

Cultural Sentience in Selected Short Stories in English

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Abstract – Staying true to the essence of the beliefs and practices that form a given culture that an individual conforms to, a culture is normally ingrained and dictated through stories for posterity so that an understanding of the ways, mores, customs, traditions and value system is gained in an implicit way. The influence of stories lies in the way they are told, and the effect they have on their receivers. This paper aims to study the concept of culture in the context of Indian socio-historical locale more than just the *jeu d’esprit*, since it intends to examine the influence of culture as depicted in Indian English literature, mainly the genre of literary short story writing. In order to restrict my topic, three short stories written by Indian writers in English shall be observed. Yet these stories do not cover the socio-cultural matrix of India in entirety, they still make an all-inclusive evaluation of the cultural link, divergence, profanation and intolerance faced by the people living in various parts and communities of the country. The stories by Rabindranath Tagore, Chaganti Somayajulu and Vishwapriya L. Iyengar have been selected for the reason that it is believed that India is a country with great diversity, deviating customs and beliefs and all these writers give a comprehensive picture of Indian culture and society. Rabindranath Tagore gives a fleeting glimpse of the Bengal of his time and Chaganti Somayajulu speaks of the South. Although my selection of writers is comprised of the most famous and even the lesser-known writers, the approach is interdisciplinary and to attain a sharper focus the short story penned by a female author Vishwapriya L. Iyengar has also been included as she truly mirrors the cultural discrimination amongst the Muslim community in India. This paper is an endeavour to provide a corroborative evidence to the concept of culture that finds unsurpassable manifestation in Indian literature in English through its numerous nuances.

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Brief narratives, stories are a crucial part of a society and its culture. Although it is difficult to differentiate between a short story and other forms of fiction, a short story or ‘flash fiction’ should be read in a single sitting. As per the Dictionary of Literary Terms, a short story is: “...a relatively short narrative (under ten thousand words), which is designed to produce a single dominant effect, which contains the elements of drama... a good short story consists of a character (or group of characters) presented against a background or setting involving mental or physical action.”

The growth of short story writing is as old as the progression of human writing. The most primitive tales were written on the papyrus- a material prepared in ancient Egypt from the succinct stem of a water plant, and was used in sheets throughout the ancient Mediterranean world for writing or painting by the Egyptians. One of the most challenging and detailed stories recorded during 1250 BC was “The Tale of Two Brothers.” The early Greeks contributed greatly to the scope and the art of short fiction. The first-known collection of the fables ascribed to Aesop was produced by Demetrius Phalareus in the 4th century BC, but it did not survive beyond the 9th century AD. A compilation of fables that relied profoundly on the framework of Aesop Fables was

that of Phaedrus and was used later by other writers. The Bible’s Old Testament spoke of men and women, of tales and lessons learned that occurred many, many years before they were written. In Europe, it received its most distinguished treatment in the Middle Ages from Geoffrey Chaucer and Giovanni Boccaccio and later gained recognition in Germany, the United States, France, and Russia in the 19th century with a notable contribution from writers like Guy de Maupassant, O. Henry, Somerset Maugham and William Faulkner. H.G.Wells called the 1890s as the ‘Golden Age’ of the short story in England as this was the time when this genre gained impetus and the attention of the literary critics. Born in the bosom of the novel, short story according to Boris Éikhenbaum is ‘a term referring exclusively to plot, one assuming a combination of two conditions: small size and plot impact on the ending. Conditions of this sort produce something totally distinct in aim and devices from the novel’ (p. 81). Yet seems to be entwined with the novel, it builds ties with other genres - memoirs, journals, etc. and the benchmark used by various critics to distinguish short story from the novel can be nebulous.

India is a wonderfully rich storehouse of fictional literature. The genre of the short story was alive and

beaming in India, even before this literary genre was coined. Though the *Vedas*, the *Upanishads*, the epics and the *Puranas* (written by the sages) constituted the mainstream of India's literary heritage, the *Jatakas*, the *Panchatantra* and the *Hitopadesha* are a proof of the fact that short story, which constituted the second important additional stream, existed thousands of years ago. A collection of five volumes of stories written by a teacher to help instruct the different aspects of kingship for princes, the *Panchatantra* served as a manual for a prospective king, to help him in deciding how to rule, how to choose his fellow friends, fellow ministers, how to conduct himself in daily life etc. *Hitopadesha*, a collection of Sanskrit fables in prose and verse and its stories travelled to several parts of the world and the *Jatakas* were a huge body of literature native to India concerning the previous births of Gautama Buddha in both human and animal form. Its introduction as a distinct form in India can also be traced to the early 19th century. It includes fables, myths, parables and fairy tales. Influenced by the novel, the briefness of its narrative; single action and thematic focus have made this literary genre extremely well-known and entertaining amongst Indians. The flowering of this genre could be witnessed with the writers like Mulk Raj Anand, R.K. Narayan, and Raja Rao. Covering a wide range of subjects and a large number of characters, this genre matured later in the works of writers like Keki Daruwalla, Anita Desai, Shashi Deshpande, Arun Joshi, Kamala Das and the prolific short-story writer, Kushwant Singh. There was an Indianness in their work, in terms of choice of words and their style of writing. This echoed with the innovative, but growing ranks of Indians reading English literature and their works were the forerunners to the magnificent diversity of Indian writing in English that we see today. So with these writers in the field of short story writing, short story may be said to have become completely qualitative as well as quantitative. Though the listing is an amalgamation of some important and less important writers, the range of themes; the portrayal of Indian culture and its diversity; the art of narration and the authentic record of Indian life undeniably enriched this genre.

