

CASTE, SUPERSTITIONS AND OTHER ISSUES OF E 'LITE WOMEN IN INDIA IN THE EARLY 20TH CENTURY WITH REFERENCE TO "THE TAILOR'S NEEDLE" A NOVEL OF PROF. LAKSHMI RAJ SHARMA

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Abstract: The question of what happened in the past of ancestors' life always fascinates human beings. People preserve culture and bequeath it to the generations to come. This is more so generations ago. This paper is an attempt to understand the life of the elite women in the early twentieth century as written in the debut novel of professor Lakshmi Raj Sharma. The name of the novel is 'The Tailor's Needle'. Sir Saraswathi Chandra, the protagonist in the novel, is a towering personality. He was educated at Cambridge University. He has three children, Yogendra, his son, Maneka and Sita, his daughters. He bestows them with western education. The western education could not come to their rescue in dealing with the daily issues. The battles they had to face in consequence of western education and in the absence of native wisdom forms crux of the novel. The caste and class prejudice, superstitions are candidly mentioned. The novel directly takes us into the world of 1930's. Superstitions customs and other cultural dimensions are faithfully represented. The language employed suits to the timeline of the novel. The differences between flat and round characters are clearly shown. The choice of expression of words is apt for each character. The language of Maneka is discourteous and piercing where as that of Sir Saraswathi is diplomatic and thought provoking. In the end the writer candidly accepts the fact that the story is told for generations through the word of mouth and much of the stuff is attributed to the figment of his imagination.

Key words: Tailor's needle, Sir Saraswathi, Prof. Lakshmi Raj Sharma)

Our remedies oft in ourselves do lie, which we ascribe to heaven—Shakespeare

"My father has another way of tackling problems. He believes that you should be like the Tailor's needle that passes through every kind of cloth without discriminating..... that's another name for broadmindedness and tolerance."- Prof. Lakshmi Raj Sharma

At a time in our ancient past the caste system was created because it probably had a positive function then. But we had remained to it for far too long. When the function of something is over, it should not be allowed to linger on.

The true Brahmin is the one who guides people as leaders and showing them newer wisdom as time advances.

Nothing is right or wrong for all time.

--Sir Saraswathi Chandra Ranabakshi

Introduction: The novel 'The Tailor's Needle' has the source of legendary stories. It is the debut novel of Professor Lakshmi Raj Sharma. The novel covers the time line between 1917 and 1940. The national movement is taken on the backdrop and some of its episodes are obliquely mentioned. Professor Lakshmi Raj Sharma exhorts that he likes the comedy of manners of English and likes to revive it. The novel employs so many literary devices and it became an epitome of objective work. The writer writes with such a great aplomb that reader has nothing to do but pause and ponder in awe.

A Brief Summary Of The Novel: Sir Saraswathi Chandra Ranabakshi is a great figure of Kashinagar kingdom. He spent twelve years in the Britain as a Cambridge scholar. He returns to India as a barrister. He is a source of inspiration for many and never a spent force but a strong force to reckon with. He loves men and manners of the British. He is also an ardent admirer of Mahatma Gandhi. The king of Kashinagar kingdom, Maharaja Neelamani singh, appoints him governor of state and private secretary. He becomes linchpin of the kingdom. His is a fortitude governed by profound practical intelligence. But there is not a trace of

arrogance that could be seen in his behavior. Maharaja Neelamani singh dies. His elder son Ranbir is about to ascend the throne. Sir Saraswathi overhears the dialogues of the future king Ranbir. He then learns what was in the mind of Ranbir and leaves the kingdom after arranging the secure handing over of keys to the right heir. He feels sad that honour eludes him in his own country.

Sir saraswathi Chandra Ranabakshi leaves the Kashinagar for Mirzapur. He has the support of his cousin Durga Das Ranabakshi, his cousin, there. He purchases some land. Slowly his circle of influence grows. His natural inclination guides him to leave the kingdom and he always follows his moral compass to provide healthy atmosphere to his family. But the sweet memories of it evoke nostalgia in him. After some years he saves Kashinagar kingdom from being annexed by the viceroy of India. The King of Kashinagar repents for his deeds against sir Saraswathi and for snubbing him. The diplomacy of Sir Saraswathi assumes aura when he gets Jhanda Daaku arrested and protects Tona Mal, a local businessman from being robbed. His circle of influence grows from strength to strength as he builds

his credibility by brick by brick.

