FROM COMORIN TO KASHMIR

THE SHORT STORY IN THE INDIAN REGIONAL LANGUAGE: A SEARCH FOR ITS IDENTITY

I. The origin of the Indian Short Story - dating the undated.

In most critical works on contemporary Indian literature, the ancient traditional literature, particularly the great Sanskrit epics, the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*, are given their due importance as the seminal source from which the literatures in the various regional languages drew most of their materials and inspiration. Even the literary genres, poetry and drama in the regional languages, with their continuity from the past well established, enjoy much privileged status locally, if not nationally.

But the general tendency is to treat the Indian novel and the short story condescendingly as of recent origin and isolated from the main stream of Indian literature. K. Natwal Singh observes in his introduction to *An Anthology of Modern Indian Tales:* "The development (of the short story) in its present form is largely the result of the impact of Western thought and ideas." Sarala Jag Mohan in her introduction to *Gujerati Short Stories: An Anthology* says: "All through the ages, the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* have remained a part of the Indian ethos. They have inspired many writers right up to our times. Thus we have the *Katha Sarit Sagara*,[1] the *Panchathanthra*[2] and the *Jataka*

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1. *Katha Sarit Sagara*, a collection of stories in Sanskrit verse adapted and composed towards the end of the eleventh century by Somadeva, a Kashmiri Brahmin. The title in Sanskrit - The Ocean of the Rivers of Stories - gives us a clue to the nature of the work. It consists of romantic tales, stories of suspense, comic tales. A section called *The Vetalapanchavimsati* (the Tales of the Vampire) is unrivalled in Indian Literature for the manner in which (contd.)

Tales[3] that have aroused the curiosity and interest of lovers of literature all over the world. However, the short story as we understand it to-day is a comparatively recent phenomenon in India. To be more precise, the Indian short story is hardly a century old."

Of course, there is a point of view held by some that the question of dating need not be taken so seriously, although for those who make much of dates, it is not a light matter. These are those who want everything to be neat and precise about the first novel, if not the first short story in English, French, Hindi, Malayalam. In English they start with Richardson, and soon find themselves searching beyond English frontiers - in France Rabelais, and in Spain Cervantes, which two writers, by the way, defy classification. At this stage, one is cautioned to have one's limits. But why? In modern literature we have been liberal enough to accept in the fictional genre Tolkien's long-drawn-out fantasies, Gabriel Marquez's tedious spawnings - realistic, fantastic

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elements of comedy, horror and intellectual probing into various aspects of the human condition are blended together.

2. *The Panchathanthra Tales*, the oldest extant collection of fables in Sanskrit using both the verse and prose medium. Supposed to have been written by a scholar Vishnu Sarma in the fifth century A.D. on the orders of an Indian emperor to make his children learned in 'the science of administration' - the art of ruling and other relevant aspects of life. There are animal-stories which enact human experiences and human predicaments. The influence of these stories on European literature during the medieval period through translations was considerable. The tradition is very much alive even to-day in the Indian literatures. One of the finest writers of fables is Zacharia, the Malayalam short story writer.

3. *Jataka Tales* (dating to 325-250 B.C.) apparently cycles of legends dealing with the Buddha's (contd.)

or epic, as you like to have them labelled - while almost the whole process we find at work in Marquez is reversed or subverted in Jorge Luis Borges' constricted, anecdotal fictional vignettes. Well, if we are accomodating enough, we will soon be disporting ourselves with the marvellous *Canterbury Tales* - not one poem, but several poems or stories, as I see it. Almost contemporary with Chaucer was Boccacio and, among the Celtic races, long before Chaucer there were the prose tales - the sagas. But we little realised we were going back to the great Indian tales - the stories from the great epics, the *Katha Sarit Sagara* and the *Panchathanthra*. Most of them antedate the works of Chaucer, Boccacio and others and often turn out to be the source of much in the European tradition. For the stories from the East travelled westwards, as the traders and travellers came and went, carrying with them the baggage of Oriental material products and at times non-material producrs in their minds.

2. Is language a clue to the identity of literature?

However, the problem we should really be concerned with is not so much the problem as to when the short story made its appearance but the problem of its identity. In this connection let us see what K.N. Daruwalla, poet and critic, has to say about the problem of identity in literature: "No literature can really be assessed without reference to its tradition. Identity and tradition go hand in hand and it is debatable whether you can have one without the other."[4]

The question of identity, therefore, appears to be whether we can find an integral traditional aspect of a work of art which may provide at the same time a clue to to its true identity. Does the language of fiction, which is undoubtedly a traditional element of fiction, provide a clue to its identity?

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former births. Although of special significance to the Buddhists, the *Jataka Tales* is an extraordinary collection of stories, humorous and at times tragic, of great artistic and human value.

4. K.H. Daruwalla, 'National Identity and Indian poetry in English' in *Indian Horizon*, vol. XXXII. no.4 (1983).

It is a well known fact that India as a country is multilingual, its peoples are multilingual and its literatures are multilingual. Does this mean that there is only linguistic isolation and linguistic separateness and not linguistic identity as far as the language of fiction is concerned? G.D. Khosla introducing an excellent anthology of Punjabi short stories says, "In a vast country like India where great regional differences in cultural outlook and behaviour obtain and the various languages retain their exclusive origins and identities, it is not possible to have continued and complete communication between different parts of the country, and there cannot be that awareness of the country's total literary output or its true worth, as is possible in a small country like England."

However, the complaint about linguistic isolation of the different parts of the country is not wholly true. For there is intercommunication by means of translation from one regional language to another and the translation from one language to another is often direct - is not only through English. I have with me a catalogue of the Sahitiya Pravarthaka Co-operative Society of Kerala (Kottayam). At least twenty percent of the books put out for sale are translations into Malayalam from several Indian regional languages. It is worth mentioning that the celebrated Bengalee novel, *Arogya Niketan*, appeared in an excellent translation in Malayalam not long after it was published in Bengalee. The National Book Trust of India is also making a valuable contribution towards making the best works in one language available in the others.

However, what we should keep in mind is that almost all the regional languages of India owe at least their *linguistic identity* to one linguistic source - Sanskrit. I daresay *that* linguistic identity binds the languages and the literatures too - at least in a formal sense. That is indeed a great bond, as are the Western Classical languages, Latin and Greek, for the languages of the European and the American continents.

In our own local linguistic experience, even the Dravidian languages of South India have maintained with

very little friction their loyalties between both Ancient Sanskrit and Ancient Dravidian. Malayalam has a uniqueness among the South Indian languages. Having originated as a dialect of Tamil, it has borrowed extensively from Sanskrit and, from a fusion of Sanskrit and Tamil, become a completely new living language of great vitality both in the spoken and written forms. The observation that is often heard that, if Sanskrit is yet preserved as a spoken language, it is in Kerala among the Keraliyans or Malayalees is to a great extent true. In this connection it is worth mentioning that Sanskrit as a language is much more alive to-day than either Latin or Greek. In *Contemporary Indian Literature and Society*[5] edited by Motilal Jotwari are listed several recent works written in Sanskrit which have won awards given by the Indian Sahitiya Academy. Many works still continue to be written in Sanskrit - *vide* a book on the life and the teachings of Christ entitled *Kristu-Bhagavatam* by P.C. Devasya.

