

Locating the Displaced: Indian English Short Story and Partition

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Indian narrative tradition enjoys a unique place of eminence so far as various narrative traditions exist in different parts of the world. Its basic definitive tendency that can generally be taken to be the point of departure is its unique status as the repository of all knowledge and the essential human values. To trace the history of narrative in India is certainly an uphill task but no one can be more sure than about its essential characteristic features that the art of narration had been identified with even in the pre-theorization phase. Moreover the narrator's approach towards the beings on earth, nature, society and the universe might have been thoroughly informed by the primeval human urges but the patterns of narration always remained accountable to a specific order of time and space. Indra Nath Choudhuri, the then Secretary of the Sahitya Akademi also spoke in his welcome address during the Seminar on 'Narrative' organized by the Akademi in Feb., 1990:

The Indian narrator of oral culture describes events for the exteriorization of the worldly process and therefore selects a vantage point sometimes in the time past or present or in the time future. This mobility gives him a holistic vision and time turns circular for him. He talks with his total existence. Indian narratology does not believe in a fixed definition of any kind. (2005:4)

He further cautioned the esteemed scholars against the notion of searching for such a definition that would ensure an exclusivist status to narrative in India because such an endeavour would prove to be of no use. He said:

...and humbly remind you that any discussion on narrative, particularly in the Indian context, will have to eschew the binary distinction between mimesis and diegesis, between narrative and discourse, between history or *itihasa* and myth or *purana*, between tradition and modernity. Only then shall we be in a position to conceive a proper theory of Indian narratology. (2005:4)

The characters might be gods, demons or such other supernatural agencies that directly or indirectly affected the human life but the narrator's intention remained largely human. Many of them (and a special mention may be made of Vishnu Sharma's celebrated text *Pancatantra*) banked upon animals as the characters but the dialogues, philosophic discourses and other descriptions therein had the human life at the centre. These narratives have been used as a vehicle to impart knowledge, to initiate debates on various philosophical doctrines and also to monitor human action. Though India is known more for its long verse narratives, short narratives are no less important that existed in ancient times mostly in oral form.

Short narratives in the post-Independence phase and especially the short stories written in English by Indians, like the fiction of any length, is a hybrid genre. It contains both the traditional Indian mode of narration as well as the modern European style of storytelling. It is now more culturally engaged, less didactic and a better equipped endeavour than ever before. It is more than history positioned as a more vibrant alternative history; it is more than religion stationed as the upholder of both morality and secularism as Rumina Sethi while discussing the 'narratives of nationalism' writes:

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...(nationalist) fiction-writing undermines some of the essentialist representation of the orient, but in turn, creates India-centred histories that thrive on culture-specific ideals engineered through myths about language, religion, race, caste and gender. (2006:2-3)

Another equally significant element of the modern Indian short story is the element of 'shock' that I believe, is a valuable contribution of the Western narrative tradition. It is not so that it was entirely absent in the Indian narratives but its effect was no doubt less pronounced. So it is basically a matter of degree. Moreover it has been more revelatory and relational than situational. The themes of the short stories are mostly either some contemporary issues or some such issues that address the universal human condition.

Partition of India in 1947 is one such issue that has been attracting the attention of the generations of writers not because it happened once and for all but because it still remains with us as such an undeniable fact that continues to affect the whole decision making process not only in India, Pakistan and Bangladesh but in the whole of South Asia. The very first sentence of Isabella Bruschi's book *Partition in Fiction* is an exceptionally cryptic and marvelously alliterative expression in this regard:

Trauma, a recurrent term in studies concerning the Partition of the Indian sub-continent, is revealing of the import and of the persisting perception of the event. (2010: xiii)

When Amitav Ghosh regarded the lines of demarcation among these nations as 'the shadow lines' in his seminal work by the same name, he is very right because the destinies of the people living in these nations are so well connected that they can not be separated from each other.

When the protagonist in the aforementioned novel by Ghosh puts a compass on the map of the Indian Subcontinent with twelve hundred miles as its radius his discovery is an eye opener to anyone dealing with the theme of Partition. It shows how the nations and cities falling in that circle stand together as they are both historically and culturally one with each other. It also demonstrates that even the smallest of the small events taking place in them affects the lives of the common men living in them even today as Bruschi further comments:

The Partition of India and Pakistan in 1947, contextual to their attainment of Independence from British colonialism, gave rise to such unrestrained religious hates that they resulted in inter-communal clashes of unprecedented fury and proportions, and inflicted such deep wound that their scars are still felt today. (2010:xvi)