Sir Saraswathi and his wife Savitri have three children; Maneka and Sita are his daughters and Yogesh is his son. He appoints an English governess for their education. He firmly believes that children's faults are father's failure of responsibilities. How the children respond and react to the situations against the life's challenges forms crux of the novel. Maneka marries Mohan Koushal. But he marries only to teach her a lesson. He was a maniac. He was instrumental in the untimely death of his first wife, Meena. He blindly believes his handsome friend Dilip. It was he who killed both Meena and Mohan. Maneka thinks she has killed her husband and returns home. It has been proved after so much investigation by Sir Saraswathi and Mr. Dilip's heinous crimes have been revealed. Everybody heave a sigh of relief after learning that Maneka did no crime. Savitri's health deteriorates. They move to Dehradun for change in ambience and atmosphere. Sita is attracted by kunwar Rajeshwarji, who proposes her. Though no one in the family this proposal Sita makes the alliance happen with her free will. Savitri's health was looked after by her neighbour Gauri. She learns that Yogesh loves her. Though she loves him she does not reveal. She serves Savitri when the latter is on death bed. She wins the family with her good nature. Sir Saraswathi patiently bears the sad demise of his wife savitri. He arranges a huge meeting with his clansmen. He speaks at length. He requests his members to bless the *anuloma* marriage in his family. He also requests them to bless his entry into the freedom struggle. Thus he proves himself to be a person par excellence. Though he belongs to the early twentieth century, he lives in the twenty first century leading way beyond his times. He becomes complete person by accepting whatever comes to life and act accordingly. He elevates his vision of life by facing the travails and tribulations of life head on. A few English women also appear in the novel.

Roles Played By Women In The Novel:

Savithri: Savithri is the devoted wife of Sir Saraswathi Chandra Ranabakshi. She stands for native wisdom. Her unflinching devotion for her family is immense. She has sagacity to adjust herself to the changes in family and society. She is conservative in her new ideas but modern in thinking. She persuades her husband to permit the marriage of her son with Gauri, the girl who hails from lower caste, thus proving her to be a lady of wisdom. In this context she must be treated as the one who lives in the next generation by accepting modernity. She was taken to Dehra Dun to cure her of her illness. Dehra Dun's Salubrious weather entices her to stay for more time. She always has plenty of space for her children to grow and learn. She moves beyond cultural stereotypes. In the end Sir Saraswati Chandra makes his clan's people fall in line with his decision. He struck a refreshingly well balanced, nuanced and dispassionate and useful note while requesting all his relatives accept his son's marriage with a lower caste girl. By the time Sir Saraswathi and his son come with the good news of

Maneka's innocence a pall of gloom descends over their home. Savitri dies after extracting a promise from her husband about the marriage. She has immense belief in her husband's persuading power. She dies in peace after drinking deep in the cup of life of bliss. She smells the incipient unrest in the family and rises to the occasion. She presents herself as a beautiful woman in metaphorical term which states 'Honest labour bears a lovely face'.

Sita:Sita is the sweet daughter of Sir Saraswathi Chandra Ranabakshi. She is loved by one and all. She wins the readers' admiration with her sweetness and innocence. Self belief was her leitmotif. She helps Gauri build confidence in the process of the latter's marriage. She is sentimental. She treats all equally. She has a good attachment towards for her British governesses. Her advises to Maneka always fell in deaf ears. She has the gumption and bears the consequences of her actions which she cannot change. But with her belief in superstitions she cuts a sorry figure. At times she is mischievous to the hilt. She innocently believes King Kunwarji's words and agrees to his proposal of marriage, fully knowing well that his first wife died. Sita is seen determined to follow her own inclinations in choosing her husband. She is seen as a paragon of virtue. She proves herself to be a woman of substance.

Gauri: She is the neighbor of the Ranabakshis in their Dehra Dun house. Unlike the children of Sir Saraswati Gauri's life is never a roller-coaster ride. She not only enters into the service of Savitri but into everybody's heart, with her sweet nature. After Sita she earns the admiration of all. She is a good friend of Sita. Savitri always feels some strange attachment towards her. Yogesh cannot visualize his life without her. Savitri makes the marriage solemnize after extracting oath from her husband. Her love and devotion for her father and reverence for elders makes the Ranabakshis rethink of their upbringing. She speaks good of all and ill of none. She was even kind in her reaction after the poisonous words of Maneka. She deserves the best place in her life, the wife of Yogi and daughter in law of Saraswathi.

