or taking out the characters out of the story book into a virtual world. In all it's a good pioneer effort of the naïve writer. The stories make you feel better and awakened as you read along, noticing what goes on around us with perspicacity and with an air of gentle innocence and magical imagination. The book has complementing cover design with enchanting text and a must read by all the book lovers.