Alluding to a vast array of thoughts and actions, the term *culture* is closely associated with the beliefs, values, behaviour and material objects that constitute a people's way of life. When used as a verb, it may mean 'to cultivate' and may further include the enrichment of customs, manners and activities related to a person or a community, as a whole, and form an integral part of one's life. According to UNESCO, culture is usually "Interpreted as art, we speak of culture in connection with the behaviour of people in the moral values and human relations. We denote it by action, behaviour and attitudes considered useful for the interests of society or of a certain social group. We mean standard of living, of habitation and clothing, of physical culture..." Culture connotes activity, cultivation, education, the conscious act of shaping one's activity to embody a certain set of values; mores

connotes manners, customs, habit, the subconscious adoption of patterns set and reflected by others and ancestors.

Nothing but a series of stories which when passed on correctly, light on a variety of concepts, or entertain us form history. Every story serves a purpose, even if to simply convey a message. Without history, without chronicled stories, mankind would be clueless to the past, and therefore unable to render help to the future generations. The historical roots of Indian culture are varied and multidimensional. Cultural homogeneity is the yarn that weaves the fabric of Indians together with diversity in race, caste, religion, language, social systems, etc. As a matter of fact, these varieties with their complexities account for the flexibility and strength of Indian culture and have aptly been portrayed in the short stories by Indian writers in English.

Culture is not something innate but is incorporated in one's character by the society in which one lives. According to English anthropologist E.B. Tylor, "Culture...is that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, law, morals, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society." The notion of culture seems to be familiar with a certain degree of sophistication to which all groups are held liable but the elements of refinement and sophistication seem to be missing in the short story 'Soapnut Leaves' written by Chaganti Somayajulu (Chasaso), one of the greatest short-story writers of the 20th century Telugu literature. The narrator begins by drawing a clear-cut distinctiveness between the social class and caste of both the girls, Paamma and Gaviri where the former is a rich Naidu's daughter and the latter is the daughter of a labourer and belonged to the 'loin-cloth class.' Deeply embedded in class, status and culture, the history of caste is closely connected to Hinduism and has undergone changes in innumerable ways. British ethnographer and colonial administrator Sir H. Risley defines it as "a collection of families or groups of families bearing a common name; claiming a common descent from a mythical ancestor, human or divine; professing to follow the same hereditary calling; and regarded by those who are competent to give an opinion as forming a single homogeneous community" (Hutton, 47). Attempts are made in the story to make Gaviri realize and accept the boundaries that caste system imposes on her. The story catches the attention of the readers with its uncalled-for and discriminatory practices that proffer no fear - not only on the basis of divinely ordained structuring of the society but also material inequality that stems from the divine or natural ordinance. The social forces and the fixedness of 'higher' and 'lower' castes is demonstrated through the complexity of circumstances amongst the poor widening the gap prevalent amongst the two classes.

The audaciousness of the Prime Landlord Kaambhukta when he removes his wooden sandal and flings it hard on Gaviri's shinbone for having stolen cowdung symbolizes the cultural hegemony which has its roots in Indian caste system is a weakening force. The heterogeneity in the social stratification amongst the South Indian peasant community resonates the thought of neo-liberalism with a tendency to revolt against the turmoil let loose by the landholders in the lives of the subjugated agrarian class at a point in the story when Gaviri abuses back Kaambhukta

A single dominant pattern of culture is not uniformly witnessed in yet another heart-rending short story, *Kabuliwallah* where the Indian culture has been brilliantly illustrated. Rabindranath Tagore grew up in a family atmosphere in which a deep knowledge of Sanskrit and ancient Hindu texts was combined with an understanding of Islamic traditions as well as Persian literature. Rabindranath Tagore's keen interest in producing a "synthesis" of the different religions could be attributed to as his persistently non-sectarian outlook. Set in the early twentieth century Kolkata, the story is about a little girl Mini and a Kabuliwallah exploring the bonds of friendship, affection and parting transcending the borders of race, religion and language. As the story opens up, Tagore throws light on the augmentation of cultural separatism in India through the character of the protagonist-Rahmat, who is taken away to jail by police for it appears that he has stabbed one of his clients for breach of promise. He is found guilty of murder and sent to jail for eight years. Later in the story, when Rahmat returns from jail, he is surprised to see that Mini no longer recognizes him and he is then forced to think of his own daughter Rabiya back in Afghanistan whom he has not seen for so many years and wonders whether, she too, with the onset of womanhood, must be lost to him.

