



Contemporary Short Story in Indian Writing in English

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Abstract

In modern times short stories have become a powerful medium of literary expression. The short story as a literary form was very popular in ancient India. Short story originated in ancient India and works like Panchatantra, Kathasaritsagar and the Jatak Tales are good examples of short stories. It was from India that the Arabs borrowed this form and transmitted it to the west. The evolution of the short story first began before humans could write. A short story is a brief work of literature, usually written in narrative prose. It is one of the oldest types of literature. It has existed in many forms such as myths, fairy tales, ballads, and parables. However, the modern form of the short story in India owes a good deal to western short story of the 19th and 20th centuries. Indian authors in the early part of the 20th century worked on the models provided by American, British, Russian, and French story writers. Historical events have also continued to have their impact on the Indian short story. Mulk Raj Anand, R.K. Narayan, Raja Rao, and others in the form of short stories give their contribution to its development.

Keywords: short story; social issues; migration; displacement; moral values

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A wide survey of the short story as a literary form has proved that in modern times it has become a powerful medium of literary expression. The short story as a literary form was very popular in the ancient India. The Panchatantra and the Jatak Tales are good examples of the form. The serious moral lessons could easily be communicated to the readers through the literary form of the short story. In modern times, however, its popularity has increased tremendously. In the modern fast-moving world, no one would like to read a voluminous novel. The modern man has neither patience nor time to devote himself to reading a long piece of fiction. Here, the short story caters to the need of the modern man. The reading of a short story does not take much time and it can be done in one sitting without taxing and tiring one's mind. For a limited period of time, a short story captivates our mind and when the story ends, we are caught unawares. We feel that the writer should have written more. But herein lies the charm of a short story as a literary form and we are reminded of the poem *The Noble Nature* by Ben Jonson:

*"In small proportions we just beauties see
And in short measures life may perfect be." (61)*

Thus, the short story has come to be the most favorite literary form in the modern age. In the last few decades, the short story has moved from the individual to the social, from a relatively simple narrative point of view to a more complex and more significantly, from the obvious to the subtle. The novel and the short story share most of the same elements and techniques of fiction, but the short story reveals character, usually by means of a single central and representative incident, whereas the novel traces the development of character through a series of incidents stretching over a span of time. The novel aims at representing life at large; the short story is a fragment. The novelist, endeavoring to render life in all its fullness, portrays details exhaustively which an artistic storyteller instinctively avoids. While the realistic novel is complete, the short story is suggestive. In the handling of material, then, the most striking difference between the novel and the short story is that the problem of selection, or of suggestive omission and compression, is, for the short storywriter, of supreme importance. For, the short story can never, like the novel, give us the whole of life. It can only aim to present, in a vigorous, compressed, suggestive way, a simplification and idealization of a particular part or phase of life. In following this more limited and specific aim, the short story has necessarily a simple and more clever plot, action more continuous more coherent, for significant characterization, time and place and also the point of view generally the same throughout with characters fewer and more striking and presented under more unusual circumstances. In a word, the short story has a unity that can be distinctly felt.

The novel may or may not have one fundamental idea as its basis, fundamental idea of some sort is for the short story, in the modern sense of the term, an absolute prerequisite. For the short story today aims not merely at recounting a series of interesting events in a chronological or logical order, but to create a vivid picture of a bit of life in such a way as to render a preconceived idea or impression. It has for its material not merely people and events, but people



in their relation to one another and to their environment. In a word, the material of the short story is a single situation. The modern short story differs in this respect from the novel, and also from the simple narrative or tale from which it sprang. The novel is concerned with life histories, and the simple narrative or tale, with an increasing sequence of events. The short story, on the other hand, only suggests life histories by retrospect or hint of future or by presenting determining crises in lives of characters, and it uses its series of events in accordance with a dominating motive, to render the impression of a situation. Brander Mathews, in his *Philosophy of the Short story* lays great stress on this unity of impression what Poe calls the 'effect of totality' as the mark of distinction between the short story and the novel. And Canby, carrying the discussion still further, says that it is the deliberate and conscious use of impressionistic methods, together with the increasing emphasis on situation, which distinguishes the short story of today from the tale or simple narrative and makes it seem a new work of art. The short story deals with a fragment of life. Unlike the novel it does not attempt to exhibit life in all its variety and complexity. Thus, the short story is not a novel on a reduced Scale, but it is entirely different from the novel.

