



## SHORT STORIES OF YESTERDAY AND TODAY

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**Abstract-** *Popularly literature means anything that is printed in a book, But actually literature means that which is of universal interest to man. What applies to a local or professional or merely personal interest will not belong to literature. Literature deals with life as it is seen and experienced by the individual writer. It may be described as imaginative reconstruction of life. It is a form of art and as such imagination plays a vital part in the presentation of life in literature. It has been rightly said, "personal experience is that basis of all real literature.*

*Thus the term literature is limited to imaginative literature poetry, drama, fiction etc. It yields aesthetic pleasure by reason of its eternal appeal of subject-matter and style. It treats of personal reading of life unit is elevated to a work of universal interest by virtue of its mode of treatment. Literature is a vital record of what men have seen in life, what they have experienced of it, what they have thought and felt about those aspects of it which have the most immediate and enduring interest for all of us. It is the interpretation of life as life shapes itself in the mind of the interpreter.*

We care for literature because we care for life, because we are interested in knowing the varied aspects of it, because we like to know how men and women live life and think about life. A great book grows out of life; in reading it, we are brought into large, close, and fresh relations with life. We live our own narrow selfish life; we are eager for a larger and ampler life. We are intensely interested in men and women, their lives, motives, passions, relationships: hence the literature which deals with the great drama of human life and action appeals to us. This explains why drama and fiction absorb our interest. The writers want to confide their observations and experiences to others, and the readers are glad

to listen to what they impart. The writers have varied experiences, are endowed with insight and passion and have the power to render their utterances of unusual interest and value. Their attractive treatment of the varied experiences makes us responsive to what they say. Thus we care for literature, not only for the life it embodies but also for the artistic beauty in which a writer embodies what he has to say. In short, we read literature both for the subject and the form. Milton has said, "A great book is the precious life-blood of a master-spirit, embalmed and treasured up on purpose to a life beyond life." The secret of profitable reading is to imbibe the quickening influence of the master spirit and to

imbue the mind with the freshness and largeness of the vision that the master spirit embodies in his literature.

This paper presents selections from the work of British, American and Indian writers who have made significant contributions to the art of the short story. Each story is chosen for some characteristic of this form of writing which it exemplifies-symbolic atmosphere, rigorous brevity, sparkling dialogue, transparency of style, some fresh insight into human nature, humour, fantasy, or mere drama and suspense.

This raises the question: what, then, is a successful short story? To offer an all-inclusive definition of this literary form is almost impossible since the modern story, in its endeavour to approximate to life in all its sinuosity and unpredictability is often elusive in meaning and structure. Edgar Allan Poe defines the short story as a 'piece of fiction dealing with a single incident, material or spiritual, that can be read at a sitting; it must sparkle or impress; it must have unity of effect or impression; it should move in an even line from its exposition to its close'. But a contemporary writer might question his assumptions on several grounds. First, he wouldn't accept the traditional emphasis on plot-a progressive movement 'in an even line from its exposition to its close'-a mere sequence of events chronologically arranged. He would rather invite his reader to delve into the psyche of his character to understand his behaviour, or invest a seemingly trivial detail with interest and significance. For life, he may argue, is 'not a series of gig lamps symmetrically arranged,' but a fascinating jumble of impulses, emotions and memories. No wonder, a writer like Katherine Mansfield chooses to weave a story round a mere cup of tea, while Joyce Gary attempts to

communicate the indeterminate processes of 'growing up'. 'What are stories?' asks Virginia Woolf in her novel, *The Waves*, 'Toys I twist, bubbles I blow, one ring passing through another. And sometimes I begin to doubt if these are stories at all....' A psychological story-writer may often appear to be something like the little dog in *The Waves* who 'trots down the road after the regimental band, but stops to sniff a tree-trunk, to sniff some brown stain, and suddenly careers across the street after some mongrel cur and then holds one paw up while it sniffs an entrancing whiff of meat from the butcher's shop'. If such is the stuff life is made of, then why should one contrive intricate plots, portray characters of extraordinary mettle, or spin out tedious stories with some preconceived moral design?

