

**WOMEN IN ‘DURABLE GOODS’ AND ‘TALK BEFORE SLEEP’:
NOVELS BY ELIZABETH BERG**

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Abstract

Elizabeth Berg with her first novel “Durable Goods” was able to make out a place for her in the heart of the readers. Berg’s all novels are reflection of women world; their joy, love, pain, happiness, sorrow and suffering. In her first novel, “Durable Goods” Berg describes the feelings of a twelve year old girl, who was left alone to her abusive father. Again in her next novel “Talk Before Sleep” a strong friendship between two women are found. Both of them knew that their friendship is not going to last long as one of them is dying out of cancer, but they still keeps promises of friendship. Though most of her novels leaves a touch of pain, but still it becomes favourite to all; as in this regard it can be said that-

“Our sweetest songs are those that tell of saddest thought.” P B Shelley.

“Elizabeth Berg’s gift as a storyteller lies most powerfully in her ability to find the extraordinary in the ordinary, remarkable in the everyday.”

- The Boston Globe.

Elizabeth Berg’s uniqueness lies in the fact that, her way of presenting stories are such that one feels having a glimpse of someone’s life while going through her novels. Berg is known for her many bestselling novels and short stories. Berg was able to mark her as a promising writer with the publication of her first novel ‘Durable Goods’. American Library Association named it a “Best Book of the Year”. She was also honoured by the Boston Public Library and the Chicago Public Library.

Feminist study or the theme of feminism is one of the burning topic of the 21st century. The term ‘feminism’ though deals with women; it also focuses on the every aspect of women life. During some decades, the study of feminism has taken such a gigantic shape that almost all the writers have tried their hands in giving us a glimpse of the feminist world. Feminism is a movement aimed at establishing economic, political, social rights for women. Gail Omvedt had defined feminism as-

“Feminism is not a form of social science nor is it a single consistent ideology. It can be best understood as the developing self- consciousness of women as an oppressed section struggling for liberation.”

Elizabeth Berg is counted among such writers, who are mostly known for their ability to give a true reflection of women world through their writings. In almost all of her novels, a reader first notices the woman as the central character and the plot then revolves around the character. In her first novel named “Durable Goods” where Elizabeth Berg deals with the thoughts and feelings of a small child of twelve years; in her another novel named “Talk Before Sleep”, she portrays women friendship.

Her novel “Durable Goods”, which gave her a different identity, deals with the thoughts, feelings, and with almost every emotion of a twelve year old girl named Katie. She was a girl who lost her mother out of cancer and she was left alone to her abusive father when her elder sister ran away. He was a colonel in the army and because of his transferable job they often moved from one place to the another without any warning. When the story begins, they were living on a base in Texas and it was in 1960’s. Katie found her Texas life better and was able to adjust with the environment, but she was having no idea that how long she will be able to stay there. In the novel we find how she has to accept each move, in spite of her unwillingness-

“He doesn’t like to hear complaining about the way we move so much. We are not allowed to cry when we drive away- or at any other time, either about any place we leave behind...You will have to be the new girl again, but you cannot cry about it in front of him...”

The ‘durable goods’ that army packs up while moving his family to a new assignment serves as a metaphor, for how Katie is expected to be strong and able to withstand harsh treatment. Katie opens her secret of survival to the readers and she tells us -

“For a while when I was younger, I used to pretend-run-away all the time. I would dump my doll out of her suitcase and go far into a field that was behind the house we lived in then. There I would sit on a big rock...I would listen to the buzzing insects and makeup ideas for new parents.”

Katie knew that in order to survive, she has to bow to the authority, i.e. to her abusive father. Going through the lines of the novel, the hearts of the readers gets heavy with the thoughts of suffering of such a small child. What Berg has written about Katie’s experience, still there is some section of children in this world who are forced to live a bitter life, as they have lost their mothers and have an abusive father. Lines in the novel, also moves the reader most which contains the description, that when little Katie felt unable in understanding situation; she hidden herself underneath her bed and consulted with her mother as she imagined her mother to be heaven-

“She is the only thing in a background of soft blackness. I think, well now it’s Missouri, and she nods her head. I think this will be a new place, where you’ve never been. She nods again, kindness. Out loud I say, “That’s what bothers me that you will never have been there.” And out loud, I hear her voice answer, “But I will still be with you.”

Berg writes about most ordinary things, in an extraordinary way. “Durable Goods” is said to be having biographical touch than any of her novels, as Elizabeth Berg was born in St. Paul, Minnesota and grew up on army bases around the U.S, and this may be the reason why reading every lines of the novel arouses the feeling of a true story within the readers. In an interview to Oprah Book Club, Elizabeth Berg says- on a question of attachment to the characters that-

“Oh, I am attached to them. And just because the book ends doesn’t mean that my attachment to them ends. I still think about characters and

sometimes I- this sounds awful to say, but I draw inspiration from my own characters.”

Moving to her second novel, that was published next year to the “Durable Goods” is another fantastic novel named “Talk Before Sleep”. The title of the novel has deep meaning as it is a heart wrenching story about a woman who loses her closest friend in cancer. It is the story of Ann and Ruth, two women in their early forties who have been friends for about seven years. We know from the start of the novel that Ruth is dying of cancer, and this contributes to the sense of both urgency and patience that the novel cultivates.

Ann’s description about their growing friendship, takes the readers to the past. It was the friendship between such two women, who were able to speak openly and directly to one another in a way only real friends can - “*She hears my unspoken sentences*” (61). But suddenly things changed and when the novel begins, the friendship was about to end as one of the two friends, Ruth was on her way to death. Throughout the novel, Ann learns about her life through her relationship with Ruth. She learns how her own need for family and home is greater than freedom and solitude. With her funny, loving descriptions of their conversations and experiences we get the insight to Ann and Ruth’s character. Emotional separation between the two friends touches us the most. The dying of one makes the other empty. The following lines describes how separation between the two friends-

“Oh! I wish I could take a day for you. I wish we could trade for just one day. She steps back from me, smiles bitterly. ‘No, you don’t’. Yes, I do! I do!’

The most powerful aspect of the novel is, Berg has so technically presented it, that the ‘talk’ between the two friends narrates the whole story. Though Berg’s this novel does not escape the theme of women life, it also focuses on the friendship between two women. The theme of separation between two friends underlies throughout the novel; and towards the end of the novel, as Ruth is closer to dying, Ann says-

“Our conversations are silly- about nothing, really...low voiced assurances offer each other: Did you turn out the lights? Put the chains locks on? Is the cat in? Always were checking to see that were safe. I’ve always thought that was the funniest thing, given the vastness of the dark we lie down in.”

As a reader we feel, this novel is the brightest example of true and pure friendship. The approaching idea of death in this novel glooms the characters. Berg writes that her purpose of writing this novel was twofold-

“I wanted to demonstrate the strength and salvation of women’s friendship and I wanted to personalize the devastating effects of losing someone to this disease”

“Talk Before Sleep” is such a novel, which at last ends up conferring the readers both strong power and pain. Power is for the idea that life should go on and pain because of the thought that everyone has to leave their loved ones one day. Berg’s ability to show the depth of women’s friendship and the pleasure is simple but amazing. Berg’s books have received mixed reactions from the critics, but she will always remain favourite to the readers, who loves the real and honest description of everyday life.

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