I dare say there was never anything like the achievement of Sanskrit literature of Ancient India in the history of the human race. Northrop Frye in his *Anatomy of Criticism* speaks of the potency of the ancient myths and we in our own cultual context think of the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*, the latter now accepted as the longest poem in world literature and one of the greatest. 'Myth' has many roles, functions, as we shall see later. Here we need only note the fact that 'myth' has remained the indispensable sub-structure of the modern Indian languages in both the colloquial and the poetic literary forms. That is because the diction, the literary idiom; the phrasing and the verbal texture in general in the Indian languages preserve closeness to the roots of the original language, Sanskrit, buried in ancient legendary mythical lore. Incidentally, this is the principal reason for the richness, along with the suggestivity, of the modern Indian languages. For it is an opinion widely held among scholars that Sanskrit, rooted in folk lore, traditional legends and religious myths, has the most concentrated suggestivity and allusive power of all languages living or dead.

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5. Heritage Publishers (1979).

This richness of the Indian languages derived from Sanskrit is accepted by the Indian writers without reservation; it is taken for granted. In fact, the Indian writers are apt to ignore the closeness of the Indian language to the great perennial source, Sanskrit, from which most of them originated.

On the other hand, the European languages have moved so much away from their original mythical roots that the European literatures have to make a cult of plainness even in creative writing - the bare, bald style. As to why the traditional mythical heritage has ceased to be a viable living tradition in Western languages and literatures, the reason has to be sought in the development of modern society itself - the industrial, technological development and its impact on the European languages.

I am concerned only with the literatures of the Indian regional languages, whether they have an identity not only as a whole but also in respect of particular genres like poetry, drama, the novel and the short story. The question is whether the short story has a common identity to which we may relate it. If it has such an identity, how are we to explain it.

3. a) Literary tradition as distinct from linguistic tradition;
   b) Modes of fiction with particular reference to the Allegory

The linguistic identity of the Indian short story in terms of a common language from which the regional languages have originated does not, however, have a direct relevance to the *nature of the experience* that the modern Indian writers deal with in their stories. On the other hand, the question of identity is more related to the nature of the experiences that writers generally deal with and the forms and the modes of communication that they generally adopt. It is on this basis - on the basis of experience and mode of communication - that we formulate and name literary traditions like Romanticism and Classicism with regard to poetry. Our concern is whether there is any such tradition, literary or other, to which we can relate Indian fiction and in terms of which we can find its identity too.

It has to be accepted that the tendency in modern fiction is to move more and more towards realism, 'imitation of reality' - mimetic realism as it is called by the eminent Hungarian Marzist critic, George Lukacs. An admirer of the great masters of realistic fiction in the nineteenth century like Dickens and Tolstoi and a modern novelist like Thomas Mann, he would have the modern novel freed from overwrought symbolism and over-poetic language of the kind one comes across in writers like James Joyce. But according to the realists like Lukacs it is the purpose of fictional art not only to maintain a truthful fidelity to reality - to the natural world and the world of peoples and things; it could, and should, maintain a close relationship to the 'course of human experiences', 'the deeper psychology' of man.

However, there are other modes of apprehending and presenting reality. There is a mode of heightening and intensifying reality -metaphorically, symbolically. What is humdrum ordinary in life is made to stand out novel, unusual. We may call this method 'the symbolic method', and the fiction which uses such a method we may call 'symbolic fiction'. Symbolic fiction too starts on the realistic level and has much in common with realistic fiction. The symbolic writer keeps close to the realistic level. But along with realistic devices of presentation other devices are brought into play, devices like the symbolisation of the background and the characters and the evocative, metaphorical use of language. In symbolic fiction the use of both the realistic and the symbolic methods and the interaction between them enable the writer to realise the central idea or the theme.

It is easy to identify realistic fiction and it is also not difficult to distinguish it from symbolic fiction. *Middlemarch* we will classify as a realistic novel. But in *Wuthering Heights* and *Hard Times* the realistic and symbolic devices are brought together. Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* could be called more symbolic than otherwise.

According to Professor Abrams, the title of his book *The Mirror and the Lamp* "identifies two common and antithetical metaphors, one comparing the mind to a reflector

of external objects, the other to a radiator projector which makes a contribution to the objects it perceives." Professor Abrams specifically mentions two functions of art, a mimetic function in the realistic manner and an evocative function heightening reality. Corresponding to these two functions of a work of art can also be identified the two uses of language - the denotative realistic use of language and the metaphorical, symbolic use of language.

However, there are other traditions of fiction which we are apt to overlook. The writer, instead of aiming at a direct representation of reality, constructs a substitute, a surrogate story at a further remove from 'reality' and makes one suggest or represent the other. The writer frees himself in the first place from the constricting, limiting task of having to represent reality mimetically, realistically. The story that he uses for his deeper purpose is an imaginary, literary construct and can therefore be wide ranging, embracing a variety of forms; myths, legends, fantasy, folk tales and fables can all be grist to the mill for the writer. Divine order of beings, heroic figures from the past, stories in which fantasy is the dominant trait, demonic stories of possession like those of the Yiddish novelist, Isaac Bashevis Singer, and fables like those of T.F. Powys, one of the greatest fabulists of all times about dogs and lanterns, a corpse and a flea.

With this greater freedom of imagination which the writer can exercise in his 'fictions', in his literary constructs, the 'world' which can be revealed through these literary artefacts is also enlarged from the real world to the non-material world of ideas. But first about the real world itself. *Gulliver's Travels* - so fanciful, imaginative, is indissolubly linked to eighteenth century England, notorious for its political corruptions. So, incredible fantasy and the world of reality come together - modern India in Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* and Hitler's Germany in *The Tin Drum* of Gunter Grass, of whom more will be said in a different context. Such a meeting between 'the imaginary' and 'the real' we may call "Art's Oblique", if we were to adapt a phrase from Andrew Marvell's poem, *The Definition of Love*.

This indirection in art, Art's oblique, which gives the greatest opportunity for the artist to be an artist, a 'maker' of tales, is rightly called allegory - which is itself rightly defined as a 'trope in which a second meaning is to be read beneath and concurrent with the surface story.'[6]

This concurrent meaning beneath 'the surface story' which concerns the real world we find in two of the greatest allegories in Western literature, Melville's *Moby Dick* and Thomas Mann's *The Magic Mountain*.

C.L.R. James, the West Indian writer, would have us believe that the 'white whale' in *Moby Dick* is a symbol, an allegorical symbol of rapacious capitalism which lured people to their destruction. Melville was very likely thinking on those lines as his novel which followed *Moby Dick*, namely, *The Confidence Man*, dealt with an identical theme, the phoney 'disguises' we put on in a social system, which itself is hypocritical - based on chicanery and deception.

