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Indian English Short Story: A Reassessment

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Abstract

Notwithstanding the ancient Indian tradition of story-telling as reflected in *Katha Sarit Sagar*, the *Brihad Katha Manjari* or the *Panchtantra* and the *Jatak Tales*, the short story as a distinct literary form is largely the product of the 20th century, particularly in India. Modern short story, like lyric on its small canvas, has its focus more intense than that of the novel. As a critic says, it is “the most sensitive literary barometer that registers every shade of social change” (Mehrotra190). Beginning with R.K. Narayan, M.R. Anand, Khushwant Singh, K.A. Abbas and Anita Desai to present day writers like Shashi Deshpande, Vikram Chandra and Shiv. K. Kumar, the English story writers in India have faithfully recorded the contemporary Indian life and society and caught the rhythm of the post independent India prone to quick changes on all fronts – social, economic, political, scientific. This paper seeks to make a quick survey of how Indian English short story has honestly portrayed the contemporary life and why in spite of its forward march, both quantitatively and qualitatively this genre

seems to be lagging behind the great stride it has made in the native Indian languages like Urdu, Hindi, Bengali, Punjabi etc. Urdu alone has given us a large number of powerful short story writers like Prem Chand, Manto, Ismat Chughtai, Krishn Chandra, Qur-ratul-ain Haidar, Intizar Hussain to name a few.

Keywords

Indian English Short Story; Reassessment; Post independent India.

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The English short story writing in India makes its beginning almost simultaneously with the novel in the 1920s or 30s. The triumvirate of Mulk Raj Anand, Raja Rao and R.K. Narayan 'are the pioneers of novel and short story in Indian English literature in the fourth decade of the twentieth century'(Das:95). Like novel in India, this genre in modern time also owes its origin to the European model. Therefore, 'if the western masters like Maupassant, Frank O'Connor, Theodre Powys influenced Mulk Raj Anand, R.K. Narayan was influenced by Chekhov and Raja Rao took the French masters as his guide and source of inspiration'(Das:95). However, these great writers have not forgotten their Indian roots and search for their themes in Indian myths, epics, folk tales and ancient tales. Therefore, the Indian short story is extraordinary in its ability to stick to the traditional rules of the craft and still demonstrate remarkable originality and sense of Indianness. It revolves around a limited number of characters, continues itself in time and space, and has a well-plotted narrative that drives its central theme. Within the traditional framework, however, its creativity flowers, and what emerges is a story that is marked with freshness and imagination.

The early masters like Anand, Narayan and Rao along with Khushwant Singh and Khwaja Ahmad Abbas mostly adopt the ironic comic mode to explore Indian life and society in great ferment. Thus the freedom movement and the nationalistic urge looms large in the early short stories and novels of these writers. The post-independence events and the tragic partition of the country

further complicated the matter in the shape of communal hatred in which hundreds of thousands were killed and migration on massive scale rendered millions of people homeless. However, surprisingly while the novels in English like Khushwant Singh's *Train to Pakistan* (1956) and Chaman Nihal's *Azadi* (1973) captured the pangs of division and the gruesome tragedy of partition quite faithfully, the short stories in English failed to catch this moment of great crisis in the nation's history at the scale it should have. Surprisingly, the otherwise apolitical author R.K. Narayan made an attempt to express his disappointment and anguish at the communal question and the sheer absurdity of communal rioting in his story entitled *Another Community*. There is another story by Saros Cowasjee, *The Chowkidar* which gives a faithful account of the atmosphere of communal disharmony, dreadful animosity and almost tragic atmosphere of mistrust which still continues to plague us. Nevertheless, some of the short stories of Khwaja Ahmad Abbas and Mulk Raj Anand also bring out the pathos and tragedy caused by the partition.

