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Embers of Social Revolution in Rajinder Singh Bedi's Short-Stories

Ayesha Irfan

Abstract. Bedi acknowledges that he writes about the common people, their joys and sorrows and that he did not strictly subscribe to any ideology. He feels that it is his social realism and his candid approach to writing that led people to label him as a progressive and he did not mind this tag. Like his contemporaries he could not help being stirred by the partition of India, and this is often the backdrop of major literature produced during this period including that of Bedi. The writer who had the greatest influence on Bedi's craft was Anton Chekov. Bedi wrote nearly eighty short stories, including "Garam Coat", "Lajwanti," "Apne Dukh Mujhe de do", "Kalyani", "Graham", "Where is the Funeral Procession", "Give me your Sorrows", "Too Tall for Marriage", "Dus Minute Barish Mein," and "Vitamin B". Bedi's stories candidly display human emotions and his subjects belong to the middle and lower middle-classes. With sharp precision he navigates the everyday lives of common people; while placing them in their cultural milieu, he explores the social inequalities and economic problems that middle classes in India face.

Keywords: Rajinder Singh Bedi, Rashid Jahan, "Lajwanti", "Quarantine", "Maithun", "Vitamin B", "Graham", "Give me Your Sorrows", "Bas ek Cigarettee", "Dus Minute Barish Mein," Anton Chekov.

In his essay in the *Social Scientist* Aijaz Ahmad makes the following observation:

The Indian Progressive movement ... represented the condensation of a great many values that were recognizable in the culture at large – a point of confluence ... between socialist imagination, the progressive arts as they were evolving around the world, the anti-colonial movement that was its immediate political context, the various reform movements that had preceded and lived alongside even the anti-colonial

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movements as such, and behind all that, the values of the various humanisms and medieval theisms, ... as the Bhakti and Sufi-Sant traditions. (By) reform movements, I mean the whole range: from the anti-feudal, anti-caste movements to the emancipation and education of women, to the reform of prose itself, in several languages. Yes, it is true that women writers such as Rashid Jahan, Ismat Chughtai, Razia Sajjad Zaheer, Khadeeja Mastoor and others had been inconceivable in the entire history of Urdu literature before the advent of the progressive movement. (28-29)

A manifesto was formulated in 1935 called for the duty of Indian writers to stimulate progress in the country by inculcating the spirit of scientific rationalism in literature, and to strengthen resistance against the forces of feudalism, imperialism and decadent morality. It resisted orthodoxies and the centuries old escapist romantic-spiritualist tradition. It looked for new modes of apprehension and new idioms of assertion on questions of family, religion, sex, war. To quote a few lines of the Progressive Manifesto from the *Left Review*, 1936:

It is the duty of Indian writers to give expression to the changes taking place in Indian life and to assist spirit of progress in the country' by introducing scientific rationalism in literature. They should undertake to develop an attitude of literary criticism that will discourage the general reactionary and revivalist tendencies on questions like family, religion, sex, war and society. They should combat literary trends reflecting communalism, racial antagonism, and exploitation of man by man. (Rickword 2)

Along with Marxist oriented writers, this movement was supported by political and philosophical thinkers Jawaharlal Nehru and Rabindranath Tagore. Among the writers associated with this movement are Hasrat Mohani, Maulvi Abdul Haq, Josh Malihabadi, Firaq Gorakhpuri, Ahmad Nadeem Qasimi, Aziz Ahmad, Hayatullah Ansari, and Sa'adat Hasan Manto. Urdu Writers Sardar Jafri, Kaifi Azmi and Jan Nisar Akhtar were also the card holders of the Communist Party. Khwaja Ahmed Abbas, Rajinder Singh Bedi, Sahir Ludhianvi and Ismat Chughtai were not members of the Communist Party, but supported this movement. *Taraqqui pasand* or progressive writers were a coterie of writers, who believed in social equality; revolted against sexual oppression; discarded the notion of an all-powerful religion, critiqued religious obscurantism and drew attention to the blind faith and social-cultural and religious practices in Hinduism and/or Islam that led to the marginalization of sections of the society. They

brought about social, intellectual and political transformation in the Indian subcontinent and mostly comprised upper middle-class intelligentsia, including journalists, academics, writers and scientists with Marxist orientation.