Thomas Mann's story of the sanatorium, with its 'representative' characters of the rationalist, the absolutist, and the non-conformist in the manner of a popular comedian making long speeches consisting of broken, incomplete sentences, has tremendous power and is certainly one of the greatest novels of this century. The main character, who is described as 'Life's delicate child', realises in the end that he will understand the meaning of life only if he participates in it. The last scene shows Herr Castorp stumbling through an artillery bombardment. The ambivalence of the scene is obvious. There is some meaning in life for Castorp if he participates in life *and* if he survives the war. Apparently the fable of the sanatorium represents the sickness of mind which ravaged the European intelligentsia on the eve of the first World War. But as D.J. Enright has pointed out: "It is not a fable treating of the maladies of pre-1914

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6. *Dictionary of World Literature*, ed. Joseph T. Shipley, Philosophical Library, New York, p. 21.

Europe; it is a work of art with moral implications relevant to any country and any time."[7]

With all the contemporary significance of Thomas Mann his interest for the discerning reader is as much an interest in ideas - moral and political ideas - in which the writer is involved, deeply involved as a matter of personal exigency. Nathaniel Hawthorne, T.F. Powys and Isaac Bashevis Singer may be considered three of the greatest writers who, in their shorter fiction especially are concerned with moral ideas and moral problems. So, in place of the term 'allegory', which as a term conceals rather than reveals, we can refer to the stories of these three great writers as moral fables - the fable being the means to convey the moral underlying the fable. The mora or meaning is always concerned with ideas that have a moral human relevance. So belief in ghosts, spirits becomes for Singer a means for dealing with 'obsessions'. The haunted world of Hawthorne's imagination is for him the means of dealing with the instinctual passions of man and the sense of guilt "over the impulses secretly felt or the laws secretly broken." Hawthorne too has summed up superbly the fictional art of the allegorist: "It is with fiction as with religion: it should present another world, and yet one to which we feel the tie."

It is said that allegories thrived best in times of spiritual and moral stability. So it seems paradoxical that some of the greatest allegories have been written in our own times, generally accepted as a period of moral and spiritual conflicts. Yet the fact cannot be disputed that the greatest allegories of all times - the great religious epics of India - were written from the fifth to the third century B.C. They were imaginative artefacts or creations of the highest order, rendering moral ideas into felt experiences.

Poet Reggie Chrysostom refers to the moral, ideation nature of the great allegories in a poem of his titled *Song of Raghavan*.

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7. D.J. Enright in *Focus Two*, ed. B. Rajan and Andrew Pierce. (Dennis Dobson Ltd.) London (1946), p. 115 'The Forgotten Novelist: A Survey of Thomas Mann.'

The Ramayana is a profound work;
Not merely mortal lovers;
Not just of kingdoms, kings and thrones
Or Man and sacred vows.
Doubtless underneath there runs,
In its fabric richly wove,
Apart from demons, gods and men,
The ideas that then throve.

Consider the superb way in which Northrop Frye defines 'the myth'. One would, on reading Frye's comment on myths have thought he was referring to Indian myths. Probably he was not. Frye says that the myths "created an entire universe in which 'the gods' represent the whole of nature in humanised form, and at the same time show in perspective man's origin, his destiny, the limits of his power, and the extension of his hopes and desires."[8]

Perhaps certain modifications of the above statement may be necessary when we come to Indian myths. We must keep in mind that the myth deals not only with 'gods', whatever their human significance may be. The myths also present human beings. Seetha may be of divine origin. But consider her 'human destiny'. Anyway let us remember again that the purpose of a mythical tale or a coherent collection of mythical tales like the *Mahabharata* is to "show in perspective man's origin, his destiny".

Ancient myths and epics have become the happy hunting ground for pragmatic anthropologists and social historians who have ceased to imagine, ceased to feel. On the other hand, the so-called spiritualists would abstract the essence of the epics to spiritual truths. One feels that even a discerning critic like Richard Mason exaggerates the spiritual value of allegories. "The allegorist", he says, "deduces intuitively the spiritual truths from which he begins. The allegorist expresses his certainty of the greater truth by imagining the less".[9] The method of the

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8. Northrop Frye, 'Myth, Fiction and Displacement' reprinted from *Fables of Identity in Twentieth Century Criticism* Harcourt Brace Johanowich, Inc. (1961) p. 164-165.

9. Ronald Mason in *The Sirit above the Dust: A Study of Herman Melville*, p. 61-69.

allegory is perfectly stated here. But the statement ignores the moral and human relevance of the great epics, ignores the fact that they concentrate almost exclusively on the moral and human condition of man.

4. The influence of the great epics on the form and structure of the modern short story.

The influence of the great epics on the modern short story was felt on both levels, on the level of form and content, on the story and its meaning.

It is inevitable that a form or genre like the ancient epics, which dominated the literary scene and had become very much the moral and spiritual sustenance of all classes of people from the high to the low, from the intelligentsia to the poor and the down-trodden, should exert considerable influence on other genres and forms of literature. We are however concerned with the question of the nature and extent of the influence exerted on the modern Indian short story.

The allegorical epic is a literary form in which the 'surface story', the narrative element, has a distinct place. In fact, it is the main vehicle of communication. But it is also the chief means through which the epic poet held the interest of his audience. We should not forget the fact that in the ancient world the epic was the most entertaining and cogent form of mass communication, presented very often orally and catering to a variety of needs. The taste of the audience was primarily drawn towards 'the story' - the salient element of the story, like the action in the 'story' the characters etc. The writers of succeeding generations in the regional languages nurtured in literary traditions and endowed with sensibility could not have escaped the spell of the great stories from the past apart from their meaning.[10] The epics were available in translations in

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10. M. Grysunova, "Ramayana embodies lofty moral ideals" Daily News (Sri Lanka) Feb. 27, 1985, quoting Dr. Natalia Guseva, who adapted the epic *Ramayana* for th Central Children's Theatre, "No other people have created anything like the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata.*"

most of the important regional languages. The modern novelists and short story writers do not hesitate to use the vast mythical lore from the past. It is most natural for them to do so. In other words, the modern writer does not only draw directly from the life around him. As we shall see later, there was no dichotomy, between the past traditional literature and 'present life'. Anyway, the view of art as entirely an imitation of reality cannot easily be accepted as far as the Indian writers are concerned.

We find mythical stories and legends, characters and situations from the epics often used by modern writers to forward the story and reinforce the meaning. In the best writers such allusions and references to the past literature are an organic integral part of the stories. But the finest achievement in the creation of the modern story is when the writer creates new 'mythical' stories inspired by precedents from the past. Art as imitation of another artistic form ceases to be imitative and becomes truly creative.