It doesn't however mean that Indian short story in English has been completely divorced from the social reality. As a matter of fact, Indian English short story holds mirror unto contemporary society which reflects its Indianness. It is an honest and faithful critique of the post-independent India in ferment at all levels – social, cultural, political, economic etc. While Mulk Raj Anand focuses on the socio-economic man, R.K. Narayan like his novels makes an interesting comic ironic portrayal of the people of Malgudi. His stories usually deal with the conflict of tradition and modernity, changing social values, position of women, the institution of marriage, social evils and superstitions as we find in his about half a dozen collections of short stories. The atmosphere in Narayan's short stories is almost similar to that of his novels. And as in his novels, here too irony is the key note. His story *Lawley Road* where he takes a dig at the attitude of the political leaders to rename certain streets after the Indian leaders is a case in point. Moreover, R.K. Narayan has also made extensive use of Indian myths in constructing the plot of his stories. Anand has also to his credit numerous short

story collections which deal with “humanistic themes like the plight of the poor and the downtrodden, evils of caste system, poverty, ill-treatment of women, miserly businessmen, priestly exploitation, greed, vanity, selfishness, callous bureaucracy, feudalism, the Machine” (Naikar 38-39). Actually these are themes which he expands in his novels. His stories along with his novels are significant in the history of English fiction in India both from the point of view of theme as well as his experiments with language. As a critic says, Anand’s experiments with social realism, and corresponding attention to the surface of life in pre-Independent India, catches within fiction the complex alliances, misalliances, transformations, and failures of the Indian national movement. Moreover, these novels are pioneering in their effort to render into English the exuberant dialects of northern India. Although awkward, Anand’s exposition of “pidgin-English prepares the way for the subsequent linguistic and cultural translations of Indian-English writers” (Gandhi 178-79).

Raja Rao has also to his credit three collections of short stories. As a matter of fact, his writing career began with short stories. The stories of his first two collections like *Javni*, *Akkayya*, *The Little Gram Shop*, *The Cow of the Barricades* which won for him great adulation, show his social concerns and preoccupations which are later on overtaken by spiritual concerns in his novels. Raja Rao shows mastery in the handling of plot, character, situation, language and sensibility. One also gets the glimpses of his powerful description and graphic presentation of village life which reach their consummation in his novels. But what is most significant, is his experiments with language which speaks of his commitment to developing a unique Indian idiom.

Here are the beginnings of a master who is committed to evolving an idiom of his own that was soon destined to develop into what is today known as Indian English. Expressions like ‘corner-house’, ‘red-man’, ‘village-kid’, ‘hell-moving cries’, ‘a mouthful of curses’; swear-words like ‘you witch, you donkey’s kid...all testify to Raja Rao’s brand of creative writing. It is trite to add how the native idiom is

employed here to convey a sensibility that is distinctly Indian.
(Ramachandra 48)

Khushwant Singh is another writer who has made some contribution to English short story writing in India. Although known more for his best work *Train to Pakistan* he made his debut with the collection of short stories, *The Mark of Vishnu*, published in 1950. His stories deal with different aspects of Indian life. “They are marked by irony and satire, based on Singh’s ability to assimilate closely-observed facts of the Indian way of life” (Balaswamy 84). His well-known short stories are *Karma*, *Kusum*, *The Riot*, *The Mark of Vishnu*. *The Mark of Vishnu*, a favourite with the readers deals with the superstition of the ignorant and knave village people. However, his stories ‘suffer from some limitation arising from his total dependence on the socio-materialistic interpretations of life’ (Balaswamy 84). Nevertheless, some of Khushwant Singh’s stories ‘show a variety, some kind of spontaneity, and above all that feeling of authenticity and a fidelity to the basic tenets of life’ (Balaswamy 84).

The post-independent Indo-Anglian short story writing is marked by a strong sociological bias and social consciousness. Like a barometer, the short story of this period faithfully registers the strain and stresses, the peculiar flux and gradation, the changing social ethos. In short stories such as Mulk Raj Anand’s *A Village Idyll*, Shiv K. Kumar’s *Eclipse at Noon*, Saros Cowasjee’s *A-4* and R.P. Jhabvala’s *Lekha* and *The Widow* the gradual change-over in society’s attitudes of reticence into loud mouthed expression of what till then had been considered vulgar or worse, can be noticed. Anand’s *A Village Idyll* shows how contemporary Indian society has demolished social barriers in matters of love and suggests an incipient acceptance by society of the individual’s own choice in respect of marriage. Khushwant Singh’s *The Black Jasmine* portrays both tradition and change. Khushwant Singh’s *The Rape* though totally different from Anand’s *A Village Idyll* in mood and technique, does suggest the triumph of love over social opposition and conservative ethos, and thereby succeeds in suggesting the new social context. While Anand’s story is a lyrical portrayal of

