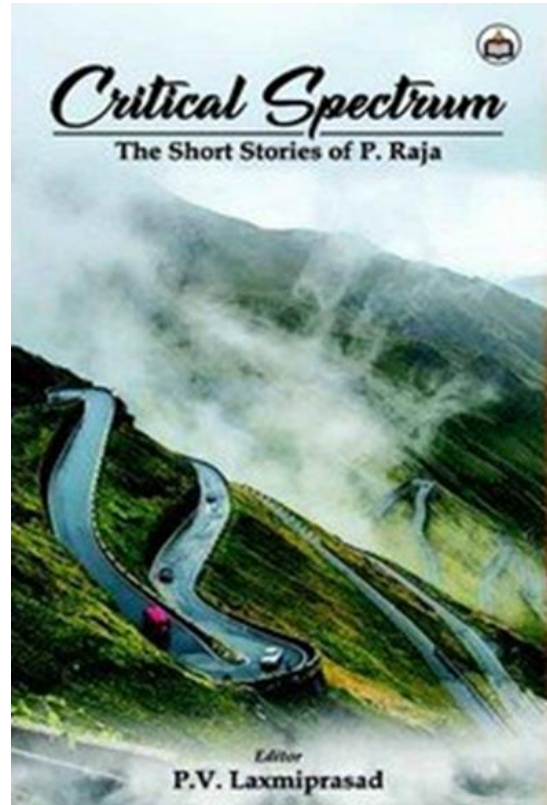


***Critical Spectrum: The Short Stories of P. Raja* Ed. P.V.Laxmiprasad, Authorspress, New Delhi, 2018, ISBN :978-93-87281-91-2, Pp 313, Rs 1200/-**

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Critical Spectrum: The Short Stories of P. Raja is the collection of twenty-seven critical essays on the story writings of P. Raja who has four story collections to his credit. As a writer, P. Raja who hails from Pondicherry, has 50 published books to his credit. He has 3000 publications in the form of poems, stories, one-act plays and History of Pondicherry. He is the recipient of several awards. Pondicherry University awarded him “the Best Writer Award” and the Governor of Pondicherry honoured him with the Creative Writer’s award. Against this backdrop, I have chosen his stories for a critical evaluation. To begin with, storytelling has been recognized as a source of entertainment over the years. In addition, it can bring joy and it



can bring reform. Sri Aurobindo remarked that “Laughter is the salt of existence”. True to his observation, P. Raja the short story writer on whose writings this proposal has been made writes short stories to amuse others and never to abuse others. He adopts the style that amuses his readers. We have always loved a good story and we have always had good story tellers. Indians are, no doubt, great story tellers. P. Raja is a worthy successor to Ruskin Bond and Manoj Das. In fact, everyone tells stories in their everyday life. Story-writing is essential to being human. Animals do not tell stories to each other.

Raja has published four collections of short stories namely 1) *The Blood and Other Stories* (1989); 2) *Kozhi Grandpa’s Chickens* (1997); 3) *My Father’s Bicycle* (2005); 4) *The Black Bitch and Other Stories* (2016). These four collections present a kaleidoscope of strange sights and impressions that he observed and felt. Most of his stories were broadcast on All India Radio, Pondicherry and later published them in newspapers and journals.

P. Raja has been mainly a story teller of subjective sentiments and personal quests but at the same time, he could assimilate into his narratives all that carry a universal impact and transcend time and space through his meditative analysis of human predicaments. He is known for his humour. He draws his characters largely from the middle class into which he has been steeped since birth. The key for his narrative is vocabulary and words come to him unsummoned and with words, he plays all sorts of trickery. A story teller mastering the short story form, his style was fashioned by his surroundings, his semi-urban environment and the inherited cultural ethos of his forbears. Wit and humour are his forte and these ingredients are always subtly woven into the fabric of his narrative technique, while traveling on something profound. All the critics who have worked on Raja's stories have amply demonstrated these features of story writing in his stories.