The reader of modern Indian stories is generally familiar with such stories from the past which the writer alludes to and such stories figure even in the language he speaks. So when Thakazhi, the Malayalee writer, writes of a blind man cruelly treated by the members of his family, the reference to the *Kuchela Vrita* which, besides the *Ramayana*, is the great mainstay of the blind man against despair and sustains his optimism, is quite understandable. But the real purpose of the frequent references to *Kuchela Vrita*[11] and the concluding mention of the fact

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11. The story of *Kuchela* is told in *Bhagavatam*, tenth Skandha. But the work referred to here is a devotional poem in Malayalam in the *Vanchipattu* - boatman's song style, by Rama Warrier based no doubt on the story in *Bhagavatham*. Kuchela, a destitute Brahmin with many children was in his youth the classmate of Lord Krishna in a hermitage. When he visits Krishna who is now the king of Dwaraka, he is entertained lavishly by his friend. Krishna eats of the rice flakes brought by Kuchela and is prevented from eating the second handful by (contd.)

that at night "the neighbours heard him still reciting verses from the *Kuchela Vrita*" is to show the different kind of blessing that the blind man obtained, different from the material wealth with which Lord Krishna blessed Kuchela. "Pappu Nayar's heart grew boundless, illimitable. He was really not groping in the dark.....the arena of his heart was resplendent, shining with the brightness of mirrors reflecting light perpetually."

How wonderfully appropriate are the ironical references to three episodes from the *Ramayana* in the Malayalee writer, Uroob's story *Odayuthathai Odayuthathai*. A mendicant 'traveller' is entertained in a highly orthodox family household and made to read from Valmiki's *Ramayana* and "interpret" to a large audience of household folk and relatives. A young girl from the family is stimulated by this 'reading' from the great epic to meet the 'guest' in lonely places and have her 'doubts' cleared. She gives him a version of *Ramayana*, a subversion indeed which shows a young growing mind chafing against the restrictions and denial of freedom in a sequestered family. She speaks for herself and others like her when she shows up what is ignored by the *Ramayana*, the rights of women, the fact that a woman too has a mind like a man. She asks the 'guest' why Lakshmanan left his wife to follow Sri Rama into the forest. Will the mere slashing of the nose of *Sharpunaka*,[12] the sister of *Ravana*, cure her of what

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his wife; for Kuchela was being blessed involuntarily by Lord Krishna from his own wealth. Kuchela returns home rather puzzled that Krishna did not give him any material assistance. When he reaches home, he realises that Krishna has blessed him - huge mansions in place of his former dilapidated house and a contented and happy wife and children.

The word 'Kuchela' has come to stand for a person who undergoes much poverty and hardship.

12. Because she was widowed by her own brother Ravana, he gives Sharpunaka the choice of any man she likes. She was unlucky to be infatuated with Rama and presuming that it was Sita's presence that made Rama spurn her, she attacks Sita in a murderous fury. Lakshmaman metes out to her a punishment which we with our more tolerant attitudes find undeserved. Lakshmaman cuts off Shurpannaka's ears, nose and breasts

grows within her - her love for Rama? The third question was more personal, more poignant. When Ahalya, the wife of Sage Gautama, was turned into stone, would she have still her consciousness of her past,[13] that she was a wronged woman, that she was still Ahalya. With all her immobile exterior 'petrified' outwardly like Ahalya, the young girl implies that she carries within her unfulfilled love for the roving guest.

In Uroob's story, *A Wet Evening*, the war at Kurukshetra comes to life again in the potent figure of the man with the stump of leg trotting along begging for his livelihood. Uroob sees him as a 'modern' Aswathamma, like the Aswathamma of old,[14] who killed innocent children and was in turn maimed for life, going about nursing his bitterness and contaminating others with his hatred. Here we see, as Eliot would put it, "not only the pastness of the past, but its presence". The connection between the ancient myths and the modern Indian fiction and reality is natural and inextricable, bringing contemporary reality through another 'reality', giving the present reality a new dimension.

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13. The story of *Ahalya and Gautama* is given in the *Ramayana*. Indra, the king of the gods falls in love with Ahalya, the wife of sage Gautama. He disguises himself as Gautama and sleeps with her. Gautama comes upon the scene and curses his wife, transforming her into a stone. Gautama realises his mistake and feeling sorry for his wronged wife, foretells that Ahalya will be brought to life the moment Rama passing through the forest treads on the stone.

14. Aswathamma, the son of Drona, the military guru of the Pandavas and the Kauravas. Both fought on the wide of the Kauravas in the Kurukshetra war. His name, Aswathamma (Aswa = horse), is accounted for by the fact that the sound he made at his birth resembled the neighing of a horse. In the war he killed Arjuna's son's child and thereby earned the wrath and contempt of everyone and became what may be called in contemporary parlance an 'outsider'. He was cast out of civilised society and was fabled to go from place to place begging for his livelihood. Only Vyasa, (contd.)

In the story called *Dread* of Parappurathu, the Kerala writer writing in Malayalam, the writer begins reflections on the transience of human life, compared with which Nature is permanent, eternal. Into the story is then brought the English girl, Dorothy Kellan, who is enraptured by the beauty of Nature around her and tries to give that beauty a permanence through her own art. Goddess Naini Devi, who is the goddess of the Himalayan regions and of Nature too, takes offence at her presumption to confer eternity on objects in Nature through art - which right belongs to her only - and endows her with eternity through death. The fantasy at the end, of goddess Naini Devi travelling with Dorothy over the wide ranging Himalayas, making her enjoy the beauty of Nature after her death, is by implication a poignant reminder to the reader that nothing remains for man except his short brief life and the possibility of trying to achieve some kind of immortality through art and literature, is questionable.

Naini Devi,[15] an *ad hoc* symbol from the contemporary folk lore of the hill tribes living along the Himalayan mountain range, becomes sufficient for the writer Parapurathu to enforce his moral on the 'destiny' of Man. But the goddess Naini Devi of the hill tribes is given a noble ancestry. She was born from the eye of goddess Parvathi, who in Hindu mythology is the daughter of the god Himalaya.

However, the most remarkable feature of Indian Literature is that 'myth-making' which was so natural with the

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the author of *Mahabharata*, had pity for him and took him to his ashram!

15. Naini Devi belongs to folklore. She was born from an eye of Parvati, the wife of Siva, when she burnt herself to death. The story of Parvati, her father king Dakshan and her husband Siva belongs to mythology proper. King Dakshan did not invite Siva to the great fire-sacrifice he conducted, for Siva was uncouth in his ways and went about carrying a skull in his hand. Overcome by grief Parvati jumps into the fire and kills herself.

ancients is very much a feature of the modern writers in the Indian regional languages too. The tradition is preserved unbroken.