A culture, according to T. S. Eliot is much more important than the individuals and it requires a unity and diversity with respect to regions, religious sects, and social classes. In his book he remarks, 'A people should be neither too united nor too divided, if its culture is to flourish'(p. 50). Though there is no record of exactly when the Kabuliwallahs started coming to India, Tagore's *Kabuliwallah* can be closely linked to Afghan-Pakhtoons who have been visiting India in order to promote trade. India and Afghanistan have a strong relationship based on historical and cultural links and India has played an important role in the re-enactment and rehabilitation of Afghanistan. Relations between the people of Afghanistan and India traces back to the Indus Valley Civilisation. Following Alexander's brief activity, the descendant state of the Seleucid Empire controlled the region, which is the present known Afghanistan. Afghanistan was deeply influenced by Buddhist, Hindu and Zoroastrian cultures till Islam was introduced in the seventh century. But notwithstanding many Afghans accepting the message of Islam, the Muslims and Hindus lived harmoniously though it was invaded several times by the Ghaznavids, Khaljis, Suris, Mughals and Durranis

between the tenth and the eighteenth century. During this period of unrest, several Afghans began immigrating to India. Even post-independence, India maintained cordial relations with the country and signed a Treaty of Friendship with it. India's strong and vibrant culture itself nurtures tolerance. The diversity of India and its rich cultural acceptance of Afghans, who naturally identify with the Indian pluralistic society was strictly represented in the story. When Mini's father offers a 'wedding feast' in the form of a bank note to Rahmat so that he could go back to his country to meet his daughter, a kind of culture of humanitarianism –a fundamental sympathy, a moral consciousness and an emotional response to an individual despite the cultural differences, was upheld.

Another important symbolic component of a culture is its language. Language is used not just as a device for the exchange of information, but as a symbolic system to construct and mould symbolic realities, such as values, insights and identities through discourse. The relation of culture and language is the way they share human values, realities and behaviours of a social group. Language comes with meanings already embedded within and is shaped by myriad social, cultural, and historical forces. In the cultural context, language has deftly been used by Chaganti Somayajulu and Rabindranath Tagore in their short stories. Language came to Chaganti Somayajulu naturally in Telugu as the language perfectly describes the 'slice of life' and the collective vision of the peasant community, on the whole.

The remarkable richness of language can be very well speculated from the short story *Kabuliwallah*. An abundance of colloquialism teamed up with vitality and spontaneity in the use of language amongst the educated elite class, Mini's father's conversation with Mini has been often feisty in the short story. Mini says to her father at the beginning of the story: 'Dad, our sentry Ramdayal doesn't even know how to pronounce the word "crow." He is so backward.' Before he could begin to enlighten her on the differences between languages, she launched into another topic connected with the traditional mythic beliefs about elephants holding up the corners of the universe or the elephant of Indra, the king of gods and god of rain reflected through the childlike story of Bhola:

'See, Dad, Bhola was saying that when elephants lift water with their trunks and spray it from the sky, it rains. Dear, oh dear! Bhola can speak such nonsense...'

Therefore, Tagore was the life and breath of Bengali language and literature and the story *Kabuliwallah* truly reflected his empathy for the poor and the downtrodden. His playfulness with certain images provides a psychological depth to his writings. He toned down his translations to make them

characteristically Indian so that he could mirror the real Bengali culture of the times.