The story that I have chosen for discussion is R.K. Narayan's 'Another Community' that is knit round the events during the year 1947. Narayan who is otherwise compared to the British author Jane Austen in the matters of the selection of themes (as both of them are famous for their exclusive middle class humour and the arbitrary neglect of the contemporary socio-political upheavals) has chosen to write again (as usually he does) about a man belonging to the pre-Independence Indian middle class. This man is given no name; he is just anyone belonging to a particular community that again is

nowhere mentioned. The story begins with an open challenge by the narrator to the readers:

I am not going to mention caste or community in this story....I am giving the hero of this story no name. I want you to find out, if you like, to what community or section he belonged; I'm sure you will not be able to guess it any more than you will be also to say what make of vest he wore under his shirt; and it will be just as immaterial to our purpose. (2001:93)

This challenge is more the author's conviction in the universal oneness of character among the people belonging to a specific socio-economic background. He fully believes in the fact that the sort of gesture his hero shows in the given situation will be demonstrated by any other individual coming from 'another community'. Such an experimentation with the narrative where the protagonist's personal details are never revealed and that too when the fate of the individual solely depends on his/her identity, is certainly a novel attempt of its kind. It demands an extra sense of involvement on the part of the author and a far greater craftsmanship because the narrator will have to have a rare understanding of the human psychology and surely a greater command over the form in hand. What Harish Raizada comments about Narayan's *oeuvre* (especially stories) is apt to quote here:

For the most part he rather prefers to get his effects by revealing new aspects and experiences of life in seemingly commonplace situations and unsuspected shades of character in ordinary individuals. (1969:82)

Narayan's protagonist in this story is a happy-go-lucky fellow who leads a contented life with one hundred rupees as one month's salary from the office 'which was concerned with insurance business'. Everything in his life remained calm and cool till Oct. 1947 when the newspapers started pouring in such news that contained the sinister account of the clashes between the communities. What I have referred to while talking about Ghosh's text in the earlier part of the article is quite clearly expressed and reflected upon in the following lines of the present story:

Some one or a body of men killed a body of men a thousand miles away and the result was that they repeated the evilhere and wreaked their vengeance on those around. It was an absurd state of affairs. But there it was: a good action in a far-off place did not find an echo, but an evil one did possess that power. (2001:94)

The common man who had hardly contributed in the whole process of conceptualizing the Two Nation theory became the foremost victim to it. How the implementation of this policy ultimately affected the lives of the common men is very well showcased in this story. It made men conscious of their community and also forced them to take arms against any injustice done to anyone belonging to his/her own community. The protagonist who is a simple fellow with a lot of humane feeling finds things going out of control. He is thoroughly confused for he finds no reasons for looking at his own neighbours with suspicion but he is very much conscious of the change that is coming in his neighbourhood:

Life seemed to have become intolerable. People were becoming sneaky and secretive. Everyone seemed to him a potential assassin. People looked at each with suspicion and hatred....The air was surcharged with fear. (2001:95)

Although the story does not contain any date as how the long awaited Independence was celebrated in the area and how the protagonist reacted to it, it certainly records his grudge and anxiety for the impending dangers, the dangers that do not allow him to sleep or wink. He is not among those who had to face displacement nor does the story contain any such suggestion that he will be forced to do so even in near future. Moreover the story also hints at the fact that his community and the other community are supposed to be equally powerful in the area but the protagonist hardly ever takes any interest in planning to take revenge against anyone belonging to the other community. What the story basically aims to do is to highlight the human side of the whole process and does not make any attempt to present an elaborate deliberation on different political ideologies that either condemned or praised the move. These are the things that make the story more realistic and a rare example of a Narayan tale. What William Walsh comments in the concluding chapter of his book on Narayan is remarkable:

It is something, in these circumstances, to find a writer who is independent enough to abstain from fashionable abstractions in order to concentrate upon the particular, upon the exact stress, the precise tone, the exact feeling in the actual situation. Not that Narayan's stories are simply exercises in a specialism of the moment. They contain structures larger than this—lines of feeling, directions of attention, clusters of notions. (1983:165)

The ending of the story also succeeds in leaving an undeniable impact on the readers' consciousness as the protagonist, all aware of the tension in the air goes to his office showing his unflinching faith in the essential goodness of the human race. While coming back he meets an accident that is again like any other accident anyone meets on the road but this time it proved lethal and he is butchered by the people in alley because he belongs to 'another community'. Though the protagonist in the story does not have to be physically displaced, the sort of trauma that he is forced to go through is born out of the situation that is a rare example of the height of fanaticism the human race has ever witnessed.

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