Karoor Neelakanti Pillai is considered the most outstanding of the Malayalee writers from Kerala. In his story *Maraparavakal* (The Wooden Dolls) the writer almost wholly through dramatic narration raises the story to symbolic levels. The difference between symbolic devices and allegorical devices dissolves in the great creative moment which is *Maraparavakal*. The wooden dolls the village carpenter, a woman, turns out no doubt satisfy her deepest creative urges. But they are at the same time the projection of her frustrated feelings over her shattered marriage. One figure she compulsively turns out represents an angry enraged woman who is no doubt herself. But the figure is also modelled almost in an unconscious way on Goddess Parvathi in a mood of anger against her lord, Lord Siva. "I give that female doll the name Goddess Parvathi. But have I seen this goddess Parvathi? I have heard people say that she mortifies herself and goes into meditative trances at times, but also sports herself dancing with Siva. There are also stories how at times they quarrel. I started making dolls, having these things in mind. At times I look into my mirror and assume poses like Parvathi and transfer them to my dolls. Often I work on my dolls imagining myself to be Parvathi. At the end, I seem like Parvathi".

This story illustrates, as nothing else I have read the nature of symbolism, and the process of symbolism and myth-making itself. The old myth illuminates the personal reality of a poor woman in the contemporary world, whose heart is ravaged by bitterness.

The Punjabi writer Kujan Singh in *Love Play* writes a story which goes beyond mere allusions or references to 'myths'. The mythical parallel is sustained throughout the story.

Love Play is simple in structure, using the myth of Lord Krishna and Radha[16] to convey the sudden awakening of

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16. Radha was the gopi damsel (milk maid) most beloved of Lord Krishna. Krishna and Radha are the incarnations(contd.)

a young boy of nine to a partial awareness of the fact that he is the object of the love and adoration of a married woman. It is a story where the mythical story of the love of Krishna and Radha is used with great subtlety. What is remarkable is the way the innocent mind of the child gradually burdened with feelings of guilt is unfolded to us, on which the main emphasis of the story rests.

The bias towards indirection in fictional art and the skilful use of myth-making is also seen in the story of Gurbaksh, the Punjabi writer, *The Guard of Many Loves*. At the narrative level, on the level of the plot, this story may be mistaken for an ordinary tale of love and revenge. But the mythical symbol, or the symbol of mythical proportions, of the rocky hill at the foot of which the main events of the story take place transforms the story into a parable, a 'myth' about the permanence of true love, as enduring and lasting as the hill in the distance. Rukni spares the village chieftain who murdered her lover and forced her into marriage with him out of fear for the safety of her parents. But she renounces worldly life, although she lives in a hut in the same village, making herself available to the people and advising those who are thwarted in love. After one such attempt to help a pair of lovers, in which attempts she succeeds, she is not to be found anywhere. "In the days that followed people looked for her everywhere. Sohnu walked up and down the river bank, but there was no trace of Rukni. Then some one pointed a hill in the distance. "Look!" he cried. "It never looked like that before. There is Rukni's head and there are her shoulders." The news went around that Rukni had taken up residence on top of the hill. She had become the guardian of love. She would hence forth take care of the loves of not only their village but of the entire countryside."

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of God Vishnu and goddess Mahalakshmi respectively. *Bhagavatam* tells the stories of the ten incarnations in Vishnu to 'save mankind'. Of these the incarnations of Vishnu as Rama and Krishna are the most well known. They are accorded separate treatment in the two epics, the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*.

In mythology and in primitive religion rock has tremendous symbolic value. It is associated and identified with divinity, god-head as seen in the worship of stone images and large edifices, mostly of stone, from which temples were made in ancient and primitive society. See how the rock-symbol figures much in Uroob's story *Odayuthathai Odayuthathai*, which has at one level much to do with the quest for the divine. Almost in a state of despair the narrator of the story suddenly comes upon a stupendous rock temple.

It may not be inappropriate to mention in this connection one of the best stories in American literature, written by that 'myth-maker' or allegorist, Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Great Stone Face*. The story is not on love in a personal sense, but 'love' representing the vital human sympathies, 'the magnetic chain' which knits mankind together. Ernst is a simple ordinary peasant and the people of his village are waiting for a redeemer with a face resembling the 'great stone face' - some huge rocks, which have a resemblance to a human counternance, on the hill overlooking the valley. Ernst too is searching among the worldly people around him for the 'redeemer' with a face resembling the 'stone face'. Gradually many are of the opinion that Ernst has the best claim to have a face resembling 'the great stone face'. For "his work had power because they accorded with his thoughts; and his thoughts had reality and depth because they harmonised with the life which he had always lived". The story of Gurbaksh is on what sanctfies love; Hawthorne's story is on what sanctfies life in general. In both these stories the symbol of the rocky hill, by its religious associations transforms ordinary human life and human experiences into a higher plane of reality.

We also find that the old myths, especially the Hindu myths, often use another nature-symbol pregnant with meaning. The major mythical symbol in the *Ramayana* is the forest in which Rama and Seetha encounter the gravest crisis in their life. Their life thereafter is totally determined by the major event in the forest, the 'abduction' of Seetha by Ravana. Seetha remains chaste, unsullied by the event and her sojourn with the formidable lover. But we find Rama becoming a victim to error and misunder-

standing after Seetha's rescue. The 'forest' symbolises that error and misunderstanding. Situated at the heart of the great epic, the 'forest' becomes a prognostic symbol antecedent to what is to follow.

There is an extraordinary artistic vision in the Kannada writer, Srikrisna Alanahally's *Kaadu* (The Woods) which sees the natural setting of the novel - the jungle - as a symbol of the human 'jungle' of a modern Indian village where, as Girish Karnad says in his introduction, "cruelty is a fact of life." "Cruelty towards children, towards women, towards the poorer sections of society. Cruelty so ingrained that victims accept it with the same calm as its perpetrators". The overpowering cruelty of the elders is experienced by a child partly in a direct manner through the grim happenings in the story - adultery, arson and brutal murder. But that world of cruelty which he at first only dimly apprehends is conveyed to him indirectly too through his response to the jungle - the jungle from where the wild elephants come to devastate the crops...the snakes came into the fields early in the evening.....the moaning night-bird near the temple, the demons said to come out of their hiding places in the dark. Those who traffick with the demons were busy in the forest "as they approached the bamboo clump behind the temple. Kitti was terrified and wanted to scream. Even when his aunt reassured him... 'Don't be frightened, Kitti' and drew him close, he was trembling."

"A fearful clay image in the light of a big clay lamp - tongue hanging as if trying to vomit blood...The magic man chanting continuously signing to Lompi to hold the chicken, pressed the knife once on his eyes, severed the chicken's neck, and poured the blood on the hanging tongue of the image.....As they were preparing to leave, the sorcerer said...'Amma, I have laid a proper spell. Your man can never again approach that woman.'"

