
RESEARCH ARTICLE

INDIAN SHORT STORIES: AN APPRAISAL

Dr Dastgir Alam

Asst. Prof. of English

M.L.S. College, Sarisab-Pahi, Madhubani-847424

L.N.Mithila University Darbhanga

Abstract:

In an arena of hundred years and so, many critics as well as many creative geniuses have tried to define short story. One thought it to be slice of life; the other found it engaged in recapturing moments. But no one has yet been able to give a definition which can be unanimously accepted. However divergent opinions may be on short story, it is considered fact that the short story, reveals the theme, range, outlook and application in limited, has universal appeal among the readers. Although the short story did not reach the height of its popularity until the beginning of the present century, it is one of the oldest types of literature. In English the *Bible*, the *Old Testament* is supposed to be the provenance of wonderful short stories which modern writers have borrowed or imitated over and over again. Even older than these are the stories to be found in the histories of Herodotus, a great historian. This book contains many highly readable tales and shows Herodotus as a master of simple direct story-telling. Thus story-telling must be as old as life itself. In India this art has been continuing since time immemorial more with a view to instilling

values in the minds of young ones in their impressionable years than entertaining them. Several reputed tales known all over the world probably emanate ultimately from the Indian '*Punchatantra*', '*Jataka Stories*', the great epics the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*. The long narratives of the epics and puranic legends are replete with numerous stories. The short story, especially a pointed moral tale or animal fable, seems peculiarly Indian. It is no surprise therefore to find a large number of good short stories written by Indo-Anglian writers such as R.K.Narayan, Raja Rao and Mulk Raj Anand, also known Trimurti of Indian English Literature. In addition to them, we find collection of good stories by other writers as well. So their contribution to the growth and spread of this genre of literature can't be discounted.

Keywords: Old Testament, Herodotus, Bible, epics, puranic legends, moral tales.

RESEARCH ARTICLE

The tradition of telling and listening to stories has successfully been through many ages and has continued flourishing in the present time as well. Though both the teller and the tales have changed considerably, the basic purpose of telling or reading stories remains still the same. In a country like India, an amusement to eyes to the readers and ears to the listeners, it would help them evolve into a better human being later. Many of the great tales known all over the world probably emanate ultimately from the Indian ‘Panchtantra’ and the ‘River of Stories’. Besides the long narratives of the two greatest epics ‘*the Ramayana*’ and ‘*the Mahabharata*’ and puranic legends, Jataka stories of Buddha are replete with numerous stories. The short stories especially a pointed moral tale or animal fable, seems peculiarly Indian. It is against this backdrop that a good collection of stories by Indo- Anglian writers are found. The novel was practically unknown until the British introduced it into the country. With the turn of the century, things began to change. Poetry, drama suffered and began to lose ground. Although Indians began to write novels, they were not comfortable with them. The only literary form, which had its roots in tradition, and could avail itself of the vast opportunities opened it up by printing and rapidly increasing demand for literature, was the short story. For some years its only serious rival was poetry.

Indian’s contribution to the tradition of short story writing has never been second to that of any other country. Even in English language, which is a language entirely alien to them, Indians have contributed exceptionally well. Today Indian literature in English is a reality. There was a time when most of the English and American critics and scholars frowned upon the practitioners of Indo-Anglian literature and did not consider them on a par with their British and American counterparts. It was largely because they had a misconception in their minds regarding the potentials of Indian English writers. They thought that Indians could not express themselves creatively in English as effectively as the English, for it was not their first language and hence there could be no “spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings” for them in this language. In the last decade, the short story almost superseded for one simple reason that they could always be translated. Since the last one hundred years the impact of British rule and tragic division of the country into India and Pakistan spawned enormous amount of writing novel, poetry or drama because of Indian writer’s adherence to a set of rules which are more often than not flouted by modern European and American writers. In order to express thoughts in a short story the rules, as said by Khuswant Singh in the book ‘The Collected Short Stories of Khuswant Singh’ should be clear enough to anyone.