One of the most significant exponents of the Progressive Writers' Movement was Rajinder Singh Bedi who wrote short stories, novels, plays, and also scripted dialogues of famous films like *Mughal-e-Azam*, *Madhumati* and *Devdas*. In his interviews he recollects how he came in contact with the Progressive Writers' Movement that fostered in him a new awareness and realization about himself and his art. He worked briefly for cinema but he says that this was out of lack of choices available to him, and he left it when he realised that the driving force here was commerce and not arts (Bedi, *Mahfil* 139). Bedi wrote for more than a dozen art films, but their modest success went on to solidify his reputation as the "father of Indian parallel cinema" (Naeem, *The Friday Times*). He wrote nearly eighty short stories, including "Garam Coat", "Lajwanti", "Apne Dukh Mujhe de do", and "Kalyani". Bedi's stories candidly display human emotions and his subjects belong to the middle and lower middle-classes. With sharp precision he navigates the everyday lives of common people, while placing them in their cultural milieu, he explores the social inequalities and economic problems that middle classes in India face. He is more interested in the ordinary than in the unusual in human nature, and he presents his characters sympathetically and tenderly. He weaves his plots from conventional and everyday experiences and with his insightful vision, he presents these experiences with an ease and grace of his own.

Like his progressive contemporaries Chughtai and Manto he read and imbibed a lot from Hemingway, Maupassant, Chekhov and Faulkner, as also, contemporary Indian writers. In "Major Trends in the Urdu Short Story" Gopi Chand Narang points out that the Urdu short story after 1936, diverged into two separate lines:

...the sociological story, represented by Bedi, Krishan Chander and Qasmi, and the psychological story dominated by themes of sex, as best seen in the writings of Manto, Chughtai and Mumtaz Mufti. After Premchand, Manto and Bedi emerged as the best short story writers in India. They were different from each other in the sense that Maupassant was different from Chekhov. Manto dealt sardonically with middle class morality and conventions, with the ignoble in life, and particularly with the coarser aspects of sexual relations. (115-116)

Bedi acknowledges that he writes about the common people, their joys and sorrows and that he did not strictly subscribe to any ideology. He feels

that it is his social realism and his candid approach to writing that led people to label him as a progressive and he did not mind this tag (Bedi *Mahfil* 142), like his contemporaries could not help being stirred by the Partition of India, often the backdrop of major literature produced during this period.

The writer who had the greatest influence on Bedi's craft was Anton Chekov. "Chekov had the greatest impact on me because he does not attempt to tell a story. He converses with life and presents a slice of life before you in such a way that "I understand as if this is also the feeling in my own heart." (Naeem *The Friday Times*). Bedi's stories according to Naeem "are memorable because of the plight of their heroines: women who are victimised by caste, feudalism, lust and patriarchy but who also harbour sexual desire in their myriad roles as lover, mother, wife, daughter and sister" (Naeem *The Friday Times*). Similarly, Narang praises his portrayal of women and the Indian domestic life that is most sincere; he observes how Bedi started with models provided mainly by Chekhov, and that gave a vision and direction to his understanding and portrayal of human relationships, his portrayal of Indian married women is genuine and remarkable. He observes in "Major Trends..."

(Bedi) is more interested in the ordinary than in the unusual in human nature, and he presents his characters sympathetically and tenderly. Weaving his plots from commonplace events, his penetrating vision probes underlying relationships, which he presents with ease and grace of his own. His portrayal of Indian domestic life and Indian married woman is superb, and some of his characters like Indu, Rano and Lajwanti have become immortalized in Urdu as the most realistic, sincere and sympathetic penetrations of Indian womanhood." (116)

Bedi renders most empathetic portrayals to women, children and the elderly in his stories. The women he portrays are the soul of Indian family life, and they are full of empathy and kindness and they make sacrifices for the sake of their families and their sacrifices are vital to the happiness of their family and the society. As Narang observes:

Bedi does not idealize woman, but the suffering, enduring and tolerating nature of his characters imparts to them a touch of sanctity, a breath of greatness. The woman in Bedi's stories, whether a beloved, a wife or a mother is the suffering soul of creation, the all-pervasive spirit, the mother of the whole universe" ("Major Trends" 116).