Here it may not be out of place to refer to a perceptive note on the influence of the ancient Indian epics on R.K. Narayan by the eminent critic George Woodcock. The emphasis is on the portryal of character. Woodcock says

that Narayan recreates characters from the great epics. What we should keep in mind, however, is the fact that what Woodcock says about Narayan is true of several other contemporary writers writing in the Indian languages. "The ancient Indian myths which Narayan began to read in his middle years are not merely plots for films (his eponymous hero, Mr. Sampath, tries to make films based on the great epics.); his novels recreate them in real life. Weak and inexperienced characters fall under the influence of malign men who are little more than nature forces personified...Such is the evil Dr. Pal in *The Financial Expert*...And such too is Vasu the hunter in The *Man-Eater of Malgudi*...Malgudi settles down again into the peace of mediocrity, a middle class town in which, creating an ambience for the sad, eccentric characters and their *quasi-mythical* adventures, the colours and smells of India are so powerfully evoked."[17]

5. Indian Humanism seen as providing the Identity for the Indian Short Story.

In our attempt to link the modern short story and modern fiction with the allegorical tradition of the ancient epics, we saw the extent to which traditional literature has influenced modern Indian fiction. But we found ourselves dealing with a continuity and relationship in respect of the formal aspects of the literatures in the past and the present - external aspects of plot and character - rather than the content of the two genres.

There is, in other words, a certain imbalance in the approach, that is, placing greater emphasis on the 'allegorical form', 'the fable', or 'the story' than on the experiential and moral content of the works, past and present. That imbalance is certain to distort our central query regarding the identity of the Indian short story and fiction

I believe that the Indian novel and the short story, whether they are presented as direct reflections of reality

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17. George Woodcock on R.K. Narayan in *Commonwealth Literature* ed. William Walsh Macmillan (1979) p. 175.

or modelled on or merged with traditional elements of the literature from the past, are based on a tradition, a tradition of moral and human values from which the ancient literatures too take their origin. We may call this tradition humanism or moral humanism. Moral humanism represents the collective, general, moral experiences of the past of a people. This humanism, moral humanism, remains the real tradition in terms of which we can find an identity for modern Indian fiction and the short story. For moral humanism is the most distinguishing trait of Indian fiction too - and I dare say the line of a great tradition remains unbroken.

In considering that tradition, the moral and humanistic tradition from the past, we should not be in too great a hurry to identify the literary and cultural tradition with all that went to make a great civilisation. However, we cannot separate the tradition of the great epics from their philosophical and religious foundations - the great scriptural texts, the Vedas and the Upanishads.

So, in its original context Indian humanism comprises three levels - the human, the moral and the transcendental (or spiritual). That is a matter of history and we cannot however much we try, rewrite history. But those who are concerned with the Indian past and the Indian present are apt to lay too great an emphasis on the 'spiritual' past and that can lead them to difficulties. In Forster's *A Passage to India* the Englishman Fielding surmises that "India's a muddle". Elsewhere the well-meaning Adela reflects "Perhaps life is a mystery, not a muddle; they could not tell. Perhaps the hundred Indias which fuss and squabble so tirelessly are one, and the universe they mirror is one. They had not the apparatus for judging." This kind of philosophical speculation leads one nowhere. Without appearing to be blasphemous, let us turn from heaven to earth, from God to man.

On the level of human living and human experiences, the writer and the audience both in the past and the present are concerned more with moral and human issues than spiritual questions. It is moral, human issues that serve as a catalyst for creative activity. The artist is the 'most conscious point' of the age in which he lives. In

fact, all great literature is moral and humanist, is concerned with moral ideas and human experiences more than anything else. When we speak of the core of experience in a work of art, the experiential content of the work which we blandly describe as the theme of the work has a moral dimension to it - has moral elements blended with it.

That is what Indian humanism is. It is essentially concerned with the human condition, the fate of man in his earthly destiny. Not only the human, emotional level but the moral level of existence too - not only what the human condition is but with the question of what it ought to be. That is why Indian humanism has depth. It has its complexities too.

Yet all this while in the passage of Indian literature from the past to the present, the spiritual element is tacitly acknowledged when not openly promoted. But contrary trends are easily to be discerned in the contemporary era of the novel and the short story. Without deviating from moral goals and objectives modern writers, novelists and short story writers - Yashpal (Hindi), Guno Samtaney (Sindhi), Pudumaipittan (Tamil), Thakazhi and Ponkunnam Varkey (Malayalam) - inveigh often against not spirituality as such but the decadent forms of it. This is an important development in Indian fiction. Asceticism, even in its most genuine form, is seen for what it is - a denial of what is essentially moral and human. This is what gives stories of the above writers with this bias tremendous power in their denunciation of what is corrupt in religious practices and the regimen of rituals.

Indian Classical literature is unique in that it concentrates almost exclusively on the moral and human condition of man. No works have ever been written which are so concerned with the moral and human problems pertaining to man.

In speaking of the essential qualities of myths and epics Northrop Frye says: "A myth may be told and retold - it may be modified or elaborated.....its life is always the poetical life of a story, not the homelitic life of some illustrated wisdom". Here Frye rightly distinguishes between 'the poetical life of the story' and the 'homelitic wisdom',

which are not the same thing. The story generates poetic, emotional life which no doubt has very often a moral dimension. Abstract, moral wisdom has no emotional life in it.

It is often thought that the great epics - the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* are saturated with moral wisdom. Often the moral life of the poem is close to its poetic, emotional life - the 'moral sense' is dependent on the 'felt-experience'. But we also find that the 'poetical' emotional life of the story often runs counter to the moral wisdom, which may be consciously insisted on and consciously, that is ironically, rejected too. When moral virtues are presented as fixed quantities or definable qualities, we should be on our guard. For what is bound to emerge is a moral struggle - the claims for the human, emotional life coming into conflict with the stipulated moral truth.

So in the *Ramayana*, although Seetha preserves her chastity and virtue, she becomes the victim of calumny which the great Rama himself fails to resist. The moral ideal of public good, the ideal of the general good of the people triumphs over individual human virtue. And the individual is sacrificed on the altar of statecraft, of political expediency. Likewise in Shakespeare 'the king' must rule and so Falstaff, who represents instinctive natural living and humanity is cast aside from the prince's entourage. King Lear, first wrapped up in self-conceit and pride, comes to realise the great 'truth' that is in self-effacement and self-sacrifice, on which 'the gods themselves throw incense'. But no sooner has he achieved moral enlightenment and moral wisdom than he is overtaken by tragedy. What we have in the great epics and in Shakespeare is the human condition, and the representation of the great poets of the human condition is closer to real life than moral or abstract wisdom would have it, even when wisdom is presented as important, desirable and attainable.

We are moved by these frightful contradictions in the human condition; our sympathies are enlarged. Lord Krishna may be right from the higher point of view, his cosmic vision. But it is the inconsolable grief of Gandari that stands out at the end of the *Mahabharata*. And she speaks not only for her own children, the Kauravas, but for the innocent and the young, like Arjuna's own son brutally

killed in war. Of what avail is Krishna's 'wisdom' for her? It is the humanistic content of the great epics coming into conflict with moral wisdom and ethical principles that makes us realise how ironical, contradictory and cruel human life is. It is such moral emotional tension that gives real life to the great epics (see Bali's condemnation of Rama for slaying him for the higher good, but using craft. Our sympathies are evoked for Aswathamma, although he kills innocent children. He could not bear the death of his father, Drona, again killed by ruse.) And it is such a humanism that is closer to moral conflicts rather than moral certainty or acceptance that we come across in Thakazhi, Karoor, Bibhuti Bhusan and Tarashankar Banerji.