RESEARCH ARTICLE

He writes:-

1. A short story must in fact be short. It cannot be short novel, anymore than a novel can be a long short story.¹
2. A short story must be built around one incident or a series of incidents illustrating one theme or portraying one character or the equation between the one character and others.²
3. A short story can be as fantastic and its characters and situations as fanciful as the writer cares to make them, provided they have the ring of truth and a message to convey.³
4. A short story must have a distinct beginning, middle and end.⁴
5. A short story must have like a scorpion's sting in its tail, a curlicue which sums up the story.⁵

The earlier writers of short stories in English in India could not treat the short story consciously as a form of art. The earlier practitioners were reformist. They had a zeal for reform and tended to make frequent philosophical comments keeping aware themselves generally to the ancient Indian tale form. It is called second to poetry as the form of short story, is the literary form most suitable for recording the variety and nuance of Indian experience. Because it is governed by tradition, Indian life has little place for individual dictates. The result is that whatever experience it

yields is predictable instead of unusual or dramatic. Variation is provided by details within this pattern. There are thus moments of dramatic or lyrical or tragic intensity, rather than a sustained experience, which offer insights into human nature. The short story with its concentration, brevity, and sensitivity can better record these moments than can the broader canvas of the novel. Having this backdrop it is against that the writers like Raja Rao, Mulk Raj Anand and R.K.Narayan, though primarily novelists have written short stories of some merit. The genre seems, however to be peculiarly appropriate to the talents of R.K. Narayan, Khuswant Singh and others. In the context of short stories, among short story writer R.K.Narayan's narrative art is fully exhibited by some of his short stories in the collection 'An Astrologer's Day or 'A Horse and Two Goats'.⁶ In the former collection we find clever anecdotes with surprise endings (An Astrologer's Day), ghost stories like 'Old Bones' which is both chilling and humorous, and tales about children, animals and Tamil families-subjects Narayana has penchant for. A good illustration of Narayan's grotesque humour is 'Engine Trouble'. It tells of the owner's misadventures with a road-engine (steam-roller) which he has won in a gymkhana. The upkeep of the engines proves to be a costly affair as it costs much in rent and in an attempt to dispose it off he finds himself in trouble with the police. Ironically, it falls into a well during an earthquake that takes

RESEARCH ARTICLE

place. The well-owner, however, is only too delighted to pay the owner of the road-engine for filling in a hole that was hazardous for the public. The impressive body of R.K. Narayan's short fiction is based on his close ironic observation of life little incidents, a healthy sense of humour coupled with irony and satire. His short stories belong to the native psychological factors, the crisis in the individual's soul and its resolution and above all the detached observation, which constitutes that stuff of fiction that is forced into the background. He uses wit, which is a powerful verbal expression generally brief, clever and deliberately contrived to create surprising and unexpected effect, often resulting in mirth and admiration, to achieve his humour which is a cultural specific term and a perception of incongruities.

There is subtle observation of human weakness is Narayan's forte. This is brought out very well in 'A Snake in the Grass' (An Astrologer's Day). Dasu, an old servant, is accused of neglecting the garden in which a cobra has been reported by a passer-by to have entered. After much hue and cry very intelligently Dasu produces a sealed water pot in which he claims to have caught the offending snake. Since none of his accusers will venture to remove the seal, Dasu's honour is vindicated. A more recognizable outer rope of the Malgudi saga is 'Uncle' (A Horse and Two Goats). Its

comic but poignant story of the impinging of experience upon innocence in the relationship between a boy and his enigmatic uncle owe something to Narayan's admiration for the novels and short stories of Graham Greene. Narayan is unusual in being apparently at home with both the novel and short story. Some of the greatest Indian myths and legends have been retold in English by R. K. Narayan.

Of all the Indian novelists Raja Rao happens to be the greatest interpreter of Indian thought and culture. Far from a nostalgic admiration, his praise of India takes the form of self-understanding of himself and its values for others, specially of the people of the west. Rao holds its distinction in English novels as well as short stories. In Raja Rao's volumes of short stories, 'The Cow of Barricades and Other Short Stories'⁷ we see a commentary on the subject matter of his novels 'Kanthapura', 'The Serpent and the Rope', and 'The Cat and Shakespeare'. All three are explorations of Indian identity and self-realisation; in the struggle for freedom and in freedom itself. The true story of 'Kanthapura', 'Protector of Gold', and 'Companions' are straightforward imitating the theme and style of Indian myth and legend. In 'The Little Gram Shop', a brutally objective picture of dehumanization caused by poverty and plague in India has been traced in the lives of a miserly gram-seller and his wife. In a

