

Tess Slesinger (1905-1945)

Dr. (Smt.) Basobi Shrivastava*

Professor of English, S.L.P. Govt. P.G. College Morar, Gwalior (M.P.).

Abstract

The United States has produced some of the best novelists, playwrights, non-fiction writers and screenplay writers. Their contribution to English literature is remarkable. We also have some of the finest women writer who's works are remarkable in their own accord.

However, Tess Slesinger is one who made quite a contribution to American Literature, but could not outshine the kinds of Emily Dickinson, Anne Tyler George Sounders, Mark Twain, Edgar Allen Poe, to name a few. Her writings were outstanding though her literary career was cut short due to her untimely death at the age of 39. She was a writer with a skill for balancing deep emotions with satire. She was also the one who openly addressed the issue of abortion in her novel 'The Unpossessed' which was later made into a film.

She was a sensitive witness to the upheavals of her time - the economic depression, joblessness, insecurities and a sense of uncertainty among the people. She has recorded these insecurities in her writings.

She dedicated her only novel 'The Unpossessed' 'to my contemporaries' She embraced the cross-currents of her time. Her works show accomplishments. She has also written a number of film scripts which will long outlive her. Her literary contributions vouch for her talent and potential as an author.

Keywords: Hispanic writing, psychological realism, internecine warfare, Radicalized, prescient.

There is a great and proud tradition of American writing, including some of the world's best authors. Novels, plays, poems and short stories pour out of the United States with increasing number of women writers, African American, Native American and Hispanic writing making a strong contribution. American writers contribution to English literature is incalculable.

The credit of showing a new domain and opening the doors to a new realism goes to Mark Twain and Henry James. While James immigrated to Europe and embraced psychological realism in novels such as Portrait of a Lady (1881), Mark Twain used national dialect in classics like Huckleberry Finn (1885). The twentieth century has witnessed the flowering of American Literature.

Arthur Miller, Walt Whitman, Emily Dickenson, Hawthorne, Melville, to name a few, are known for their novels, poems, short stories and plays. Raymond Chandlers tried his hand at writing several screenplays besides novels and short stories. Some of his novels have been made into films.

However, there remains a name Tess Slesinger who couldn't be accorded a pedestal for her contribution to American literature. Tess Slesinger is a lesser known American writer with a collection of short stories, some fiction, some non-fiction a number of screenplays namely, The Good Earth, (1937) His brother's Wife, Girls School and a few more and only one novel 'The Unpossessed' during a short span of literary career as she died of cancer at the age of 39.

She was born on 16th July 1905 as Theresa Slesinger in New York to Anthony Slesinger, a Hungarian dress manufacturer and Augusta, a welfare worker, who later became a prominent psychoanalyst. Her family was Jewish. She moved from the sheltered, wealthy, assimilated Jews into the internecine warfare of New York.

*Corresponding Author: Mobile No. 7509165621

In December 1932, *Story* magazine published her first short story "Missus Flinders, which was based on her own experience of abortion and was perhaps the first of its kind to address and highlight the theme openly. Later she incorporated it as the final chapter of her only novel *The Unpossessed*' (1934). The novel satirizes the New York milieu in which she lived. The world of radicalized, educated Jews provided satire material for her in 'The Unpossessed' which was published two years after her divorce from her first husband Solow who was a journalist and her classmate. She also worked as a journalist for some years. She wrote book reviews for *Menorah* journal.

Her parents unconventional relationship influenced her and contributed to her pointed irony. It also helped shape her vision of marriage and the battle of sexes that was the subject of much of her fiction and screenwriting. She was unmistakably a product of her times.

She was a novelist with a skill for balancing deep emotion with biting satire. She became one of the first writers to explicitly discuss abortion. The central character Margaret Flinders of 'The Unpossessed' undergoes abortion to please her egotistical husband in order to 'free' him. Her skillful use of 'stream of consciousness' established a light tone while revealing her persona's despair. The reader identifies with her because her problems are questions and her attempts to solve them are processes. Missis Flinders published as a short story is a masterpiece of ironic understatement affirming both the pain and power to endure of her character.

The twenties were the years of hope and gusto, which gave enormous self-confidence to all individuals. Thirties presented a completely different side of life. The 1929 debacle sent shock waves throughout the country but the optimism of the 20's was still alive and the country was confident that it would tide over the ups and downs of business and economy. But it was not to be so. The inevitable effects of the depression began to be seen in the rising number of unemployed and migrants looking for jobs and money. Hundreds of workers were laid off, maids were dismissed and female members of the family took to work.

The mental state of the people now posed a more disturbing question than the economic problem. Being unemployed was a social disgrace and humiliation. It was a phase of crisis of faith: faith in one's own capabilities, faith in law, faith in leaders, faith in American progress. The whole structure of American society seemed to be collapsing into pieces.

Tess, was a mere sensitive witness to these upheavals. She has recorded in her stories both the economic insecurity and the pervasive sense of uncertainty in the minds of the people. "Jobs in the sky" reveals Tess's fine understanding of her milieu. It deals with the worst problem of the era-joblessness. There are other stories of Tess that show her explicit understanding of the 1930's. Her stories not only capture the socio-economic aspect of the times but also projects it in terms of its human drama.

The tensions and the sense of insecurities of the period are fully dramatized by her in the content of human relation and emotions. What makes the story characteristic is not merely the direct satirical attack on the social evil, but the ability to, ironically, seize the interrelatedness of the individual moment and the general milieu in terms of class-structure man- woman relationship and hopes and failures of the common man.

In addition to 'The Unpossessed,' her only published novel, Slesinger's writing credits include one book of short stories, *Time-The present* and several screenplays, including *the Good Earth* and *A tree grows in Brooklyn*, *Dance*, *Girl Dance*, *The Bride wore Red*, *His Brother's wife*, *Girls' School*. *Remember the day*.

Non-Fiction

How to throw a Cocktail party.

Writers on the Volcano.

Fiction_

1. After the Cure.
2. Ben Grader makes a Call
3. For Better, for worse
4. Mr. Palmer's Party

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5. Young wife
6. The old lady counts her injuries
7. The best things in life are three.
8. The Lonelier Eve

Dedicating her 1934 novel *The Unpossessed* 'to my contemporaries' and titling her 1935 collection of stories *Time-The present*, may have been eerily prescient of Tess. Her works not only embraced the cross-currents of the lived moment but her life was cut short by cancer. She died of cancer aged just 39. Her brief life spanned the continent from the heady world of New York left wing intellectuals to Hollywood's sunshine as a screenwriter. Her works show accomplishment, her short stories and her film scripts will long outlive her. Excerpts from newly discovered notes for another novel focusing on the real workers of Hollywood establish her importance as one who saw through the pretensions and complexities of her own time to basic human issues. Her literary contribution speak strongly of her talent and potential as a writer. Some of her works being unfinished could not see the light of the day due to her untimely death.

Her writings have been widely acclaimed by critics as 'impeccable', 'brilliantly written' and 'sheer genius'. She; co-wrote Pearl S. Bucks's screen adaption 'The Good Earth'. She also collaborated on scripts and screen adaptations of four films with her second husband. Tess's screenplay and fiction dealt with class-differences, sexual competitiveness, gender inequality and the problem of the artist in contemporary society.

Tess did not live to see the premiere of 'A Tree Grows in Brooklyn', She left a bulk of unfinished work, leaving behind her two children Peter and Jane.

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