Bedi captures the multiplicity and diversity of Indian middle-class life in his stories, and like Chekhov he appreciates the subtlety of life, and never

fails to capture a bit of sunshine even in a tragic situation in life. To quote Narang again:

His stories have the simplest themes, but are permeated by an artistic quality of unfailing charm. His ability to create atmosphere and delineate characters, and his realization of seemingly insignificant but psychologically important aspects of life have made him the most noted short-story writer of the post-Premchand period. ("Major Trends" 117)

Partition happens to be the most significant historical event which impacted Indian literature. With widespread communal animosity and riots, the compositeness of the sub-continental culture suffered a serious setback. The mayhem and loss of our cultural values was most demoralizing for writers many of who suffered the impact of the Partition at first hand and this is profoundly reflected in their literature. "The traditional romantic hero who, for a change, sometimes put on the face of an idealist or a sentimental revolutionary, now disappeared. He was replaced by the uprooted migrant, the abducted girl and the man with a guilty conscience" (Narang "Major Trends" 119). Bedi too fled Lahore, the city he loved, to protect his family. The publishing house he had founded also shut down.

"Lajwanti" by Rajinder Singh Bedi explores the trauma of women who were abducted during the violence and mayhem following the partition of 1947. Bedi unravels the other side of silence (Butalia 5). Lajwanti in Punjabi is the "touch-me-not flower" that shuts its leaves upon human contact. It is also the title of Rajinder Singh Bedi's short-story that displays Sunderlal's reunion with his abducted wife Lajwanti. Sunder Lal is social-worker, and he is appointed the secretary of the committee that helps in rehabilitating the women recovered from the other side of the border to their husbands and parents. Sunderlal is portrayed as an abusive husband whose wife went missing during the Partition and he now actively campaigns for the return and rehabilitation of abducted women. Many of these women had to kill themselves out of shame, many suffered when they were not accepted by their immediate family members. This story illustrates the emotional upheaval that Sunderlal experiences when it is his turn to take his wife back into his home.

Sunderlal is at first overcome with joy when one day he finds that his wife Lajwanti is amongst the abducted women who have been returned. Then he is overwhelmed with doubts that probably she was happy with the man with whom she has spent the past few months, for she is looking fairer and healthier than before she was abducted. He keeps his word of never beating her again and is considerate towards her, but she finds that she has been rehabilitated but not accepted by her husband. Lajwanti longs to be

accepted by her husband, and wishes to unburden herself of her past, by narrating to him about the time that she has spent away from him. Bedi very realistically portrays the agony of her soul when Sunder Lal refuses to speak to her, he treats her very compassionately and tenderly, as if she was made of glass and would break at the slightest touch, but Lajwanti discovers that her past and her real self cannot be restored to her.

“Quarantine” another short story by Rajinder Singh Bedi, immensely relevant in today’s context for it finds a close approximation to our experiences during the recent Covid-19 pandemic. Based on the plague epidemic in India before the Partition, it is the story of a William Bhagav, a sanitation worker who treats his patients with compassion and inspires a doctor to follow suit. Bhagav looks after the quarantine centre of the locality where people infected with the plague are housed. The story is a dialogue between Bhagav and Bakshi, the doctor appointed to oversee the quarantine centre and prevent the plague spreading across the town. Bedi narrates how one would realize that there was a plague infected person in the neighbourhood only when a corpse would leave a household for the last rites amidst loud wailing. This story finds resonance with our experiences during the Covid-19 pandemic, particularly because most often, people feared being quarantined. So much so, they did not let doctors or neighbours know whether anyone in the family showed symptoms of the virus.