This critically edited volume consists of twenty eight brilliant research papers. To begin with, S Malathy through her paper entitled, "Innate Art of Story Writing: P. Raja's The Black Bitch and Other Stories" are well constructed. These avid works exhibit his solid craftsmanship. The plethora of his ideas and facts move elegantly with his lively and vibrant characters, his skill in invention and his due order, coherence and arrangement of the matter, enhance the whole texture of his composition. Anju S Nair in her paper "Architectures in the Stories of Raja" finds in his stories a variety of moods – a veritable feast of humour, irony, pathos and satire. There is a powerful autobiographical element in some of his stories. Another notable aspect worth mentioning is how the writer exhibits exemplary skill in bringing before his readers the multicultural Indian society through a description of the Pondicherry town and the influence of the French rule. The plurality of postcolonial India is also suggested in the language used by the common man, who combines his admiration for the French and his inclination towards traditional practice. He highlights how even after independence people are not free from colonial hangover. The characters also display multiculturalism. The notable marks of his writings are vitality and a keen sense of actuality. The vitality of his creations, the variegated richness of his total comprehension, and the purposive energy of his narratives carry all before them. K. V. Raghupathi traces certain trenchant philosophy in his scholarly paper. He observes that Raja writes with no hypocrisy. He presents the real-life incidents in a humorous way without twisting. His narration and description create such gripping sensation that readers hardly let out his stories. But the underlying tone of his humour is his subtle and sarcastic observations on the realities of life, though he does not claim that he has philosophy of anything. This is precisely what makes Raja distinct. He writes about the common, because he

honestly believes that such common incidents convey the essence of life when probed deeply. His stories are wonderful pieces of entertainment, heart-touching, that give us a smile, surprise, sometimes shock and yet sometimes disbelief. DC Chambial is another critic who finds that Raja is a universal writer. According to him, each story of the book deserves and needs, at least, an article for thorough understanding and explication; but, space and time, both sit heavy on me to restrict my examination to the present study. A methodical assessment of these stories reveals P. Raja as an omniscient writer gifted with humour in recording human manners and mannerisms narrated with dexterity besides a master psychologist understanding their minds through their emotions and behaviour observed keenly and meticulously. G. Srilatha examines the techniques in the short stories of P. Raja and concludes that the literary techniques employed in all the short stories are similar. The plot is designed in a flashback technique. The styles of these stories are dramatic visualization, humour and irony. The stories are ironical. Through the dialogues uttered by the main character the readers can analyse the story. Gobinda Sahoo has studied humour and satire in Raja's Kozhi Grandpa's Chickens for a critical analysis. He evaluates that in P. Raja's stories, we find the satirical comments on humanity and many of them bear some sharpness. There is no doubt in it that, contrast is the main weapon of comic literature. The presentation of the difference between what people appear to be and what they really are arouses real humour. P. Raja is a master of using this technique in his stories. It is the inconsistency of ideal and the real that has been the centre of his main concern of expression. R. Janatha Kumari has studied the collection Kozhi Grandpa's Chickens and found certain useful lessons of life. She writes that everyone knows that life is precious. If life is so important, the value of life is so important. Values and morals can not only guide but inspire and motivate, giving energy and zest for living and for doing something meaningful. Our purpose is not to make a living but a life – a worthy, well-rounded, useful life. G. Satya is another critic who has studied a few stories for a kaleidoscopic view of life. The stories make a profound impact on a sensitive reader by their striking originality, imaginative presentation and humanistic appeal. They are written in a crisp, easy and enthralling style and bear testimony to the author's compassion and concern for humanity, his hatred of shame and cruelty and capacity to see through human follies, pretensions and prejudices. B. Nagamani finds Raja's stories as largely humourous and inviting. The narrative techniques are entrancing and arouse reader's curiosity. The suspense is sustained. Jyothi Susan Abraham has critically assessed the collection My Father's Bicycle and finds the stories absorbed in the digital world. Raja's short stories transports the post-digital reader to the pre-digital India reminding the past without

