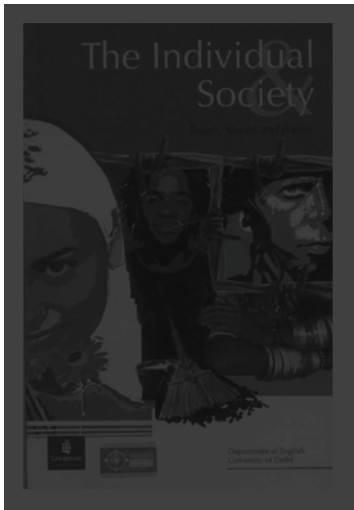


The Individual and Society

Divya Bajpai Jha



The Individual and Society: Essays, Stories and Poems, is edited for the Department of English, University of Delhi by Vinay Sood et al (pp. 251). It is an imprint of Pearson Education, pub. 2006. The book is designed as a textbook for the English Discipline Course of the B.A. (program) I Year as well as the Concurrent Course for several B.A. (Hons.) I Year courses like English (Hons.), History (Hons.), Economics (Hons.) etc. As such, it is meant to cater to students of a wide variety, having a varied exposure to such themes as Race, Gender and Globalization etc. The book is divided into five sections viz. Caste/ Class, Gender, Race, Violence and War and Living in a Globalized World. Each section has five to eight stories, essays and poems related to the theme. Each is preceded by a short description about the author and her/his times and political or literary leanings. Wherever required, the chapters are followed by some helpful notes explaining meanings of difficult words and phrases as well as relevant contexts. Questions quizzing the reader about her/his understanding of not only the

chapter concerned but also its relation to the other chapters in the section as well as the relevance of reading the chapter within the wide rubric of the section titled viz. Race, Gender etc.

On the whole, this format works quite well for the task at hand. It not only introduces the theme to be discussed but also gives ample opportunity for exploring the various facets of the issue at hand. As the chapters themselves look at the theme from various perspectives, they provide an opportunity for the reader to do the same. For instance, the section titled Caste/ Class, on the one hand, explores the theme of exploitation on their basis through the works of Premchand, OmPrakash Valmiki and Hira Vansode and on the other has a very interesting story by Ismat Chughtai. Chughtai's story 'Kallu' explores the varying fortunes of a Muslim family as their social class changes from that of an affluent, educated Zamindar family before partition to that of a struggling post-partition middle class household trying to come to terms with their new status devoid of the Zamindari trappings. That caste is not a unique Hindu phenomenon but a malaise endemic to most sections of our country's religious fiber, is also brought out in this story. Essays by JyotiRao Phule and Dr B.R.Ambedkar, also in the same section, explore this theme on a theoretical and ideological plane.

Chapters in the next section-Gender- similarly explore the theme from an Indian as well as a western perspective. Marge Piercy's 'Breaking Out' and Virginia Woolf's 'Shakespeare's Sister' explore the position of, or rather the lack of position of Women in the Western world. Rabindranath Tagore's 'The Exercise Book' and Eunice DeSouza's 'Marriages are Made' take a look at the woman's

space and the place of her aspirations in a male dominated Indian Society. Jamaica Kincaid's 'Girl', on the other hand, adds a further colonial dimension to this exploration of the woman's position in what is largely, and essentially, a man's world.

In principle, it is a good idea to expose students to a variety of writing styles, themes, social and cultural realities of people. Some caution however, one feels, must be exercised when planning a textbook meant for students coming from a varied social, cultural and economic background. Certain issues, like the sexual exploitation of women, must be brought out in the open and discussed in the classroom, not only to sensitize the male students but also to activate the largely inert female student body regarding their position and their own responsibility towards changing their lot. However, having said that, some more thought should have gone in while including a chapter like 'Highway Stripper' by A. K. Ramanujan. Though an excellent poem in itself, it is perhaps a difficult piece for the average B.A. (Program) student, not to mention the tricky nature of the ensuing classroom discussion.

The sections on Race, Violence and War and Living in a Globalized World are also quite balanced and exploratory in their approach. These, through the writings of such great writers as Wole Soyinka, Nadine Gordimer, Siegfried Sassoon, Bertolt Brecht and Roland Barthes, provide valuable insight and ample food for thought on the themes discussed. A pan-Asian sensibility and experience, at the same time, is represented through the works of Sa'adat Hasan Manto, Intezar Husain, Amitav Ghosh, Bibhas Sen and Imtiaz Dharkar. Manto's story 'The Dog of Tetwal' is a

poignant, though humorous (albeit with a tinge of black) exposition of the human tragedy of a war between India and Pakistan. Ghosh's 'Ghosts of Mrs. Gandhi', on the other hand, talks about life after the assassination of Mrs. Indira Gandhi. These are issues to which every heart in the classroom returns an echo. Imtiaz Dharkar's poem 'At the Lahore Karhai' is a playful take on the situation of a citizen of the world, this newly emerging water hyacinth like entity, who, on the one hand, is at home anywhere in the world, and on the other, is forever searching for his roots.

It is in formulating the questions at the end of the chapters that the team of editors has sometimes overlooked their brief of catering to B.A. (Program) as well as B.A. (Hons.) students. For instance, questions like:

"How far would it be correct to say that Ambai's story concerns an experience specific to a woman's body? Compare it to Virginia Woolf's understanding of Judith Shakespeare's body and sexuality and how it shapes her experience."

-are comparative in nature and problematize the issues to a level far beyond the pail of an average B.A. (Program) student. Such problems are, however, likely to occur while dealing with such an extensive collection of writings and a student readership of such a varied capabilities and exposure. The book, barring these small inconsistencies, is a very good collection of writings and the editors are to be congratulated for meeting the challenge of providing a thought provoking, interesting and readable collection very convincingly and successfully.



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