

SHORT STROY



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THE ORIGIN OF INDIAN SHORT STORY

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Historically, the origin of the story can be traced back to the stores in the Bible and the Canterbury Tales of Chaucer with a varied and variegated structure and form. The short story is one of the favourite literary genres today. The realistic stories of Pushkin and Gogol, the horror and ghost stories of Henry James and Edgar Allan Poe, the detective stories of Arthur Cona, the science fiction stories of H.G.Wells, Jules Verne and Asimov all of them have helped in popularizing this form and of course, Chekhov and Maupassant, O.Henry and Kathrine Mansfield, Shashi Deshpande and Vikram Seth all prove the universal popularity of this genre. This wide range variety also the flexibility of the form with probably one commonalty – “a short story should have a single or unique effect, it should concentrate on a totality which can be achieved by a scene, an episode, an experience, an action, a character or characters, a meeting a conversation or even a fantasy.” (Jami Edwards “Interpreter of Maladies, a review from book reporter.com, 1)

The craft of a short story is as old as the hills. To that art belong parable, fable, saga and folk-tale, all which share their origin and structure with poetry. From earliest times they expressed the articulate tongue of mankind, that voice which differentiates man from animal. It was not until the nineteenth century, following the maturity of the novel as a form, that the descendant craft of short-story writing sprang from a variety of soils. The art of storytelling is native to all the people; perhaps the Egyptians were the first to endow random tales with permanent literary form. The tales from Egypt are not only an invaluable commentary on the then

Egyptian life but are also genuinely moving and interesting. They are always short and tell mainly of adventures, either natural or supernatural.

As a literary form and an oral tradition, the short story dates back to pre-historic times. Since the dawn of human civilization it has flourished as an important and engaging social art. The earliest stories mark man’s slow emergence from his animal status. The forms of these stories, like the forms of the rituals of primitive man, help to create for him a history and an identity, and were part of the creative impulse that made him consciously human beings.

The genesis of Indian tales can be traced back to the *Vedas* and the *Upanishads*, the *Puranas*, the *Panchatantra* and the *Jataka Tales*. These are older than the fables of Aesop and travelled beyond the bounds of the subcontinent to Asia Minor in the North West and China in the North East. *The Mahabharata* and *The Ramayana*, two epics, have proved inexhaustible mines from which creative artists of the country have quarried for their material for ages. These antique tales passing from generation to generation have tempted the great epic poets to stuff into their poetic framework enormous masses of religion, philosophy and polity, which are often incongruous with their central theme. They are tales of practical wisdom and worldly polity or illuminating commentaries on epic and religious myths. One should agree with R.K. Narayan's view that “every story has implicit in it a philosophical or moral significance and our understanding of the distinction between good and evil.” (R.K. Narayan, *The world of the story Teller*,

Fiction and the Reading Public in India, Mysore: University of Mysore, 1976, 141.)

Indian literature from the very beginning of its history has been related to the life of the common people. They have not been for the edification of the scholars alone, but an engaging social art, a comprehensive and artistic medium of expression, to benefit the literate and illiterate alike. Although story-telling is as old as language itself "the short story as a conscious literary form is younger than most other forms." (James E Miller, Jr. & Bernice Slot, Eds., *The Dimensions of Short Story: A Critical Anthology*, New York: Dodd Mead and Company, 1972, 511)

Though, Indian in origin, the Indian short story writing in English is Western in technique. The Indian short story writers in English had to look to the West for inspiration as far as technique was concerned. Edgar Allan Poe, the pioneer of the short story, defined the modern short story as a prose narrative, requiring from half an hour to one or two hours in this perusal. In the opinion of H.G. Wells,

A short story is or should be a single thing; it aims at producing one single vivid effect; it has to seize the attention at the outset, and never relaxing, gather it together more and more until the climax is reached. The limits of the human capacity to attend closely therefore set a limit to it; it must explode and finish before interruption occurs or fatigue set in." (M.G. Gopala Krishnan, *The Short Story in India: Some Aspects*, Gandhigram: Gandhigram Rural Institute, 1984, 3)

In modern literature, the short story has established itself as a genre being attempted by many. It has developed into a distinct genre. It is not a reduced form of novel. Certain elements like plot, characters and settings are common in both the forms. But both differ in the handling of material, in the approach of theme and also in their focus and angle. Unlike the novelist, the short story writer has to focus his limited characters to the scene of main action within a short span of time. Thus, the concentration of attention upon a particular aspect of character may result in a powerful impression. It is not a loosely knit piece of work; it is an organic whole producing unique or single effect. The shortness of the short story does not remain as a

handicap but in a way, a source of strength. It requires far greater care and precision in the treatment of theme than the vast canvas of the novel demands. Thus, the short story is neither a rival nor a substitute for the novel. It is another kind of literary form; prose fiction developed beside the novel.

Brevity and unity are the most important elements that distinguish the short story from the novel. Its subject should be of a nature that can be adequately and effectively developed within the prescribed limits. It should be clear in outline, well proportioned, complete in itself. It should convince the reader that nothing could have been gained by further elaboration. It may deal with or may cover a wider field of time or involve a larger sequence of events than many novels.

Unity is another important element of the short story. It includes unity of motive, unity of action and unity of impression. There should be one and only one informing idea, which must be worked out to its logical conclusions with unerring singleness of aim and directness of method. In the novel, different elements are interwoven into its texture and at times, there may be two or more points of interest. No such scattering of interest can be permitted in the short story. The interest arising from the germinal idea of the short story must not be complicated by any other consideration. In a short story, elements like theme, plot, characters and settings are almost the same as those of the novel, but there may be difference in the treatment of the material, its focus and in angle. Usually one of these elements may dominate over the other.