Bedi’s story reiterates how medical workers are afraid of getting infected and maintain a distance from infected patients. Only Bhagav, a sanitation worker is not afraid of them, and he performs his duty towards the people in his locality by instructing them to take required precautions and maintain hygiene. He regularly sprays lime to disinfect the locality and advises people not to step out of their homes. Bhagav wakes up at three o’clock in the morning, and cleans the locality, performs the last rights of dead bodies, when their own relatives are scared of touching them and sprinkles lime upon the streets. When people are afraid of stepping out of their homes, he does their chores. He takes out time to speak to the infected patients and be kind to them, even when the doctors and immediate family members are devoid of empathy for them. Dr Bakshi realizes that he can never manage to match up to the courage, commitment and empathy that Bhagav demonstrates for his patients, for he was terrified of going to the quarantine centre. It was Bhagav who assisted him when patients were required to be handled physically or cared for, personally. Silently Bhagav points out the apathy of medical staff towards the-plague infected people and questions work ethics of medical staff, including those of Dr Bakshi.

Bhagav commitment continues at the quarantine centre when his own

wife is inching towards death, and he returns to work immediately after her passing. It is his commitment that compels the doctor to extend his work beyond his professional duty as a health worker. The medical staff now reaches out to people in the slums of the town and treats patients here with compassion and commitment. As a result, the entire team of medical staff under Dr Bakshi is facilitated and praised for their work. But Bhagav, like so many sanitation workers in the recent pandemic, does not get any recognition for his hard work and compassion.

In the eponymous “Kalyani”, Bedi powerfully explicates the life of a prostitute. It boldly foregrounds her sexual experiences with Mahipat, her customer. He depicts the utter powerlessness of a woman in an unequal sexual relationship, and examines how sex and sexuality remain spheres of assertion of male supremacy. Ironically, Kalyani can’t help exulting over giving birth to a male child, that she proudly displays to Mahipat.

Bedi’s “Grahan” or “The Eclipse” metaphorically depicts the eclipse of values in a lower middle-class household. This is a story of a woman, Holi, who is into an abusive marriage in a Kayastha family; day in and day out, she has to single-handedly do the daily chores of a large family of four children, three men, two women and four buffaloes, with diligence. Her entire morning is spent in scrubbing and cleaning the house and cooking, with no respite. Holi suffers regular beatings from her mother-in-law and her husband despite fulfilling all her duties. She is expecting her fifth child and she wishes to escape this drudgery, by fleeing to her parents’ home twenty-five miles away, across the river. She has often thought of escaping but her courage has always failed her. The empathy and understanding with which Bedi sketches the character of Holi and his use of the mythology endows a mystical quality to this story. To quote Narang; “Her mother-in-law is the Rahu of Hindu mythology while her husband is the Ketu, both preying upon the poor woman. Her husband is out to suck her blood and impose upon her a male tyranny. But the tyranny of the society is far more cruel than the diabolical designs of the eclipse.” (Narang in *Rajinder Singh Bedi Selected Short Stories* 9) Bedi narrates how, after suffering abuse at her husband’s house, she arrives on the banks of the river to take a bath, on the day of an eclipse. She finds a boat leaving for her village of Sarangdevgram, and has an urge to escape. However, she has no money to pay for the journey. She comes across a man called Kathu Ram who hails from her parents’ village, and is known to her from her childhood. On the pretext of providing shelter to her while waiting for the next boat to arrive, he tries to molest her. Bedi describes this pregnant woman’s escape from an attempted rape poignantly: “At that time, the moon in the sky was in complete eclipse. Rahu and Ketu had in their callousness extracted their debts to the full.”

(Narang in *Rajinder Singh Bedi Selected Short Stories* 43) Professor Narang makes this observation upon the story:

In this manner, this beautiful moon is ravished by Ketu, that is, tarnished by one eclipse and then by another. The significance of the story lies in the fact that here a myth has been used with such telling effect as to invest the story with a down-to-earth quality. In the finite we see the infinite and the outer mundane reality sparks off the vision of spiritual reality. (Narang in *Rajinder Singh Bedi Selected Short Stories* 9)