Literary historians are generally inclined to think that the short story is a product of the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth century. But it is in no sense a new literary development. It originated in ancient India and works like Panchatantra and Kathasaritsagar are examples of short stories. It was from India that the Arabs borrowed this form and transmitted it to the West. However, the modern form of the short story in India owes a good deal to the Western short story of the 19th and 20th centuries. Indian authors in the early part of the 20th century worked on the models provided by American, British, Russian, and French story writers. Historical events have also continued to have their impact on the Indian short story. With Independence, the reconstruction of India and the assertion of a national identity brought in some of the early work of Indo-English masters like R.K.Narayan, Raja Rao and Mulk Raj Anand. The cultivation of a landscape, and topography around the semi-fictional Malgudi, as representative of a South Indian small town, complete with railway station, Main Street, school etc., is R.K.Narayan's special forte. This, taken together with the metaphysical speculations of Raja Rao and Mulk Raj Anand's focus on the disadvantaged and dispossessed gave expression to three aspects of the life of an emerging nation. Narayan presented an idealized picture of a small town and its people. Rao focused on spiritual India both in his characters and landscape, while Anand provided a delineation of the lower strata of Indian society. Between them, one might say, a large section of India, with the exception perhaps of the metropolis, was covered. Thus, the Indian short story writer in English began his work under the impact of the West and that slowly but steadily he spread his wings to incorporate the charms of a finished form and a natural prose style.

It is universally admitted that storytelling comes naturally to women. In almost all the languages, women novelists have taken a foremost position in the art of narrative. There is thus a spurt in the output of stories produced by women writers. There are quite a few women short story tellers of Indian origin who have excelled in the art of storytelling and in creating an aroma of Indian



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setting and environment, for example, Bharati Mukherjee, Uma Parameswaran, Mena Abdullah and others.

Bharati Mukherjee as a short storywriter deal with problems of transition which brings the state of displacement, separation rootlessness, cultural conflict or biculturalism and it cultivates ocean of diasporic ethos in her works. She was a significant short story writer. Her popularity shot up with the publication of *The Middleman and Other Stories* that bagged the 1998 National Book Critics Award in America. It consists of eleven short stories and depicts the problem of emigrating to America and the dream of a new life which tempts them to go there. Bharati Mukherjee is herself a middleman, an interpreter of two cultures. She is tackling big subjects- violence, culture shock and politics not always with equal success. But the writing remains elegant and economical. She is a writer who has found her subject - the impact on America of what she regards as a new breed of third world pioneers.

In *The Middleman*, Bharati Mukherjee has plunged herself into the throes of American society. In return, she offers acute insights into the clashes that mark a non-white's entry into that culture. Adam Hochschild is of the opinion that the characters in this book of short stories are "searching for their salvation." (49) The world they are escaping is not the self-made prison of suburban marriage, but real prisons, death squads or the half-life of Third World poverty. Filipino, El Salvadoran, Iraqi, but mostly Indian, they are members of America's newest wave of immigrants. With one eye out for the INS agents, these are the people who cook the meals and clean the houses and clerk in the mails of a country.

As a writer, Bharati Mukherjee has compassion, wit, and a marvelous ear for everything. No two stories in the collection are set in the same place: Queens, New Jersey, Toronto, Sri Lanka, Hamburg, Florida and elsewhere. Perhaps that is to emphasize that the entire globe is the setting for what she writes about the confrontation between third world people, dreaming of a new life in the West and those who feel like the Southern Vietnam vet in the story "*Loose Ends*": "They came in with half a dozen kids and pay them nothing. We're coolie lab our in our own country." (44) In her stories Bharati Mukherjee is straightforward and her stories have great passion and energy.

Uma Parameswaran as a story writer was born in India and migrated to Canada after marriage. She is now a Professor of English in a University of Canada. She is a writer of Indian Diaspora. Uma Parameswaran herself has said that connecting the two homelands has been the main theme of her creative writings. In 1967, She published a story *The Door Shut behind Me*, which won her a literary prize. This story is an interesting one. Through this story the writer wants to convey the message that there is both loss and gain in the act of migration. *What was always Hers*, a collection of short stories and winner of the 1999 New Muse Award and the Canadian Authors Association 2000 Jubilee Award for best short stories, is Parameswaran's latest work of fiction.



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These stories established her as a short-story writer. Enlightened, compassionate, and humorous, these stories and a novella explore relationships, especially women-oriented relationships, and the experiences of Indo-Canadians. Uma Parameswaran's stories join the writings of Rienzi Cruz and Lakshmi Gill in sharing the community too silent in this country. Uma Parameswaran, an expatriate writer in Canada, carries a distinct memory of her past and transmits her nostalgia in her artistic creations in a unique way. She tries to relocate the history, philosophy, and vision of her homeland in the midst of an alien host culture and reveals her diasporic consciousness. Thus, Uma Parameswaran through her stories and other creative writings highlights not only the immigrant experience of the new Canadians but also shows how these characters achieve cultural synthesis in the new land.