The short story came to India at a crucial period in the history of Indian letters. The nation was in ferment. A massive movement for liberation from foreign rule was raging in the country. The British were in no mood to withdraw easily. The struggle was long and grueling. It involved, in particular, the imaginative youth and the creative talent of the country. As the suppression increased, the movement tended to go underground. The writers and artists became more subtle and more insidious. They resorted to symbols and imagery. There are some of the ingredients of great art. A large number of short stories written in Hindi, Urdu

and Punjabi during the period reflect mainly the struggle for freedom. Our short stories portrayed the unjustness of the Raj and the grim fight of the people against it. It took different forms; it was non-violent here, violent there.

The main drama of Indians heroic effort to throw away the foreign yoke had the backdrop of the Russian Revolution. It was mainly on the unique chapter of world history that our short story writer was nurtured. The short story was a new tool in the hands of the creative writer. It lent itself admirably to advocating the cause of the poor, the under-privileged and the have-nots. Our short story writers depicted the plight of the repressed and the rack-rented in vivid colours and infused in their readers a great strength of will to undo the injustice.

It was a mighty silent revolution in Indian letters. No more did the nawabs and the maharajas, the white-skin rulers and the privileged Brahmans glitter on the pages of our writings. It was the story of the common man and his problems. The poverty-stricken and the under privileged, the toiling millions and the have-nots came to be portrayed and glorified. It was not the mercenary fighters but the soldier-lovers; it was not the stooge by the suffering citizens, not the landlord but the tiller, not the mill-owner but the mill worker who figured in our stories. Our writers glorified them the way it had never been done before.

The main preoccupation of the Indian short story writers during these years was the freedom struggle. No sensitive writer could remain uninfluenced by the mighty movement sweeping the country. There were various parties and diverse roads but the goal was the same. The short stories written in the Indian languages in the nineteen forties reflect the vitality of a people devoted to a cause. In these stories reflect the Indian freedom struggle. We have vivid pictures of the exploitation and the arrogance of the foreign rulers and also the determination of an awakened people struggling for their birthright.

Then independence came. The foreign power withdrew after dividing the country into two parts. With the partition was let loose a communal fury which caused unprecedented dislocation and misery. Millions of people migrated from one part of

the country to the other, thousands were massacred, women were abducted and raped, children flung on spears, property burnt and looted on an unprecedented scale. This frightful mass-fury left the sensitive writer stunned. Was this the freedom he had dreamt of and fought for? No. A spate of stories was written on the partition of the country-the havoc it wrought and the plight of the refugees. Seeing how the neighbour attacked neighbour, some of the writers seemed to lose all faith in common humanity. There is a strain of despair in a great deal of the writing of the period. Yashpal, Ashok, Mohan Rakesh in Hindi, Krishan Chander, Rajinder Singh Bedi in Urdu, and Sekhon and Virk in Punjabi wrote some significant stories moved by the partition riots.

Short story writing requires both inspiration and hard work. It is a highly exacting art. It can be the story of an age; it can be the picture of a split-second arrested by the skill of the writer. The short story reads like a poem in its intensity and lyrical description. It may have a high drama couched in it in the most dramatic form. It may be as long as a novelette. It may be as short as a snatch of a dialogue. It holds the mirror to life. And the sort of life we have in our day and age, the short story does fullest justice to its complexity and its nuances.

The Indian short story in English is virtually a product of this century. The first short story collections appeared in 1885: *Realities of Indian Life* Stories Collected from the Criminal reports of India. (London, 1885) by Shoshee Chunder Dutt and Sourindra Mohan Tagore. Shoshee Chunder Dutt's Bengalian: *A Dish of Rice and Curry and Other Indigestible Ingredients* (1892) contains two long tales *The Reminiscences of a Karani's Life* and 'Shukur: *A Tale of the Indian Mutiny of 1857* and a number of short stories. Next appeared P.V.Ramaswami Raju's *The Tales of Sixty Mandemians* in 1886 and *Indian Fables* in 1887.

Notable among the pioneers in the Indian short story are K.S. Venkataramani and K. Nagarajan. K.S. Venkataramani had contributed *Jatadharan and Other Stories*. Gandhian influence is discernible in his short stories. His stories are realistic in approach and they show the interest of the author in the social revolution. He exposes the social evils

prevailing in society. For example, "The Erode Waits" depicts the anxious but futile efforts of Subramania Sastri to find a suitable bridegroom for his daughter, Patty. His contribution to the development of the Indian short story in English is significant. By attempting to translate the typically Indian idiom into the English idiom, he has shown the way to others. He holds the reader's attention by his realistic portrayal of personal relationships as well as with his humorous touches.

Nagarajan's stories are atmosphere dominant and his technique of narration is noteworthy. Some stories, in his "Cold Rice," the only collection of short stories of him, draw obviously upon the author's own experience as a government pleader. He presents a realistic picture of the contempt pleader. Most of his stories end happily as in the ancient tales; they do not fall a victim to moralizing.

A writer is the product of his/ her own contemporary society. By living in the contemporary society by looking at living conditions and understanding them from the own prospective and responding to the then and existing conditions, as all other people made the artistes including the writers are also made.

Thus, the short story occupies a prominent place in the literary world. It has cut across the boundaries of all countries to find room in their cultures. It starts there, it get finished there. It contains a moral, evokes an interest and the content leaves an indelible impression on the minds of the listeners. Hence, the short story can be considered the best of literary expression and the most effective genre in the human culture.

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