This should explain why a good writer, in an attempt to achieve verisimilitude, often stuffs his story with descriptive details. Take, for instance, Sir Mohan Lal's wife Lachmi (in Khushwant Singh's 'Karma') whose diamond nose-ring 'glistened against the station lights. Her mouth was bloated with betel saliva which she had been storing up to spit as soon as the train had cleared the station'. Or Joyce Gary's description of Kate (in 'Growing Up') lying 'on her back with her hair tousled in the dirt, her arms thrown apart, her small dirty hands with black nails turned palm upwards to the sky'. It is such specifics that stimulate the reader's imagination and draw him into the central situation.

Often a writer may achieve the same effect through a subtle use of metaphor which lends a new dimension to the object. Katherine Mansfield, for instance (in her 'Cup of Tea'), describes Rosemary as followed by a thin shop-girl, 'staggering under an immense white paper

armful that looked like a baby in long clothes'. In Raja Rao's story, 'A Client', the old man's 'wrinkled dust-covered feet seemed bluish green like cow-dung'.

But the temptation to charge a story with too much detail, which is not thematically illuminating, may prove disastrous, for dramatic economy is the very essence of good writing. Indeed, Poe underscores this element as the very basis of a successful short story. (In the whole composition there should be no word written of which the tendency, direct or indirect, is not to the one pre-established design. And by such means, with such care and skill, a picture is at length painted which leaves in the mind of him who contemplates it with a kindred art, a sense of the fullest satisfaction... . \* No wonder, a story is sometimes likened to a poem because in both forms, the writer functions like a jeweller, meticulous in choosing his effects.

It should be interesting to analyze Raja Rao's story on the basis of this criterion. On the surface, it appears to be rather longwinded and overdone, but a close reading will reveal that the interminably long speeches of Nanjundayya generate the same tension as a series of dramatic events. Each word here contributes to the central concern-the progressive ensnaring of Ramu into an early marriage.

In stories which rely heavily on fantasy or romantic setting, the most important aspect is the evocation of atmosphere. In fact, as Eudora Welty remarks, 'atmosphere in a story may be its chief glory'. Like the opening scene in Hamlet, a descriptive passage establishes the tone of the narrative, even suggests what could motivate the central character. For instance, in Washington Irving's horror-tale "Adventures of the German Student", the murky backdrop plays a crucial

role constituting as it does the symbolic externalization of Wolfgang's morbid perceptions, his diseased imagination, and his susceptibility to supra-rational stimuli. Quite suggestively, the opening passages evoke a weird atmosphere quite in tune with the young scholar's nocturnal adventure, 'The lightning gleamed, and the loud claps of thunder rattled through the lofty narrow streets....' Again, when he returns home, 'one stormy night through some of the old and gloomy streets... the loud claps of thunder rattled among the high houses of the narrow streets'. It is in such an uncanny setting that Wolfgang encounters a corpse, 'escorts' it home, imagining it to be some living destitute woman.

But with Katherine Mansfield, whose characters seem to emerge straight from real life, it is the atmosphere that often synthesizes polarities- In her story included here, Rosemary Fell feels a great urge to cut short her shopping and run home for tea. "Rain was falling, and with the rain it seemed the dark came too, spinning down like ashes. There was a cold bitter taste in the air, and the new-lighted lamps looked sad. Sad were the lights in the houses opposite ... Rosemary felt a strange pang. She pressed her muff against her breast ... One ought to go home to have an extra-special tea.' It is precisely at this moment that Miss Smith, the poor girl, also 'clutched at her coat-collar with reddened hands, and shivered as though she had just come out of the water'. She stammers out, 'Would you let me have the price of a cup of tea?' Here the rain, cold and dark, bring together two distinctly different types of women-to meet and part in a highly dramatic situation.