the intensity of lovers making a dent into the tradition-bound ethos, Khushwant Singh's story realistically and truthfully suggests the possibility of love. In *Lekha* R.P. Jhabvala focuses her attention on extra-marital love against the background of contemporary Indian society. The themes of mal-adjustment in married life and the concomitant phenomenon of extra-marital love constitute the recurring motif in the short stories of Jhabvala and this story too reflects the growing awareness in women and the assertion of their independence. It is interesting to point out that one of the notable features of Indian society since independence is the emancipation of women, the overcoming of their innocence, their growing independence – social, cultural, financial and spiritual which has not only resulted into the emergence of numerous women writers but also found proper representation of the issues concerning women in the English short stories. The early writers like Raja Rao, Anand and R.K. Narayan were content with sketching the traditional virtues of rural women in pre-independence India and thereby projected the conservative and tradition bound status of women. Thus Raja Rao in his stories like *Javni* and *Akayya* focuses on the mute suffering and selfless sacrifice of Indian widows. However, R.K. Narayan was perhaps the first to portray the rebellious face of women in his story *The Shelter*. *Lajwanti* by Anand shows the fate of women who dare to cross the lakshman rekha of their tradition-bound role. But the emergence of women short story writers like Kamla Das, Shashi Deshpande, Anita Desai and several other women writers like Githa Hariharan and the Indian origin American writer Jhumpa Lahiri, has shown us the new face of the liberated women. As Shiv K. Kumar says, "Our women writers seem to have lent a new dimension of sensitivity and perception to the short story in English. They find its limited canvas quite congenial to their sensibilities in confronting their brief, often muted experiences" (Das 110). However, these women writers are quite rebellious and aggressive in their writing, and they do not always let their essential experiences fade into silence as we find in Kamla Das. Love is the central and recurrent in her stories which have remained unexplored as they pale in significance when compared with her poetic

achievements. As a matter of fact, we notice the same note of frankness in dealing with love relationship as we find in her poetry.

The other well-known women writers Anita Desai and Shashi Deshpande are quite different in sensibility. Shashi's women are

...conscious of their predicament: they are victims of inequality: they are creatures of conventional morality: they are the ones who are unfairly abused, misused and ill-used. But they believe in conformity and compromise for the sake of the retention of domestic harmony rather than revolt which might result in the disruption of familial concord. (Das 111)

She writes stories which are usually woman-centred but quite realistic. Shashi Deshpande keeps close to the social reality in a society whose mores and conventions are rigidly conditioned by man. However, she faithfully depicts women's inner self, their agonies, their trials and tribulations, their hopes and their frustrations. In sharp contrast to Shashi Deshpande, Anita Desai, called as the Virginia Woolf of India, is focused more on the inner turmoil and the chaos inside the mind. She explores the feminine psyche with a delicate sensibility. Like her novels her stories too explore the subconscious mind. Although Anita Desai has not written much in this genre in comparison to her fiction, her stories are quite "witty, evocative, tender and perceptive" (Tandon 80). Moreover, her short stories reflect "her Indian sensibility in themes, characterization, setting and language" (Tandon 91). She makes frequent use of Indian words in her stories to evoke local colour.

Apart from these authors we have several other short story writers like Ruskin Bond, Shiv K. Kumar and present day authors like Githa Hariharan, Vikram Chandra and the expatriate writers like Rohinton Mistry and Jhumpa Lahiri who have not only contributed to the growth of this genre but also given a faithful picture of their time. Jhumpa Lahiri, in particular, needs special mention because she has earned great critical acclaim for her short stories. She won the most prestigious literary award of America, Pulitzer Prize for her first

collection of short stories, *Interpreter of Maladies*. Jhumpa Lahiri's novels and short stories dealing with the broad theme of expatriation and the various adjuncts associated with it like the issues of identity & cultural confrontation, also assume a universality as characters struggle with authenticity, assimilation & independence. Her stories and novels have a powerful emotional resonance that transcends the label of immigrant fiction. Moreover, she has also led the revival of Indian English short stories which has by and large been ignored by our fiction writers. Her two beautiful collections, *Interpreter of Maladies* & *Unaccustomed Earth* contain stories which have been described 'profound...powerful...& haunting' by critics. What further enriches her art is her elegant, luminous and masterly prose style.