William Butler Yeats once remarked, "Culture is the sanctity of the intellect." Writings by women have given a new dimension to the genre of short story writing in India. Exploring feminine subjectivity and capturing the spirit of Indian culture and their status as a woman in a male-dominated world has been the subject of study of writers like Vishwapriya L. Iyengar. In the short story *The Library Girl* the life of a Muslim girl named Talat irrevocably changes when she wears a *burqah* that destroys her identity and individuality. From 1000 CE onwards, northern India was invaded several times by Mahmud of Ghazni – a Turkish noble and later Mohammed Ghauri – a ruling prince of Afghanistan – entered India through the Indus plain. Both these invasions formed the basis of Delhi Sultanate. Purdah was a distinct feature of Muslim women's lives during the time of the Mughal emperors' reign in the country, despite the fact that it was totally absent from the working class. This 'disorderly' effect on women where they could be relegated to four walls of domesticity prevented female education. Muslim women's education, therefore, was generally restricted to religious knowledge. *The Library Girl* provides a fresh perspective to the emancipation of slave-like meekness that is ingrained in the psyche of Muslim girls since they are born. Notwithstanding Islamic injunction of female discrimination, Talat challenges the paternalistic cultural structure that prevents women from living freely just because they are women. A clear discrimination between a boy and a girl child is witnessed as Talat's brother Tahir is allowed to go to school, but Talat is forbidden on the pretext of financial problem. This fact is revealed to us by means of Talat's thoughts:

"Another day she had heard Ammi and Abba quarrelling bitterly and it had frightened her. Ammi was asking how, if there was money for Tahir's education, there was none for Talat's. Her father had laughed and then shouted. She stood at the edge of the ditch outside their house and overheard, 'Buy her silk, satin, velvet, silver – but, fool woman, don't compare her with Tahir.'

Perhaps, a reading of such prejudice that exists in the Muslim culture gives rise to ethnocentric tendencies, i.e. the belief in the inherent superiority of one's own ethnic group or culture, amongst people belonging to other communities in India though Vishwapriya L. Iyengar demonstrates the need to break the gender binaries and her story stands for solidarity amongst women of all communities. History shows that even verses from the holy *Koran* decriminalize gender inequality. Women have tried to contest the medieval mindset that supports patriarchy and have addressed it as a form of cultural injustice which was inherited from our past cultures.

Therefore, the upshot of the above research is that although cultures coincide with history, they are

amenable to change. Indian culture, in particular has evolved with time. When viewed through the historical lens, short story and its vast repository of myths, beliefs, superstitions, values, etc. prove that human culture is impressionable and more or less the same everywhere. One's culture is simply a tool that can be used for the judgement of the behaviour of others in a social context. The genre of the short story has transmuted the cultural diversity of India, thereby providing it a cultural stability and has renamed it as a national culture with a seeming continuity.

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Both language and silence came to him naturally, whether it was English or Kannada. *Javni*, the first amongst the nine short stories in the collection 'The Cow of the Barricades' (1947) written by Raja Rao strikes strongly on the caste system prevalent in the

society of those times. There is a kind of insecurity in the social -matrix of the caste system that started off in ancient India and was transformed by various ruling elites in medieval, early-modern, and modern India, especially the Mughal Empire and the British Raj. A system of stratification, involuntary in nature, the Indian Caste System forces a person to follow a social status depending on the caste one is born into. Its history is closely connected to one of the oldest religions of the world-Hinduism, and has metamorphosed in countless ways. British ethnographer and colonial administrator Sir H. Risley defines it as "a collection of families or groups of families bearing a common name; claiming a common descent from a mythical ancestor, human or divine; professing to follow the same hereditary calling; and regarded by those who are competent to give an opinion as forming a single homogeneous community" (Hutton, 47). Javni was a washer man's daughter. Being a woman of low caste this 'dirty widow' who is 'good like a cow' has to accept the conventions that caste system imposes on her. Marginalized by her kith and kin as well as the society, she is greeted with abuses like 'donkey's wife' and is not allowed to sit and eat with others as it was considered highly irreligious. This legacy of discrimination (on the basis of caste) that found a reference in the *Manusmriti* and the *Arthashastra* is passed on from one generation to the other. Historically, the culture of discrimination and social exclusion encapsulated a continued pattern of hierarchy. It was to be followed in letter and spirit as authority and control could be exercised on the ones who tried to depart from the norms laid by the social order. According to Romila Thapar, 'The power can be based on anything ranging from physical force to superstition. Deprivations of various kinds become forms of discrimination, controlled by the conditions under which they are practiced'(p102). More so, certain religious nuances run through this work. Karkala observes, "[...] when a writer chooses to knit into the carpet of his creative endeavour, composite myths, large themes, high motives, a variety of symbols, the matrix of his work does in fact develop a depth and width in time and space providing vast interior space" (1980: 72). Javni's belief in the Goddess Talakamma and the South Indian value system makes her strong enough to endure the whip of victimization. Rao reaffirms that Javni's faith in God is unsurpassable. His knowledge of history and Hindu philosophy can be recognized as Javni remarks:

"Then came all the misfortunes one after the other, and yet she knew they were nothing, for, above all, she said, *Goddess Talakamma moved and reigned*" (p. 91).

Thus, deeply influenced by the Indian culture and value system Raja Rao dwelt at length on the influence of the most vilified aspect of Hindu society- the caste system.

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