I should not be thought seeking formulas to deal with things pertaining to man which are complex, difficult. Anyway, I shall sum up the main attributes or qualities of humanism that we come across in the Indian writers as *kama*, *karma* and *karuna* - Passion, Fate (or Destiny) and Compassion. The varying degrees through which the humane, compassionate self of man is focussed on the passionate self of man is presented in Greek literature as the inextricable blend of *eros* and *agape* - an age-old but true distinction showing the contradictory composite elements of man's psyche. The human condition is primarily the condition of *kama* - the two main passions in man, passionate desires and the drive for power - *eros*, not to be construed as the sexual urge only.

In the epics is the fullest exploration of the subject of human impulses and appetites which bring about pain and suffering. In this connection I may hazard a surmise - that Buddhist scriptures and Buddhist literature do not give free scope for the presentation of the savagery of human passions. They are mentioned, at times described too, but seldom dramatised and brought to life. Besides, there are always rational principles of order, reason and good sense insisted on in Buddhism as capable of curbing the passions in man.

It is in respect of the treatment of *karma* or human destiny that the ancient epics come to their fullest stature. Any trite formula for *karma* as the cycle of rebirth or the cycle of births and deaths - some even consider the theory of rebirth as some kind of ancient existentialism - will hardly do adequate justice to the complexity of the problem of human destiny that the poets of the epics present . (Often a story of rebirth is itself a 'myth' to deal with the reality of human life) And then there is predestination. If predestination is an important dogma in Hinduism, it is often allowed to conflict with other ideas opposed to it. Is life predestined or is it just unpredictable through the operation of random, fortuitous circumstances?

Consider how skilfully and sensitively Kamala Das, in her beautiful story *The Scent of the Bird*, drops into the problem of human destiny and predestination, a subject which is close to the Indian mind, ancient and modern. The story holds our interest as a story through the element of the unexpected subtly introduced into it and the gradual building up of suspense. And when the suspense is gradually relaxed - the relief is shared by the reader too; there follows what is most unexpected, the crash of the escalator under repair in which the lady in the story finds herself after her weird experiences in the mortician's room. We however realise that the story has to be read at a deeper level. It would seem as though the lady is brought or led to her death, that there is no escape for her. But I think the real significance of the story emerges through the juxtaposition of the two levels of the story. How did the death come about? From the possibilities that are raised from the literal and the deeper allegorical level regarding the death, we become aware of the mystery of life, the difficulty of construing, interpreting life.

O.V. Vijayan is another of the 'new' writers in Malayalam, who in his story *The Rocks*, brings to bear on his apocalyptic vision much from the past. The desolation of the setting of the story we may compare with the desolation of the Kurukshethra battle field in the *Mahabharata* after the great war was over. The spear, which could instantly destroy, arrows that proliferate and cause havoc while in motion, could be considered supernatural, 'mythical'. But

that is only at the surface level. These details of a war that is over do not represent supernatural fiction or fantasy but the reality of the fearsome, destructive weaponry of our times.

This tragic sense in the contemplation of man's destiny or his 'karma' seems to be almost an integral part of the humanistic vision of the Indian writers, of the past and the present. That tragic sense can also be seen when certain writers deal with ordinary life - life in its mundane, humdrum movement. There is something terribly poignant the way Manik Bandopadhaya's novel, *A Puppet's Tale* deals with the tragic destiny of love. Everything must change including love, for everything is in a process of change and decay. So Kusum at the end reflects: "Even if a red-hot piece of iron is left alone it gets cold by and by. I don't dream again of joys and pleasure and I no longer yearn for my own happiness.....The love that had awakened spontaneously has passed away in the same manner, in the normal course of things."

Yet, with this tragic sense, an ever present component of human existence, becoming at times a sense of overwhelming doom, there is compassion flowing out of man, human compassion which remains the central pillar of Indian humanism, ancient and modern. If Parapurathu writes a moving litany on death in his story *Dread*, Karoor more often than not speaks of the compassion that knits together like a miserable school teacher living for the sake of the children in his charge or a poor villager drowning himself in the well he has built when his attempt to help the community has been thwarted. And there is Thakazhi's story *Settling Accounts*, the compassionate account of a derelict woman rejected by all. And in human misery and degradation sits Thakazhi's Pappu Nayar reciting verses from *Kuchela Vrita*, having his inner vision of fulfilment founded on compassion.

6. Humanism as a dynamic force again - how close it is to native, indigenous realism?

Fiction, as we understand it, is said to have made its entry into Indian literature in the main Indian Languages

through the influence of Western literature. The manner in which a new form of literature is said to have come into such popularity is very often attributed to the tremendous prestige of the realistic form of fiction in Western literature. But is this really true?

This awakening of a new genre was primarily through the social awakening of the Indian writers and the Indian people. That awakening resulted in humanism, traditional humanism develop from general sympathy and compassion for man to particular concern for the poor and the oppressed. Concern not only for the poor and the downtrodden, but for groups and classes of people who were exploited - women, white colar workers, large sections of depressed classes and people labouring under the tyranny of out-moded customs and oppressive, superstitious beliefs. Besides, this human concern moved from social levels to deeper psychological levels. In other words a new revived humanism it was that took charge of the new literary form and made it really come to life.

We may say that there was a successful fusion of humanism and realism in Indian fiction. (I myself will have some reservations about the realistic literary form that got started. For the influence of the traditional literature of India's past was a living presence. Otherwise we cannot account for many of the stories like *Odayu thathai* Ōdayuthathai of Uroob, the *Dread* of Parapurathu and some of the works of Vijayan and stories like Kujan Singh's *Love Play* and Gurbakhsh's *The Guard of Many Loves*.) But what about this realism in Indian fiction?

This so-called realism in the Indian novel and the short story was not an abstract sterile literary creed imposed on Indian fiction and the short story from without. Running from the past to the present, from the traditional ways of representation to the more direct representation of reality, was the richest vein of humanism. The Indian writer with his humanist heritage finds himself preoccupied with the poor, the socially oppressed and the exploited. In other words, the humanism of the writer is modified so that it takes on new goals, new objectives. This indigenous realism we come across in the Indian writers is an

enlargement, deepening of the old moral humanism in the context of the changing Indian reality. It is moral humanism socially oriented.

I wonder how one will describe the writings of the Malayalee writer Muhamed Basheer - realistic, humanist? It makes no difference what the terms we use for passages like the following:[19]

> "Bring them here."
>
> The young man with the gold rimmed spectacles issued that order. Yes, I had met those two small children early in the morning. As they came up the staircase, they were panting hard. Their eyes were sunk, faces thoroughly worn out and the lips parched and dried up. (After bargaining with them for a long time, the young man buys a pair of wooden sandals for 2 1/4 annas.) He brought from within two one anna pieces and gave them.
>
> "The 1/4 anna Sir?"
>
> "That is all I have. If you don't want, please take away the sandals and go."
>
> The boys looked at each other. And then they went away without saying a word. The young man looked down and saw them going along the road and now they were below the street lamp. He laughed loud.
>
> "I have done a small trick. One of those two anna pieces is dud." All his friends who were with him burst out laughting.