Maneka: "Mrs. Muddleton was heard to say that Indian women had been suppressed so long that they had to react sometime. Maneka was showing only signs of the future for Indian women". Prof.Lakshmi Raj Sharma Entire story revolves round Maneka. She is the central figure in the novel. At the beginning she has a care a pin attitude for moral values and tradition. She is guided not by values but by emotion and instinct. She always hurls insensitive and provocative remarks against everyone. She never hesitates to cross the limits of physical contacts with the collector and the question compunction does not occur to her. In fact she was courting trouble with him in both figurative as well as real terms. She cannot realize that admiration passes and love endures. She herself offers to him to be exploited. She wins our admiration and we revere her for her fortitude in solemnizing the relation between the collector Larry Stephens and Nimmu, a tribal woman

who worked as a domestic help at the collector building and was cheated by him. The *fakir* episode changes her episode changes her life altogether. She is possessive. She thinks she owns Yogender. Sir Saraswathi's words 'I failed to teach her how to make a home' speaks volumes about her. Three great mistakes of her life are to 1) having intimate relationship with Larry Stephens 2) Believe Mohan Koushal to be an innocent man and 3) To believe Dilip, Mohan's friend to be honest. It was Shrimal, her cousin who learned about her illicit premarital affair with Larry Stephens and split the beans about her abortion to Mohan Koushal. She is very bold and faces humiliations trials and tribulations at Nadir palace, her in laws house in Amritsar. She never let fear triumph over her hope. She was aghast after she learns that she is the second wife of Mohan and that he killed his first wife, Meena. She foolishly accepts a crime she has not committed. She has been under the curse without her realizing it. She is caught in the vortex of vicious cycle of events created by her husband and Dilip. But for the timely intervention of her father she would have landed in jail and repented for life time. She is always of the guilt that she had killed her husband. When she was absolved of her crime the whole family feels elated. Sir Saraswathi performs the operation with éclat. Maneka has real concern for her sister. When kunwar Rajeshwarji proposes Sita, she slaps him. She is bold, capricious at times. In the end she transforms into a good woman and helps in construct harmony and good relations between her family members. She loved and lived her life, on her own terms. She regains her composure in the end. She is the only dynamic character created by the writer.

Caste Element: In India, the caste system is a system of social stratification and which is now also used as a basis for affirmative action. Historically, it defined communities into thousands of endogamous hereditary groups called *Jātis*. Contemporary usage of the term *Jātis* and caste are synonyms. The *Jātis* were grouped by the Brahminical texts under four categories, known as varnas: viz Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas, and Shudras. Certain groups (Gerald D. Berreman (1972). de Zwart, Frank July 2000) (As mentioned in Wikipedia)

Caste element plays a prominent role in the Elite family members of the novel. The Ranabakshis are Brahmins by caste, believed to be the upper rung in the social order.

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The Gauri's belong to vaishyas, the third order of the social hierarchy. Inter caste marriages are a very rare phenomenon, especially in the early twentieth century. It is then that the marriage between Yogender and Gauri should take place. The western education makes the Ranabakshis liberal thinkers. The love for her children and immaculate vision and real understanding makes Savitri give consent to and make their marriage materialize. When Maneka lays her eyes upon Mohan Koushal she feels she was thankful to have belonged to the caste of Mohan. Thus caste element runs throughout the story. It is this element that is highlighted in the peroration speech of Sir Sarasawti Chandra Ranabakshi. He dwells at length as to who is a real Brahmin and the relevance of intra caste and inter caste marriages.

Superstitious element: Oxford dictionary defines superstition as "The belief that certain events cannot be explained by reason or science, or that they bring good or bad luck; fear of what is unknown or mysterious". One of the important episodes in the novel is superstitious element. It pervades everywhere. When a *fakir* comes to visit sir Saraswathi's house Maneka chides him and says if he does not go away she will fling a shoe at him. It is then the *fakir* curses her, which becomes reality in her life. Because of his curse she faces insurmountable problems. Another element is the swamy Jeevananda's hermitage and his forecast of his death. Jeevananda's says he awaits the impending visit of Sir Saraswati. The Nadir palace of Maneka's in laws house is full of ghosts, though fake or created. Mohan employs some goons to frighten Maneka. They make some tinkling sounds of *payal* and silhouettes to frighten her. The palace itself is found by her to be eerie and haunted. She listens to strange sounds and there was a dwarfish old man hanging from the sky light. To some extent they succeed. Macabre element and account of the presence of the spirit of Meena his deceased wife adds to the gruesome episode of the story. Maneka learns that those were the machinations of Mohan koushal to force her into silence and submission. The entire scenery in the Nadir palace is full of phantasmagoria. In this aspect the writer himself accepted the impact of Dickens on him. King Kunwar Rajeshwarji's dreams and others' believing in it also testify to this element.

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