pretensions and overstatements of events, locations, culture and emotions showcased in the narration. Alisha Vandana Lakra has studied the collection *The Blood and Other Stories*. The main themes are like the portrayal of womanhood, the urban rural features and the socio-cultural features in his stories. Another critic G.M. Gayathri has explored the realistic elements. According to her P. Raja has been mainly a storyteller of subjective sentiments and personal quests but at the same time he could assimilate into his narrative all that carry a universal impact and transcend time and space through his meditative analyses of human predicaments. With a view to capturing the authentic flavour of the situations he describes, he uses the techniques of transliteration since literal exactitude in such places does fail to convey the spirit of the Tamil expressions like Amma (mother), Aayya (Grandmother), amnavasai (new moon day), bidi (cigarette). These expressions effortlessly bring before our mind's eye the cultural ethos and social ambiance that form the backdrop in all his stories. Each of the expressions is a pigment of the cultural picture. R. Kavitha Devi has dealt with simple love and small desires from the collection *My Father's Bicycle*. Following the trend of the epic writers, Raja also, for most of his stories, has found themes for his short stories in the simple love and small desires of human beings which he has treated in such a humorous way blended with pathos inducing tears in the eyes of the readers. The short stories of Raja written in such a fluid and casual language make a lasting impression in the heart of the readers who after reading his one story are tempted to read more and more written by him. Anish K Joseph has applied the principles of Logotherapy and observed that a reading of P Raja's short stories using the perspective provided by the principles of Victor E Frankl's "Logotherapy" leads to the exploration of varied inherent potentials in human beings with which one can surpass the pessimistic thoughts associated with experiences of pain, guilt and death. A movement from the pangs of the 'tragic triad' to a state of 'tragic optimism' has to be achieved. Arti Chandel is another critic to trace out 'Ahalya's Curse', a story by Raja on empathy and feministic perspectives. P. Raja presents the tale of Ahalya from a feminine perspective, giving the story a new colour on the one hand and offering an indomitable and unforgettable voice to Ahalya, the age-old heroine of Indian mythology and a minor woman character in Hindu scriptures like Ramayana and Mahabharata. The reader not only rereads the story of Ahalya, but also delves deep into the politics of man-made society, its patriarchal norms and the position of women in such a society. The writer's empathy with Ahalya, in particular and women in general, brings out many of the social evils prevalent in a society and wrongs done to women, such as the commoditization of women, mismatched and loveless marriages, loss of identity, indifference to and neglect of feminine qualities, needs and

desires, suppression of female sexuality, and punishing women or branding them as unchaste and immoral without knowing the truth and without providing them their say. K. Padmaja in her paper on My Father's Bicycle deals with the fictional world of Raja. It is at once 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 "Swami's 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. Poonam Dwivedi has studied urban-rural life as twain meets from the stories and observed that Raja's diction and style of tale telling is unique as the beginning and ending has inseparable bonding. The usage of dialogues in between in the progression of the stories is unparalleled as it reaches its acme in the story totally based on dialogues and in the end the dialogue delivered "You want me to repeat it?" (53). The graphic details of characters, surroundings, metaphorical and analogical references make the poetic prose vivid and lively. The thematic attempt of commonality and blend of rural and urban is awesome. Next, Palakurthy Dinakar has studied the characters in the short stories of Raja. He evaluates that P. Raja's stories represent the kaleidoscopic view of ethnic India and the characters depicted in them are larger than the life. They offer a great variety of fragrance to the readers who could not resist themselves without having a kind of affection for the characters created by Raja. They analyse the glimpse of Indian culture with humanistic concerns. Though Raja made a mention of his characters as entirely imaginary and fictitious, they resemble the characters around and reflect the original nature of human beings. Vijaya Babu Koganti is another critic to bring out humour through the study of collection *The Black Bitch and Other Stories*. He estimates that Raja's stories mainly reflect local themes, local characters and everyday incidents of a single location. They never focus on serious internal conflicts or complex human relationships. We cannot compare Raja either with R.K. Narayan or Ruskin Bond, as the focus of the other two writers is different. R. K. Narayan's stories carry an undercurrent of pathos and they talk about human nature. Anita Arul has depicted humanity through emotional investment through her paper. Raja's stories are a phenomenal contribution to literature as they are pregnant with profound values attached with human emotions. Every individual must come forward to respect other's feelings. Values must not change according to situations. It must be the same at all costs. Raja's short stories highlight the most hidden need of the hour - the compassion, understanding, loyalty, fidelity, affinity, importance of relationship, satisfaction