“Maithun” is a brilliant testimony to the exploitation of craftsmen who have no access to the market. Through Magan Tikley who deals in antiques and second-hand articles and owns a junk shop, Bedi elucidates how the market exploits craftsmen. Magan is middle-aged and single, but he loves money. Bedi introduces him with the ironical observation: “A Hindu would readily sell a loving brother like Joseph and a beautiful wife like Padmini” (Bedi in *Rajinder Singh Bedi Selected Short Stories* 156) for the sake of money. This is followed by Bedi revealing how Magan exploits and dupes a shy, young artist Kirti, who comes to his shop to sell her finely crafted sculptures in wood or stone, by underpaying. She is only eighteen and unaware with the market-value of her exquisite sculptures. The story opens with Kirti paying a visit to Magan’s shop, and Siraj in the next shop makes obscene gestures at Kirti. Magan marvels at the pieces of sculpture Kirti brings him, and knows he is going to make a fortune out of them, but at the same time he deliberately denigrates her art, and tricks her into parting with the pieces for a small sum of money. Kirti has lost her father and her mother who is on her death bed also passes away. Kirti learnt the art of making sculptures from her father, Narain, who was a brilliant craftsman, and was exploited similarly, before her. Now it is the turn of marketeers like Magan, to exploit Kirti, not only by deprecating her beautiful art and underpaying, but also by covertly making sexual overtures at her and assaulting her modesty, by hinting that she could make more money by sculpting nudes or erotic sculptures. Bedi demonstrates how this extraordinary craftswoman is subjected to sexual exploitation and falls a victim to the mean intentions of these men who control the market where she sells her artifacts.

“Where is the Funeral Procession” (“Janaza Kahan hai?”) commences with the central protagonist waking up to a bad dream and hearing a sound of sobbing; he recalls that the day when Gandhi was assassinated, he had woken up to the sense that the sunlight had been blotted out. He wondered if this sobbing was his wife’s, who lived in a small village in Punjab, for they were estranged, and he resided in Bombay where he worked. He had been unfaithful to his wife and failed in his responsibility towards her. His wife,

the protagonist recalls, was like any other Indian woman who could scold her husband, but could never refrain from cooking for him. He recounts the travails of living in a city like Bombay where in spite of the sea, the small colonies ran out of drinking water. He recalls how one day he had queued up in to get water from the municipality water tap in the street, while he was actually supposed to board a bus and join the queue at the bus stand. One day, while walking home from office, a Mercedes hits him and he is thrown against an electric pole. He suffers an electric shock, and his limp body falls upon the footpath. The passersby rough up the driver of the Mercedes, but the author feels that it was his fault that he was walking on the road instead of the footpath. He tries to stop them but is surprised when he identifies the driver as Shanti Lal, who has had equally humble beginnings in this big city, and they shared a small rented room when they first arrived in Bombay. He is surprised to see that Shanti Lal now owned a Mercedes, whereas he continued to grapple with economic insecurities, and then he recalls Shanti Lal's connections – he was the nephew of the Deputy Minister at the Centre, so he has risen quickly. Shanti Lal insists that he drop him home, but the author knows that he is doing so out of fear that the author might register a complaint against him for rash driving with the police. He assures Shanti Lal that he will not take any such action.

Moving ahead he comes across nearly twenty men walking at snail's pace; it appears that a funeral procession is passing by, but he is unable to see any brier. Then he sees another group of people walking slowly in a line, with their heads bowed. The author confronts the different groups of men walking mournfully and is surprised at this large funeral procession; he imagines that some dear or influential person has died, for in a place like Bombay people are completely devoid of empathy for anyone's death or suffering. He could not restrain himself from inquiring from the passersby, as to whose funeral has drawn this huge crowd of mourners. This man is shocked at his question and responds that this is no funeral procession, but a large group of mill workers returning home after the day's hard work. Feeling a sense of oneness and empathy with these workers, the author joins this procession while walking in the same direction along with them.

In this story Bedi surpasses both Chekov and Hemingway in his storytelling while presenting with gravity the exploitation of the working class. It is just that Bedi lived in a third world country, and wrote in Urdu and is lesser known than American writers like Hemmingway or European writers like Chekhov, who have larger global presence and larger readerships. Bedi presents the daily exploitation of mill workers by means of their funeral walk from the mill, instead of describing the exploitative working conditions. They are not talking to one another nor cracking jokes,

laughing or even discussing their anxieties, nor making plans for the future, but simply walking with their heads bowed in groups as if they in a funeral procession.