RESEARCH ARTICLE

'Client' a more cynical view of the south Indian social scene sees a crafty marriage broken tricking student into a marriage. Raja Rao's imagination appear to be fully engaged in 'Javni', in which the narrator, who is a Brahmin, tries to rid himself of guilt in the face of the tragic resignation of a widowed low-caste woman. Paradoxically it is the widow who rejects, for conservative reason, the hero's attempt to bridge the gulf of caste. The plight of the poor in the background of religious conservatism torments Raja Rao, as is clearly revealed in 'Akkaya' which features the grim destiny and appalling death from cancer of a widow, a relative of the narrator's high caste family. It appears doubly unjust that she should first suffer the fate of the pious Hindu widow, a forced asceticism for most of her life, and the endure a long and painful incurable illness that makes her loathsome to her family.

But strangely enough there is hope and even joy in this black tale, as Raja Rao suggests with some skill, the young narrator's love for the old widow. 'In Khandesh' records the death of simpleton, Dattopant, whose stream-of-consciousness is suggested in an impressionistic style of writing. Raja Rao combines in him both a historian and a philosopher. While as a historian he is interested in the ancient tradition of India, as a philosopher he tries to unfold the underlying ideals and values. He has chosen the life of rural India as the

representation of the real India. Although Raja Rao has depicted both the best and the worst in Indian life, his main concern has been to bring to focus the highest truths that India can still revitalize for her own renaissance and also impart to the west for its spiritual regeneration. Raja Rao seems to believe that India can be known chiefly through the knowledge of Indian metaphysics. He has done full justice the depiction of a slice of Indian life at the physical and moral planes. The social scene in the Cat and Shakespeare shifts from rural to the urban India. A realistic view of Indian life in a city of Kerala evokes the veritable picture of life as it was lived in whole of India during the days of second world war. It is India in its manifold aspects that we are shown in this short novel of Raja Rao as also in his other novels, which aim at revitalizing the metaphysical truths and spiritual values. In this respect Raja Rao has become an authentic voice of India, painting the present and enlivening the past for revealing both the outer and the inner India.

Another one writer, Mulk Raj Anand who has produced numerous short stories. His short stories, particularly those collected in the 'Barber's Trade Union' and other stories' ⁸ and steer clear of obvious political motivation. Acidly satirical at the expense of the feudal aristocracy in 'A Kashmir Idyll' and expose the insolence of office in 'Duty' in which a Sikh policeman,

RESEARCH ARTICLE

humiliated by his superior officer, takes it out of a peasant who gets in his way, Anand is. A number of stories are bitter and somber revelation of the misery of the Indian poor and the underdog. In another collection as in 'Lament for the Death of a Master of Arts', a long short story on Anand's favorite theme of suffering is crisp, clean and vivid.

Apart from the trio of Indo-Anglian writers Khuswant Singh established his reputation as a writer through the short story. The collected short stories of Khuswant Singh¹⁰ contain stories by him that have appeared in smaller collection of his work, and, separately in literary journals over fifty years. At the early workshop story Anthology, there are stories written in styles very different indeed from those of Anand, Raja Rao and Narayan.¹¹ The first two use the interior monologue of a central character. B. Reuben's 'The Head Clerk' is a brilliant impressionistic story of squalor and corruption in a government office, blending comedy with the imitations of film screenplays whereas Bharti Mukherjee's 'Bless This Day' is the strange sad reverie of an exiled Indian in an American University. G. Chaudhri's 'a Snatch' is a bitter little satirical sketch that tears apart the pessimism of would be intellectual youths in India. The most remarkable story is the terrible exploration of murder during a famine in C.M. Naim's 'Just a Story' which deals with a boy and

old man who plan to murder each other for gain. Thus, Indo-Anglian writer's contribution to the increasing popularity of short stories cannot and should not be discounted. The genre of short stories contains enormous possibilities for writers to exhibit their talents.

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RESEARCH ARTICLE

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