and so on. The responsible attitude of Raja is to soften the cruel impact of some strange behaviour. Anantha Lakshmi Hemalatha has worked on the theme of carnal desire in 'Ahalya' and 'Nightmare' for both transgression and transcendence. She has examined these aspects and showed that Ahalya and the Queen of King Bharthruhari exhibit sexual behaviours that are non-ideal and even unethical according to traditional norms. Both these women face the ire of the scriptures as their encounter is regarded as purely erotic, not resulting in procreation. Their transgression blemishes them and denies them the high status and reverence accorded to women like Sita and Savitri. The scriptures give so much importance to 'Pativrata Dharma', the devotion and fidelity to the husband which is said to be the ultimate duty of a wife. Ahalya and the Queen fail in their 'Pativrata Dharma' as they seek sexual fulfilment outside marriage. But what happens to the 'Pati's Dharma'? it is not the duty of the husband to fulfil the sexual needs of his wife? Raja's women, in these two stories, respond to their inner urges and take a bold step in order to satisfy their carnal desires. They can be regarded as independent women who make their own decisions, take risks and are driven by curiosity to experiment with the extraordinary asserting themselves against the patriarchal norms. And while the patriarchs consider the act to be 'transgression', the sexual female considers this to be 'transcendence'.

D. Gnanasekaran is another critic who has studied stylistic analysis in the stories of Raja. Language has various levels: (i) graphological (form as in print), (ii) phonological (sound, stress, tone), (iii) lexical (word), (iv) syntactic (phrase/sentence), (v) semantic (meaning) and (vi) discourse/pragmatics (context-based meaning). As Ferdinand de Saussure says, language is a system of systems. It is akin to building a structure, involving several levels of construction such as the choice of basic ingredients like bricks, sand and cement that are proportionately mixed to lay a foundation and then build the superstructure, of course, with the manpower possessing the required skill. In the field of creativity, the creative writer is the skilled person who is supposed to have mastered the art of arranging the linguistic materials imaginatively and, if he/she feels, experimentally too in his/her unique way to create a work of art like a short story. Ruby Davaseeli has taken up the comparative study of O. Henry and P. Raja and finds that O. Henry and P. Raja deal with twists and turns, humour and irony, characters and types, entertainment and education, and have thus excelled in their art of storytelling. Sheeba S Nair has employed the deconstruction of myth for her critical study of a story by P. Raja. According to her, the brilliance of the author is displayed in the way he concludes the story. The anger of a woman towards the discriminative and exploitative politics of society and its people who entertain this bias explodes through Ahalya who sanctimoniously warns the patriarchal men

like Gauthama to “think twice before you curse me”. V. Sunitha has studied the short stories of P. Raja and according to her evaluation, it is plain that every story of the sophisticated writer P. Raja has some strong message to persuade and advocate. Banibrata Goswami has studied the art of storytelling by P. Raja. He concludes that Raja’s art and craftsmanship deserve better appreciation. Time will supply more. But one has to wait for that. According to Lily Arul Sharmila, Raja grasps the characters from the eminent domain and all walks of life. The necessary preoccupation with the images of the characters provides valuable insights into human life. The objects of the short stories are human actions that possess an inherent interest and certainly most powerfully appeal to the great primary human affection. The writer shows fundamental excellences of art in a splendid degree with richer fertility of thoughts and a fabulous gift of narrative and descriptive powers. The stories in the broadest view connote a personal and direct impression of life constituting credentials according to the intensity of impression. The stories disclose general things in the manner best known to himself. The pictures and the ambience that he creates in the text extrapolate author’s sensitivity to the world. Finally, P. Raja, the short story writer, presents his art, style, techniques, influences and experiences behind his story writing.

Thus the short stories of P.Raja are brilliant and are rooted in wit, satire and humour. It is his sheer brilliancy that P.Raja entertains his readers all through the stories. Humour and satire are his chief forte. Readers take delight in reading them. He makes simple themes look like extraordinary. His strength in selecting the stories is his sole observations. He has a keen eye for looking around the society. A story writer picks up the observations and experiences of his life for story writing. P.Raja is definitely a story writer whose experiences are visible throughout the collections. His stories offer, without an iota of doubt, a pure delight and entertainment. His merit and class are evidently clear in the way he presents the settings, locale and themes. Laxmiprasad edited this book brilliantly.