However, the point is that in spite of this forward march of the Indo-Anglian short story, it is still far behind the achievements of this genre in the native Indian languages like Hindi, Urdu, Bengali, Punjabi and the several other Indian languages. Even a cursory glance at the short stories written in Urdu and Hindi would prove their superiority over the Indian English short stories both qualitatively and quantitatively. If Urdu has produced great short story writers like Premchand, Krishn Chandar, Sa-adat Hasan Manto, Hayatullah Ansari, Ghulam Abbas, Ismat Chughtai, Rajendra Singh Bedi, Qurratul-ain Haider, Intazar Hussain, Ahmad Nadeem Quasmi, Quazi Abdusattar, Ram Lal, Surendra Prakash, Jogendra Pal, Jeelani Bano, in Hindi we have giants like Jainendra Kumar, Yashpal, Renu, Upendra Nath Ashk, Mohan Rakesh, Dharamvir Bharti, Nirmal Verma, Bhishm Sahini, Rajendra Awasthi, Kamleshwar to name only a few. Premchand alone has written more than three hundred short stories. While Manto has given us twenty two collections of short stories, Krishn Chandra has thirty collections to his credit. In style and scope also there is not a single Indian short story in English which can match the depth and insight of Manto's *Toba Tek Singh*, *Kali Shalwar (Black Shalwar)*, *Bu (Odour)*, *Thanda Gosht (Cold Meat)*, *Khol Do (Open It)* and Krishn Chandra's *Peshawar Express* in portraying the savagery and barbarism that took place at the time of partition of India in 1947.

No Indian English story could parallel the social realism of Premchand's *Kafan*, *Poos ki Raat* or, the socio-political consciousness of *Shatranj ke Khilari* or, the rustic simplicity of *Jhoori Ke Do Bail*. In chronicling the lives and tribulations of the people living in lower depths of the human existence, there are very few short story writers in the twentieth century who could come close to Manto or Krishan Chandra. Moreover, Urdu short story writers like Manto and Ismat Chughtai championed the cause of women and dealt with subjects considered taboo as early as 1940s which is quite amazing.

It would not be possible to go into further details as there are hundreds of such timeless gems etched deeply in the consciousness of the people in this subcontinent. There are certain factors working against Indian English short stories.

Firstly, the Indian writers have not taken to this form very seriously. They have experimented with the form but barring a few exceptions, they have been primarily novel-focused and contributed very little to this genre.

Secondly, short story has been neglected by both publishers and critics. While publishers are reluctant to publish short story collections for pure financial reasons and prefer novels, critics do not consider it necessary to write more than a paragraph about the short stories of even literary giants like R.K. Narayan, Mulk Raj Anand and Anita Desai.

Thirdly, unlike Urdu and Hindi which have a very strong and long tradition of successful literary magazines where most of these short story writers were first introduced and gradually won recognition before they published a collection, English can hardly claim to have that kind of popular and mass literary magazine barring a few here and there. As a result, an English short story writer can only start by requesting Penguin Books to publish his collection.

And finally, the English teachers are to be blamed. English literature teaching in India is marked by a pro-British bias. This is clearly evident from the preference for British writing when framing courses at the undergraduate and post-graduate levels. In an age when Indian English writers no more suffer from

any kind of dilemma over writing in English or in their native language and are even spitting at correct English, and being recognized for their 'linguistic inventiveness', they still prefer to teach the British authors and neglect native talents. At present, even the walls of disciplines are crumbling and Dalit writing is being taught in the departments of sociology, but the English teachers' orthodoxy keeps the students deprived of the wonderful literary compositions of their own writers. Why not teach the classics of Indian short stories in any language along with Maugham, Greene, Virginia Woolf or any other British author? Why not start with Narayan's or, Arundhati's or, Seth's work before moving on to Wuthering Heights or The Mayor of Casterbridge.

At a time when the English novelists in India are being noticed globally winning both critical accolades and awards, it seems a timely interjection. It assumes further significance in the sense that as a literary form short story is especially suitable to deal with the wide range of Indian experiences, so that thematically it is more expansive and faithful to the nuances of a multi-cultural, diverse nation like India than the Indian novel in English.

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