

The Portrayal of Women in the Short Stories of O. Henry

C. Arun

Part time External Research Scholar, Bharathiar University, Coimbatore

ABSTRACT

This paper attempts to point out the position of women and their attitudes as presented in the short stories of O. Henry. Women writers have a different vision because they treat women as they see and understand. Their own experience about women can be written but Male writers observe and understand women. Then imaginatively they treat women in their writings. O. Henry had spun stories of women as he had keenly observed women in the true perspective of their respective countries and ages. Women in his stories either belong to middle class or lower class. As a writer he never portrays the aristocratic women. Because he belongs to middle class; undoubtedly he writes about the women he came across, moved with and understood clearly from their own circles. They write about the women with great authority and authenticity. They also steal the hearts of women in order to present them in their short stories.

KEYWORDS

Aristocratic Women; Middleclass Women; Short Stories.

O. Henry writes about women's love, marriage, exploitation, quarrel, cheating, work, nature, attitudes and relationships with others. Their stories also deal with women's weakness, ignorance, intelligence, tactfulness, readiness, beauty, knowledge, experience and maturity. The following observations could be made for O. Henry:

1. How do women understand and move with men;
2. How do men want them to be;
3. What are the expectations of a married woman from her husband;
4. What are the activities and recognitions of a man towards a partner
5. The subtle ways of thinking of a woman;
6. Woman as lifeless objects of the society and

7. Women being used and misused by men and gods.

No such suicides are among the American women as presented by O. Henry. American women face life boldly and want to live a life. Brave life is accepted in the case of the broad based American Social life. O. Henry advocates knowledge, education and counselling for women's life. Vast majority of the social evils should be learnt through reading and carefully moving in the social circles. By learning the evils, the women could carefully avoid them very easily whenever required.

The writers also consider that there are unavoidable social influences and forces oppressing women. Such evils could be carefully eliminated by meticulous planning and restructuring the moral codes and social laws meant for women.

The oppressing evils and suppressing facts should be thrashed and solutions should be found.

The life of a woman is very precious; she should live. To make them live, a decent life is advocated by him. Most of the stories of O. Henry are written with this intention. A few of the unchangeable women characters are also found in the society; He presents them as he has observed. For such adamant and incorrigible women characters, the author throws the blame on the society. O. Henry makes efforts to scientifically study their age and people. He carefully avoids politics, war and bloodshed in all their short stories. He presents the social milieus. He is the reformer at heart; He is a great educator of the public. His solutions to certain problems of women are apt and when followed would result in the betterment of the society. The intention of the writer is to improve their social well-being. Undoubtedly he contributes to the improvement of the society.

O. Henry had written two hundred and seventy stories. He presents extraordinary life and experiences. O. Henry had a genuine sympathy for the downtrodden and oppressed. (O. Henry 100 Selected Stories) 'They consist of a rich semi-realism, sentiment and surprise endings' Here are a few stories and his observations of women are brought out. O. Henry has been a keen observer of women. All the women characters portrayed by him are from his true understanding of the women. He presents a gallery of varying types of women from different walks of life.

O. Henry portrays the bond of married women in "Between Rounds". Though the couples are often found quarrelsome, there is a deep love and affection existing between the two. It is not unusual between Mrs. McCaskey and her husband to hit each other with vessels. Noise and shouting would be followed by wailing of the woman. One day, after the

initial and middle part of their usual quarrel, the woman was crying. She stopped it because she heard another unusual cry of Mrs. Murphy over the loss of her six year old nice looking boy. Throughout the day all the other family-people of the apartment clicked their tongue in pity and enquired about the loss of the boy. It was a sad plight for the mother. After six hours, the boy was found sleeping in interior part of the apartment. It was ironical, that Mrs. and Mr. McCaskey who stopped quarrelling and weeping, again had started to hit each other. It was sarcastic to note that the usual hitting, shouting and crying might have a pause, if another unusual shouting or crying is heard; otherwise their quarrel would be revived or continued. O. Henry humorously treats the couple by pointing out their mistake. As to the anecdote of the loss of the child, the mother is ostentatiously wild with cries and shouts. No time is left for Mrs. Murphy to have a peep into the lumber room or search for the child within the house. The author also points out that many mothers like Mrs. Murphy have the things on hand and never search for them, but weep vigorously without finding the solution.

The uncultured, brutally forceful indecent couple – Mrs. and Mr. McCaskey, and the foolishly wailing women like Mrs. Murphy are brought together for sheer fun and merriment by the author. O Henry highlights the foibles and mistakes of the people so that they might correct themselves. The author cleverly points out the wrong doing of the people. The author's language is pleasant and depicts every minute detail of the society. O. Henry is always after the poor and ignorant people. To project a view or communicate an idea, the author would go about giving too many details and factual information regarding the places, persons and things.