In “Beyond the Terminus” (“Terminus se Parey”) Bedi shows the strength and respect that Indian’s middle classes have for their marital vows and their family bonding. Achla and Mohan meet when Achala’s husband Ram Gadkari has travelled to Bombay for attending a conference, and Mohan’s wife Sumitra has travelled to Kashmir with her son for a vacation. Bedi shows how a young married man and a woman meet and feel sexually attracted towards one other, but they respect the sanctity of their marital vows over their mutual attraction. Mohan has a son but Achla is childless, whereas Mohan wife has frail health and is travelling along with their son to a hill station to recuperate. Mohan and Achala meet several times in the absence of their respective spouses, and on one instance, Mohan tries to become physically intimate with Achala. Initially, Achala appears to put up a feeble resistance against his advances, but then she checks herself, for she is true to her marital vows. She tells Mohan that love exists between a brother and a sister too, and a brother’s love for his sister is possibly more enduring. She cries over her husband’s shoulder when he returns from Bombay, and tells him that she has found a brother in his absence. Mohan returns to see Achala in her husband’s presence, and she introduces him as her brother. She addresses him as ‘Bhai Saheb’ and inquires when Bhabhi (his wife) would be returning. Ram Gadkari feels that Mohan is a hypocrite and he does not appreciate his visiting his wife. Mohan too tells his wife Sumitra that he has found a sister, but Sumitra feels that since he already has a sister, it was unnecessary to shower affection upon another, adopted one. Suspicious of him, she inquires if love has swept him off his feet, and he answers in the affirmative, but being frail, Sumitra does not wish to push this question further. On Raksha Bandhan, Mohan goes to his sister’s place with his family and his sister ties a *rakhi* on his wrist with tears in her eyes, and he gives her ten rupees. Then he leaves his family to go to the market, purchases an expensive and beautiful Banarasi brocade saree for Achala and proceeds towards her home. When Mohan arrives to get a *rakhi* tied to his wrist, Ram Gadkari tells his wife that he is a hypocrite. But Achla besides giving sweets to Mohan also ties a *rakhi* on his wrist. Mohan in turn, gives her hundred rupees and the saree, and they convert their friendship into a brother-sister one. They try to remain true to their marital relationships and keep up the pretensions and the hypocrisies that society demands from them. Since the friendship between a young married man and woman would be objected to by their families and society, they give their friendship a name a brother and a sister bonding and seal it in the public eye while

tying a *rakhi*.

Bedi's stories "Give me your Sorrows" ("Apne Dukh Mujhe de do") and "The Wollen Coat" ("Garam Coat") bring out all the warmth of middle-class family relationships. In "Apne Dukh Mujhe de do", on their wedding night, Indu and Madan meet and shed their initial hesitation, by means of a long conversation about their family, their growing up and about their brothers and sisters. Madan recounts the early death of his mother of tuberculosis, and how both he and his father are now responsible for the welfare of two young brothers Kundan and Pashi and a sister Dulari. On the same night, Indu after having extracted a promise from Madan for giving her what she asks for, humbly asks him "to give her his sorrows." And from now on, she takes up the responsibility of the entire family by looking after Madan, his siblings and his father. Indu treats Madan's young siblings as her own children; she sings a lullaby to help his baby sister Dulari sleep. Madan teases her that she has tricked his family, and now his siblings and his father are closer to her than him.

According to Narang this is one of Bedi's best stories of the post-partition period, and presents life in its totality.

His method is again impersonal, but the realistic portrait of domestic relationships is related with deep psychological understanding. The ebb and flow of Madan's and Indu's household and their mundane pleasures and pains, hope and despair, suffering and gratification, are portrayed perceptively and artistically. Indu as a many-faceted character – daughter, wife, mother is symbolic of creative and benign woman, who must prevail in the end.... the combination of Freudian psychology with Indian tradition, however is not always consistent, especially in the end, When Indu would have changed her personal beliefs and actions about love had she been told by Madan to do so. Yet the story derives much of its value from insights it gives into the fulness of family life in India. (Narang, "Major Trends"127).

