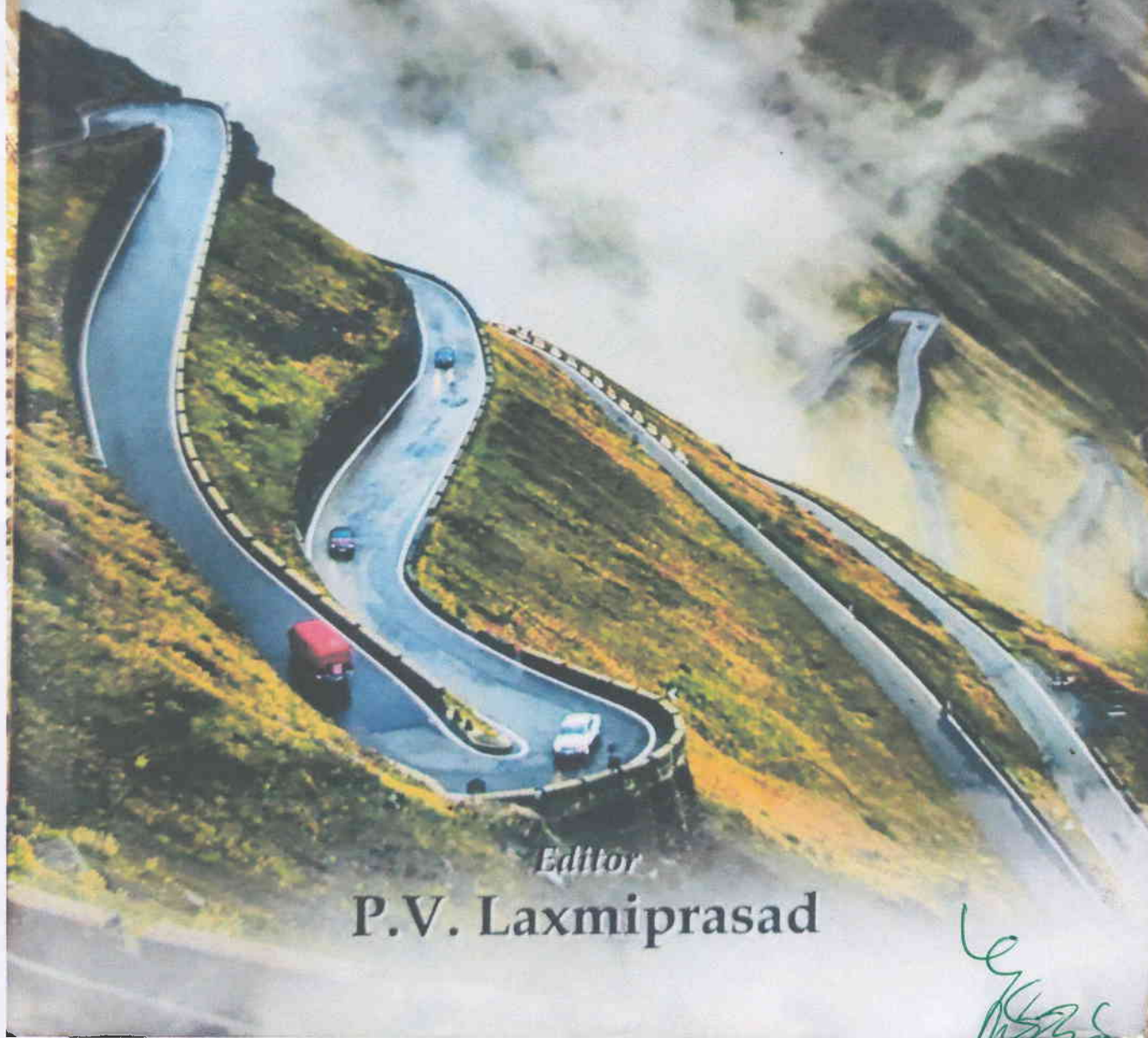




Critical Spectrum

The Short Stories of P. Raja



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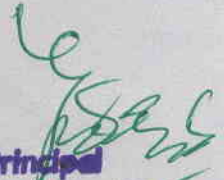
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The Fictional World of P. Raja: A Critical Study of *My Father's Bicycle*

K. Padmaja

P. Raja (b.1952) is a South Indian writer with a voluminous creative achievement both in English and Tamil. His writings include poems, short stories, one act plays, critical essays and other associated literary writings. An author of twenty one books, he has three collections of poems, four collections of short stories, three collections of folktales, and other books in criticism, history and translations to his credit. A teacher by profession he is an active contributor to the literary landscape of India. *My Father's Bicycle*, his third collection of short stories published in 2005, gives us a glimpse of the world that Raja inhabits and has carried on to the creative world in an appealing way. Dr. M.S. Ramesh rightly says, "It is as if his stories offer us at once a most faithful and a most imaginative record of his professional and domestic experiences in life!" There are eighteen stories in this collection encompassing various experiences and situations of the society around him. The writer does not lay much emphasis on the thematic portrayal but presents the stories in an anecdotal manner where through one or a few incidents he tries to observe and comment on the humanity and the society around him.

Though the setting does not become a significant factor as the backdrop for these stories, a careful study of the stories reveals that all the characters and the incidents in which they are presented are in an urban scenario except for the story "My Father's Bicycle".

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"For the first time in life I learnt that women are the worst enemies of women." (86). Her father and landlord is presented as considerate of her position. The writer might be depicting the reality that happens around, but making such an observation through a female character reinforces the stereotypical assessment of women and thus is regressive. The author seems to agree with the expectations of social conformity when he concludes the story with Sabitha getting married to the peon in her office who is a widower with a child. She is made to establish her identity saying, "Call me Mrs. Venu" (89) and here the author appears to share the opinion that whoever may be the man, whatever may be his social and economic position a woman has any identity only with a man.

This fictional world of Raja is captivating for the unique reason that he has seasoned all his stories with such incidental humour without being sarcastic. This is particularly so in the stories like "Swamis Dog", "When Wine Goes in", "Lost Shoes", "Darshan", "Ghosts", "The Bald", "The Untouchable Goddess" and "The Foreign Balloon". He transforms the grave situation into an easy and palatable one by capturing it all in one witty and humorous observation and these observations are reserved for the conclusion of the stories. The concluding statement in "Darshan", "God had the Darshan of Sundari" (57); or when Ganapathi's answer to his psychiatrist that he wants the third bullet for "...the orphanage keeper who allowed my so called parents to adopt me" (76) in "Ghosts"; or of Madhivanan's confession that he married two women, "One out of compulsion and the other out of necessity" (81) in "The Bald"; or the statement of Das in "The Foreign Balloon" that "My father is in Kuwait sir, he comes once in five years ..." (105) as an answer to the teacher's query that why does his mother possess those 'foreign balloons' instead of his father; are some such instances of hilarious yet thought provoking situations. The observation of Prema Nandakumar beautifully sums up the creative world of P. Raja. "...all fun and laughter. Even untouchability is grist to Raja's humour-mill and there is never a dull moment... They shock, thrill or amuse us by turns creating a whole population of characters."

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