Here in yet another story "The Trimmed Lamp" by O. Henry portrays two marriageable and earning women. They

are roomers and boarders together. But they worked in different places. Lou was an ironer and Nancy was a shop girl. The author contrasts them subtly and beautifully. Lou was always after new dress; she had selected her fiancée, Dan, an electrician earning 30 dollars. Nancy had different taste and temperament; she wanted to have a millionaire 'catch' as her fiancée. Her departmental store is more than a college for attracting young men to shop there and ogle at girls. She knew the latest tune of music. She also knew a lot of art wares, dainty fabrics and culture. Lou was after material world. Nancy carefully judged men; both had different temperaments.

Dan was insisting on Lou to get married soon, but she refused. One day he took both Lou and Nancy to a big party. There, another rich fellow proposed to Nancy but she turned down the proposal. Till the last part of the story the reader is not able to guess as to whether who would marry who.

Finally, the news is that Lou had gone to Europe with one millionaire. After months Lou had come back and was casually asking about Nancy and her millionaire 'catch'. But she coolly replied that she is to be married to Dan the next week. When all the other young girls in the shop mocked at Nancy, she remained quiet and unperturbed. There was a calm breathing in her; she had already come to the conclusion that the known devil is better than an unknown angel. O. Henry opines that richness is elusive; it would not provide true love and affection. He suggests that it is better to be content with what one has. He reminds the readers that a bird in hand is worth two in the bush. Though Nancy appeared to have a mind for the rich boys, she was very careful in her selection. Because both were roomers. The mind of one woman had come to the other. Nancy had become the Persian trimmed lamp in her choice and life. She had also learnt a lot from other shop girls, when

they indulged in a kind of 'conference for defence and exchange of strategical theories of attack and repulse upon and against the world' (115). The practical worlds of young boys are known the girls.

Nancy had carefully studied men and manners; she knew successful and defensive argument. She knew who is decent and who would be indecent. She was not really after the rich. She was after a confident, good partner, like the patient, hardworking Dan. Though Dan had a wrong choice in the beginning, Nancy was not worried. She was giving a long rope to him and studied him, carefully and mentally compared and contrasted him with other young men. She was also waiting for the ripe moment and when the moment came, she proposed to Dan and happily got married to him. Lou had landed on the wrong choice and was weeping. This was noticed by a Police man. O. Henry conveys the message that the girls should select not the rich but the hard working.

In yet another story called "The Pendulum" O Henry presents a house wife called Katy with her husband John Perkins. The life of Perkins after marriage became easy. The wife was there to give him the newspaper, coffee, kiss, supper, salad, rhubarb or marmalade and all the requirements of him. Ceremoniously he would rise by 8.15 to play the 'pool' and would be back by 10.15 or 11 PM. On his return he would be drunk; even then he would receive a cupidian, matrimonial, 'affectionate and confectionate kiss' (123) from his better-half.

One day, as Perkins came home, all the things were scattered on the floor; a note was there, it said that Katy had left hurriedly to see her sick mother. To John Perkins the world around him became hateful; he hated himself; he did not want to go to play pool. He swore to himself that he would never go to play 'pool'. He ate and remained in the house as was instructed in the note by his wife. Without Katy, he could not even smoke or read the newspaper or

go to dance programmes. Though he had the freedom from the marriage bonds, he was terribly upset, annoyed and felt irritated during her absence. He felt awkward and remorseful, he sat in the parlour of Katy, tears came down his cheeks; he terribly felt that life would be a waste without Katy.

Kate arrived there by the next train, for her mother was all right. The Pendulum which was moving to the other extreme moved to the other. Immediately as he saw his wife returning, John Perkins lit a cigar and went out coolly to play 'pool'. The author clearly shows that the man changes for a short period during the absence of his wife, but remains the same unchanged during her presence. When the better half is present, the in built characteristics like assertion, pride, mania and attitudes came out but when she is absent the husband is thrown to the other extreme of self-pity, powerlessness and nihilistic attitudes. Kate is a loving wife, who really loves and does service to her husband. She is constant and remains the same. The husband only moves from one end to other like the pendulum. It is an apt title.

On the other hand, O Henry never makes use of weird nature in his short stories. He depicts a story about wife beating in "A Harlem Tragedy". Wife-beating by a drunken man is still there among the middle class. The author presents the story humorously. There were Mrs. Fink and Mrs. Cassidy living in the same apartment, when Mrs. Cassidy has found with bruises, Mrs. Fink prided that her husband would never beat her; but on the other hand, Mrs. Cassidy asserted very boldly that after beating he would be the sweetest man for the rest of the week. Mrs. Cassidy also exhibited her jewels and kimono which were given to her after beating. She also acknowledged that the hurts of her husband would pave the way to delight. Sometimes, they ended up in good supper, sex, matinee and operas. Mrs. Cassidy was 'happy to see the fight'. She

sped upstairs and hugged Mrs. Fink. She thought that Mrs. Fink was terribly beaten, but she came to know that Mr. Fink was washing the clothes with all the sounds.