The story depicts how Indu helps Madan in fulfilling his duty towards his family. Whenever Madan is in need of money for Kundan's education, or Dulari / Munni's (Madan's sister who is a small baby at Madan's and Indu's wedding and is cared for by Indu when she weds Madan) engagement and wedding, Indu contributes wholeheartedly towards these family needs from her own savings. Madan often called Indu "Harishchandra's Daughter," for whenever there are differences over family issues between Indu and Madan or other members of family, eventually it is Indu's stance that prevails, not because Indu was overbearing

in her decisions, but because her stance is based on truth and dharma. After the death of Madan's father and the marriage of Kundan, the brothers are estranged when Kundan's wife asks for her own share in the family property; Kundan, whom Indu had raised as her own child, and made sacrifices for his education breaks away from the family. Fifteen years after taking care of her children and Madan's family, Indu feels betrayed by her husband who is disloyal to her. Indu's health deteriorates after the birth of her daughter, and at this point when she was in need of Madan's support to regain her health and care for the children, he starts avoiding her. Madan now feels that Indu is not really the woman he truly desired, and starts seeing other women searching for an ideal beauty along with his acquaintance Sabta, who introduces him to these women. Bedi depicts with keen insight how Indu confronts her husband on his return home: she has put on make-up and she has draped a lovely saree and is looking exquisitely beautiful. Madan notices that she is looking divine even after fifteen years of marriage. Indu asks her husband to recall what she had asked him on the day of her wedding, and he recalls that she had asked him to give his share of sorrows to her. At the same time, she reminds him that he had not asked her for anything in return. She then tries to make him understand, that she has fulfilled all the family responsibilities at the expense of her own comfort and has sacrificed her happiness to do so. Mohan at first is surprised at these words coming from his illiterate and otherwise timid wife, and for a moment he thinks that she has been tutored. Realizing his callousness, he embraces her.

"Too Tall for Marriage" reveals travails that Indian women face when it comes to marriages. Besides being chaste and good looking, they should be physically good-looking to fulfil the criteria for being acceptable in marriage. This is the story of Munni Sohi, who is nearly six feet tall, and this was reason enough for her grandmother to beat her head in despair, and she constantly curses herself and mourns that there would be no appropriate match available for her. Munni lives with her father, her brother Devendra, and sister-in-law. Devendra mistreats her sister-in-law and is having an affair with a nurse and rarely returns home sober. Munni's mother is dead and she is afraid of losing her grandmother, for she is old and ailing, and she realises that no one would stand by her when she is gone. Devendra's friend Gautam one day comes to meet the family, and the family initiates the proposal of Munni's marriage to him, he is just five feet two inches and robustly built and of course, the family gives Munni a strict instruction not to stand in his presence, so that he does not get to know of Munni's real height. The family distributes sweets amongst its neighbours when Gautam sends an acceptance for Munni. The reality was that Gautam

had already seen Munni from afar and was really quite impressed by Munni's height and sturdy dimensions, and he had actually fallen in love with her. The marriage happens, and the family awaits the unfortunate news of Munni's rejection by Gautam, for they are sure that her height would render her incompatible in marriage, and Gautam was a few inches shorter than Munni. They think that Gautam has married Munni out of illusion about Munni's real height, but then to the surprise of the family, they discover that Munni is happily married when she returns with her husband after her father's death.

"Only One Cigarette" ("Bas ek Cigarette") by Bedi is remarkable for drawing our attention to the generational conflict between a father and son in a very appealing manner. Sant Ram is a well-to-do business man, who has pampered his children with all the luxuries that he could afford. Now, he suffers major losses in his business. He is still quite well to do with a bungalow on Tughlaq road, and also some land left to him by his forefathers in his ancestral village, he also has a sizable life insurance policy. He feels that his family's attitude towards him is changing since the time his business has drifted into a deficit. He feels that if his family persists in its misbehaviour towards him, then he would rather commit suicide, and this would also ensure the benefits of a huge insurance policy in his name to pass on to his family. Being addicted to smoking, one day he has an urge to smoke early in the morning when he had no cigarette left with him, and he notices a box of cigarettes lying next to his son, Pal's table. He picks up this box in the dim light of a zero-watt lamp, to find only two cigarettes in the pack. He knows that his son too is addicted to smoking and would require one as soon as he wakes up. He takes out one cigarette from Pal's box and lights it up and takes a deep puff and relaxes. In the morning, Pal has a tiff with his mother over his drinking habit, and she tells him to leave the house instead of returning home drunk. Sant Ram on the other hand feels that Pal's anger is directed towards him rather than his mother, since he had taken out a cigarette from his case without permission. He thinks Pal is venting his anger upon his mother although he is angry with him instead. To make up with his son, he orders a carton of the costly 'State Express cigarettes'. At the same time, Pal too returns in the evening and presents a costly brand of cigarettes to his father. Bedi remarkably presents the generation gap between the father and the son, when the father explodes with uncontrollable anger and attributes this to his son's way of belittling and humiliating him further, by showing that he can no longer afford to buy a costly pack of cigarettes for himself for his business is failing. Pal is moved to tears on seeing his father's anger, for he respected his father, but his own struggles with life and his career made him treat his parents with