Mena Abdullah as a short story writer comes from a Punjabi family. Her parental family migrated to Australia. Her short story collection *The Time of the Peacock* was published as a single volume in Australia by the renowned publishing house, Angus and Robertson in 1965. It became extremely popular. The title story *The Time of the Peacock* is truly representative of the two worlds of the writer India and Australia.

In contrast to other expatriate short story writers like Bharati Mukherjee, Uma Parameswaran and Jhumpa Lahiri, Mena Abdullah is not at all worried about the common themes of the expatriate writings like the problems faced by the migrants in an alien country. Instead, she creates a world of children-Nimmi, Rashida, Lal, and their parents in a farmhouse of Australia. These children play and enjoy themselves in the beautiful land of Australia. They have not seen India. So, whatever they have learnt about India comes from their parents. Thus, the nostalgic craving is not to be found in an obvious manner in the world of *The Time of the Peacock*. Here and there these children come in conflict with the Australian culture because they belong to the traditional Muslim family whereas the majority of Australians are Christians. So, they soon reconcile to the new situation and feel happy. Thus, Mena Abdullah in her stories depicts human life and human condition that has a universal appeal.

Jhumpa Lahiri is a significant short story writer of Indian Diaspora. *Interpreter of Maladies*, her collection of short stories has received tremendous response and made a mark on the contemporary literary scene. She got the coveted Pulitzer award for this work. Her work exemplifies the role that Diaspora plays in shaping an artist's imagination. Her anthology has an interesting subtitle "Stories from Bengal, Boston and Beyond." Her range is Wide. Spanning three continents, moving effortlessly from Boston to London, to Calcutta, and even Dhaka, her stories tell us about the lives of Indian immigrants, of people navigating between the strict traditions they have inherited and the baffling New World they encounter every day. As a writer of uncommon elegance and poise and a wonderfully distinctive new voice, she chronicles dislocation and social unease in a fresh manner as did her predecessors like Bharati Mukherjee or Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni. Readers of contemporary Asian American and post-colonial fiction are, by now, so thoroughly conversant with the themes of migration, homelessness, exile, loss of identity, rootlessness, and final assimilation, that Lahiri's stories with the trials and tribulations of



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displaced people struggling to make sense in an unfamiliar world - initially seem to tread on a well traversed terrain. A closer look however reveals that even when she is immersed in the petty details of the disappointments and disenchantments of immigrant lives, she never lets her writing get bogged down by the morass of lost marriages and frustrated lives she is documenting. Her tone remains lucid and clear, shot through with a keen sense of humour. All the nine stories in *Interpreter of Maladies*, set in America and India, are united by the motifs of exclusion, loneliness, and the search for fulfillment. They do not restrict themselves only to the experiences of migrant and displaced individuals. Themes that interest Lahiri -love, fidelity, tradition, and alienation crop up in the lives of Indians and non-Indians alike. Communicating the fact that exile and exclusion are not the privilege of any one group of society alone, Lahiri portrays the specific situations of individuals as symptomatic of the ubiquity of loneliness and alienation. The common theme is an inability to communicate. But this happens for many reason the dynamics of a relationship, cultural differences, immigration and adjustment and sometimes these disjointed interactions change during the course of the story. She chronicles the attempts of married couples, adulterous lovers, and immigrants to cross borders.

Thus, we see that all these women writers have chosen the short story to express their creative instinct. They have made their presence felt in the countries where they live at present. The world has also recognized their talent by conferring prestigious awards on them.

The Pulitzer Prize is considered equivalent to the Nobel Prize which is given annually to one who excels in different fields of knowledge and literature. Jhumpa Lahiri, a short story writer has got this Pulitzer Prize. It is a matter of great pride and privilege for us. Thus, the post-Independence literary scenario of India has unfurled new dimensions and possibilities, bringing to the fore several talented and Promising writers. Indian writing in English, particularly fiction and poetry, has considerably flourished during the past few decades. The names of Salman Rushdie, Arundhati Roy, Amitav Ghosh and the like are well-known in the literary field all over the world. Though Indian-English short story has not been as fortunate as her elder sister Indian English fiction, she has her own share of luck and fate. But the contemporary short story in Indian writing in English has made its own place in the literary field thanks to the writers who give their contribution for its development. It would be apt to sum up with these words of Prof. A.N.Dwivedi:

Finally, contemporary Indian short story in English is already standing at the crossroads, and it has to make cautious moves to pull itself through. Keeping in view the international standards, it has to strive consistently to arrive at a safe destination. For this, it will have to overcome its deficiencies and evolve fresh measures of invigoration and energization. We have only to 'wait and watch for a better future of the short story, and not get bogged down in the morasses of unhealthy speculations and pessimistic tendencies, realizing the truth that The best is yet to come. (Dwivedi 21)



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