O'Henry humorously conveys the message that Mrs. Cassidy had bitter experience of being beaten and the unpleasant narration about her husband's behaviour of beating is to stop it. Mrs. Fink's foolish provocations of her husband ended in a flat farcical moment. Fun and joy are there on the part of the readers to watch the two women; in spite of all her efforts to provoke her husband to beat, Mrs. Fink fails; the sounds of washing the clothes by Mr. Fink create laughter among the readers for a moment. Mrs. Cassidy thinks that they were the result of the quarrel.

O Henry teaches the ignorant middle class Mrs. and Mr. Cassidy that they should live a normal quiet and easy life like Mrs. and Mr. Fink. Mrs. Fink, is foolish to believe Mrs. Cassidy's words of wife-beating and the sweet scene that followed the beating. O Henry conveys the following truth that the wife of one family should never make a comparison of her husband with any other family. The life-style of one family should never be borrowed or copied by another family. The author thus educates the public in a humorous vein.

O. Henry would never allow his characters to perish. The characters might despair and reach the acme of sheer hopelessness in life. O. Henry points out that it was one state of life and realization. After such a realization of futility one must continue to live to enjoy the fruits of love, affection and humility. The chief aim of life is to live, seems to be the dictum of O. Henry. The oddities of life might present so many difficulties but man must come out of them. O. Henry advocates simplicity, and sharing of love and affection by one another.

In Mrs. Cassidy it was the outspoken treatment of wife beating. O. Henry reached the pinnacle of his art by portrays

the rough exhibitionism from with the faintest ray of light or hope, Mrs. Fink tries her luck in vain. The violent optimistic element could be seen in both the women. There is an eternal design in bringing together Hetty Peper, Cecilia and the onion man. Cecilia hardly could solve her own personal problem; she tries to commit suicide but the society does not allow her to die. Though she was frigid and deeply neurotic, she slowly recovers. There is an inevitable design that the onion man is the same fellow who saved Cecilia from drowning.

O Henry highlights that wife-beating is a social evil. Some middle class women think that it is an unavoidable part of the family life because they are economically dependent. If they have economic independency, they might feel free and act free. The author points out that Mrs. Cassidy and Mrs. Fink are ignorant. They should be taught to shed their ignorance. This story is a fine lesson for their betterment and education.

O Henry is sympathetic towards women. Women are puppets in the hands of men. Some of them are economically and socially independent. Yet others economically depend on men. Before marriage they are found with their friends. But after marriage they live with their husbands. Both the writers treat widows and widows' remarriage effectively. Even the woman who commit suicide because of the social constrictions, are brave and clear in intentions. The writers are not prejudiced against women when they portray cheating women and women who murder for love's sake. Women are very faithful, honest upright and unwavering. Women are radicals and productive in making quick decisions. Whenever the society throws them without job or life, they have unique approach to life, women have a voice of their own and a life of their own; they are closely associated with their friends or their partners. Most often they

are not found with their parents or brothers and sisters, but they live a lonely life of their own. Some women suffer from the patriarchal attitudes of the society and parochialism of the small community. The narrow-minded people dominate them. Yet they survive.

O Henry parodies the treatment of women in their respective social circles. Mostly the ills of women are with the society. Some women are helpless. O. Henry deals with the sufferings of female consciousness. Some women err because of their fault. Women are treated with respect and due regard by the writers. The women are morally sound; they have steady minds though they suffer from the social, economical psychological and pathological problems. He treats women with their cultural identification. His women are true to life. The women of O Henry are confident. They have the knowledge of the scriptures. They are clever. They shame the devils and Gods for their dint of faith and honesty. They sometimes, seem to sink pessimistically because of male domination oppression and suppression but came out optimistically to face life or meet death. O Henry is unique in their portrayal of women. He has explored the emotional depths of the women. He analyses the pressures of the society in which women suffer. He writes about mostly young women. The writer laughs at the sentiments, superstitious and sophisticated life of the snobbish fops.

As Percy Lubbock, in his 'The Craft of Fiction' points out it could also be rightly said about O. Henry that he is 'impartial observers' and he has 'a presumably omniscient force.' O. Henry 'stick to one point of view in a story and not shift arbitrarily' as Henry James says. "This is what one should say or this is not what one should say, should not be the philosophy of a writer.'

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