indifference. He embraces his father and breaks down while asking for forgiveness for hurting his parents.

“Dus Minute Barish Mein” (“Ten Minutes in the Rain”) is the story of a poor woman called Rata, who, when the story opens, is seen braving a stormy weather, while trying to prevent her rooftop from blowing away. Her son is ten-year-old son is a slow child, confined to home. Rata is completely drenched in the rain water, while two men are standing afar and gazing at her fair skin visible through her wet clothes, and they are hoping that she would call out to them for help. Her husband Firaya Lal deserted her when he lost his job, and he has now gone away in search of a living. Rata loved her husband who has left her alone to fend for herself and her disabled son. The narrator observes that people who have the potential to love are treated badly. The drain of a rich man’s bungalow in the neighbourhood too is pouring out over the roof of Rata’s hut. The narrator captures the apathy of the men watching this woman trying to protect herself and her son from the torrential rain, saying that they are waiting for her call out to them while saying “hide me in your bosom, babuji.” But Rata is too dignified to reach out to anyone for help; she has also lost her horse, who wandered off for he was hungry. Bedi captures how this self-respecting woman is subjected to male-gaze; instead of empathizing with her, or reaching out to help her, the two of them are rather disappointed that she is not imploring to them for help. Her absent husband and her disabled son further make her an easy target of male-gaze.

Bedi story “Vitamin B” derives its name from the vitamin B deficiency that is common amongst the working class, and the story opens at a construction site where the author depicts children of labourers with swollen bellies and sunken chests, for they don’t get appropriate nutrition and are afflicted with Beriberi, caused due to Vitamin B deficiency. The contractors of this construction site are so strict with their labourers, that women don’t have the permission to breastfeed their babies more than two times a day, and the narrator comments, that perhaps the babies here would soon die of hunger. This story narrates the struggle of a labourer called Matadin and his wife Manbhari to survive and make ends meet; they are very hard working and work from dusk to dawn. Matadin’s wife is sexually exploited by her employer, and she is impregnated by him. Matadin, who loves his wife, tries to ensure that she survives and has a healthy baby. Since she has a Vitamin B deficiency, he steals a bottle of Vitamin B hoping that it will cures her Beriberi and she will give birth to a healthy baby. The story concludes when Matadin is arrested for stealing a bottle of Vitamin B, whereas his employer can get away with rape and molestation. Manbhari being sickly and weak, has a miscarriage and is bleeding to death.

Rajinder Singh Bedi's contribution to Urdu and Indian Literature is immense. Undoubtedly, he is one of the major stalwarts of Urdu fiction; his contribution to Indian cinema as dialogue writer and screen play writer is also immense. The Government of Punjab has instituted the Rajinder Singh Bedi award in his honour. The empathy and understanding with which Bedi has portrayed women, children and elderly and the underprivileged sections of the society, using Freudian psychology and Indian myths and metaphors, adds depth to his stories. Bedi explores human emotions with keen sensitivity and exposes social inequalities and economic problems as he unravels the ordinary and everyday lives of women and men. Bedi was often critical of the straightjacketing of art and literature by the progressive writers of his time, but he remained within the progressive camp in its battle against the modernists. He has surpassed canonical European writers like Chekhov or canonical American writers like Hemmingway in depth and psychological realism, and sensitivity, in the portrayal of the everyday situations and common people in his stories like "Maithun" or "Where is the Funeral Procession."

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