A story can be gay or sad, action-packed or woven around an intangible theme, a simple narrative or a sophisticated artifact, but

it must entertain the reader, for one does not read stories for knowledge or spiritual enlightenment. Therefore, stories with wit and humour have a special appeal to the reader. Consider the two stories included in this selection: James Thurber's 'The Night the Ghost Got in', and Manohar Malgonkar's 'Upper Division Love'. While the former exploits the perennial theme of ghosts to gratify the reader's love of the marvellous, the latter pokes fun at sentimental love, the stock theme in most 6m stories. With Thurber, humour is almost a mode of perception; his story creates a highly amusing situation out of the imagined presence of a ghost in the dining room, and consequently the entire household passes through a series of hilarious happenings-the narrator's mother whamming her shoe through the window, and his grandfather nearly shooting a policeman. Malgonkar's story centres on a petty clerk who is infatuated with a celebrated film-actress-it is her smile that haunts him day and night. \*That smile was a heady thing like multiple effects in a pinball machine when you hit the ball right. It kept me awake for a long time that night. I knew I had no business to fall in love with a film star; a lower division clerk should have no upper division aspirations AH the same I was in love. It was that smile.'

But whatever the theme or technique, it is style that sustains a story. Words, as observed by Sherwood Anderson, 'are like the colours used by a painter'. Style is not just the outer garb worn by a story-it is the meaning itself. Just as a heavy, pedantic style would not be appropriate to a humorous story, HO would a flippant and racy style be unsuitable to project a grim and poignant situation. Indeed, in the choice of style, appropriateness is all-a fact many writers seem to have ignored. Again, unlike a traditional

writer, a contemporary writer avoids involved sentences and aims at creating the rhythmic fluidity of everyday speech. Note, for instance, the difference between the following two passages: He knew the time to be full of vicissitudes, and that many a fair head, which had rested on soft pillows, now wandered homeless. Perhaps this was some poor mourner whom the dreadful axe had rendered desolate, and who now sat there heartbroken.

**('Adventures of the German Student')** I slammed shut the door at the stairs too and held my knee against it. After a long minute, I slowly opened it again. There was nothing there. There was no sound. None of us ever heard the ghost again.

**('The Night the Ghost Got in')** Between the formal periods of Irving and the short, snappy sentences of Thurber, the contrast is obvious. In fact, Raja Rao's theory of writing, in relation to the peculiar Indian genius, comes very close to the western notion of the fluid word as the most potent instrument of communication. In his foreword to Kantkapura, he expounds his theory of style:

After language the next problem is that of style. The tempo of Indian life must be infused into our English expression, even as the tempo of American or Irish has gone into the making of theirs. We, in India, think quickly, we talk quickly, and when we move we move quickly. There must be something in the sun of India that makes us rush and tumble and run on... We have neither punctuation nor the treacherous 'ats' and 'ons' to bother us-we tell one interminable tale. Episode follows episode, and when our thoughts stop our breath stops, and we move on to another thought. This was and still is the ordinary style of our story-telling.

And in Raja Rao's story there appears what may be called the Indian version of the western stream-of-consciousness technique popularized by James Joyce and Virginia Woolf, Here is a segment of Ramu's interior monologue activated by Nanjundayya's torrential outpourings.

To have one's life ruined because of a few rupees! Oh, no! How horrible. But then, how long to live like this ... cooking... washing... sweeping... counting each pie as though it contained the germ of eternal happiness, Impossible. A good marriage is profitable for the moment.... A room overlooking a spacious garden... A smiling wife bringing in hot coffee... The languor... The mother-in-law's supplication...

A few Indian short stories, originally written in English, are included here to offer our readers an experience of their own cultural milieu-Since Independence, the Indian short story in English has assumed very significant dimensions. Writers like Raja Rao, R. K.

Narayan, Khushwant Singh, Manohar Malgonkar have made their mark with their sensitive handling of a foreign medium and their mastery over an elusive literary form. The inclusion of these writers may also enable the reader to assess their achievement in a wider perspective.

It is hoped, therefore, that this anthology of short stories will interest both the student and the general reader.

#### REFERENCES-

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