Here is a description of prisoners defacating within the premises of a prison. The story is set against the political agitation for independence.

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19. Translated from the *Janmadinam The Birthday* a short story by Mohemed Basheer.

> Blocks of cabook stone are placed side by side in two long rows. That is our lavatory. Squatting face to face with shoulders touching. Five to six hundred people.....'
>
> (*The Portrait of a Prisoner*)

7. Humanism, Realism and Marxism

It was fortunate that the Indian writers had a great humanistic tradition of the past which is a living tradition too to base himself on. It was humanism that kept the writers close to the reality of the human condition, in an Indian context. Besides, humanism prevented the writers from straying into certain difficulties.

The difficulties that face a writer dealing with social problems and with crises in society are two-fold. Where the writer does not have sufficient freedom to express himself, he feels thwarted creatively, often making his peace with the Establishment, as has happened to many writers in Soviet Russia under Stalin and in many East European countries. This is the problem posed for a writer by social or political institutions exerting various pressures on him, making him toe the line. However, the Indian writer does not have this problem to reckon with.

The other problem is very often the artist's own creation. He fails, as Trotsky has observed, to "subjectively assimilate...the struggle for freedom.

> "The artist cannot serve the struggle for freedom unless he subjectively assimilates its social content, unless he feels in his very nerves its meaning and drama and freely seeks to give his own inner world incarnation in his art."[20]

In many writers we find this tendency towards exaggeration and propagandist stances making literature move

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20. Quoted from Trotsky's *A Manifesto-Art and Revolution* in Cliff Slaughterer's *Marxism, Ideology and Literature*, Macmillan, London (1980) ch. 3, p. 103.

within the narrow limits of the favourite creed to which they have committed themselves, without making literature serve their own deeper insights.

I am not going to discuss here whether Marxism, as some critics claim, represents the progressive humanism of our times. But we cannot deny the fact that in the forties many Indian writers - most of them novelists and short story writers - came directly under the influence of Marxism. The Progressive Writers' Union had strong Marxist affiliations. These writers thought that they could advance the cause of both art and society through such allegiance. There have been much political posturing and propaganda in many writers at that time, but in the best writers among them the commitment was not so much to an ideology, however alluring that may have appeared to them at that time. Their commitment was to humanist ideals, human values which are, let us note, in a constant struggle against cruelty, exploitation, tyranny and social corruption, wherever and in whatever forms they appear. The writings of novelists like Prem Chand and Thakazhi Sivasankara Pillai (professed Marxists early in their careers) represent a tremendous triumph for Indian humanism. And we have to concede that their commitment to a political ideology like Marxism made them better writers than they would have been if they were non-committed. Commitment did not become a constraint on free, imaginative expression in their cases.

So, in a writer like Thakazhi, the variety of tone in his stories is a proof of his creative individuality, which prevents his stories from becoming propagandist. In his short novel *Two Measures of Rice*, dealing with a low-caste community in Kerala, he expresses a radical, militant attitude to social oppression, whereas in the story of the fish-vendor Kochousaippu, he expresses a cynical attitude to the hypocrisy of institutionalised religion. And that cynicism is entirely appropriate to the main character as he grows from religious credulity to a full awareness of the corrupt forces he has to contend with. His celebrated story of a beggar woman - *Settling Accounts* - although full of pathos, never degenerates into sentimentality because of the concrete 'facts'

of the story, which are dismal, sordid but which make the story authentic, almost 'factual'.

However, at a time when there was a definite Marxist trend in Malayalam literature, Karoor, without being a Marxist has done more than any other Malayalee writer to unfold the frightful conditions of poverty in which large sections of the people live. Karoor writes with poise, balance and moderation without running into excesses - in the true, humanistic tradition.

8. Varieties of Comedy in Indian Literature. Comedy as an Instrument of Moral Humanism.

Since we are dealing with literary traditions and their influence on modern Indian fiction, it is worth considering another tradition from the past which has influenced modern Indian fiction. We saw how the new realism in Indian fiction is an extension and development of humanism. In whatever manner it appears, comedy is no stranger to humanism or realism in Indian literature. The relationship between these three is one of the most interesting aspects of Indian literature. Activating traditions in the creative process is also to bring "the whole soul of man into activity, with the subordination of its faculties to each other, according to their relative worth and dignity."[21] As for the comic tradition itself, is not the end of every great comic tale a moral discovery - the reaching after moral and human values? In fact, that moral humanism in terms of which we found the identity of Indian fiction, finds artistic expression not only in the great epics but in these unique fictional forms of the ancient past - the comic tales and the fables.

Comedy is a well known component or branch of ancient Indian literature. The myths and legends and the ancient epics make much use of comedy. But that is only a small part of a larger tradition. It would be worth keeping in mind the fact that in Indian classical literature we have the largest collection of comic stories of any literature, past or present.

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21. Coleridge from *Biographia Literaria*, ed. George Watson J.M. Dent & Sons, (1965, 1979), ch. XIV, p. 173, 174.

Comedy has been very much a part of folk-lore in several regions of the country, preserved first in the oral tradition and still continuing to be preserved. The folk stories of Kerala and Tamil Nadu centering round characters like Thenoli Raman are well known. But we are dealing here chiefly with the great Northern tradition of the *Katha Sarit Sagara*, the *Panchatantra* and the *Jataka Tales*. And although it is quite possible that much of what we now know as the marvellous fables and tales of the *Panchatanthra* and *Katha Sarit Sagara* and the *Jataka Tales* may have had their origin in folk-lore, in their present form they represent a highly literary, artistic and sophisticated achievement.

Of course not all the stories are amusing, humorous, comical. The stories of the *Panchatanthra* are called 'didactic fables' and many of the stories convey the moral or the message directly, and in respect of form and style belong to the category of the fable and the allegory. A tiny mouse falls from a hawk's mouth into the hands of a seer, who tenderly looks after it changing it into a beautiful maiden. Afterwards he realises that it was time to give her away in marriage and approaches the Sun, the Clouds, the Wind and finally the Mountain. Each of these admits the greater superiority of the one mentioned after it, while the Mountain speaks of mice who bored holes in it, thereby proving their greater superiority. The seer realises what has to be done and transforms the damsel into her former shape and gives her in marriage to another mouse, with whom without any difficulty she goes into her new abode.

However, even in fables such as the above there is a good humoured, pliant manner of rendering the story through its varied phases and moods, of which the story teller has complete mastery. And between the two traditions, the tradition of the fables and the allegory and the tradition of the comic tales, the *Panchatanthra* stories have come to be associated with the latter.

Commenting on the *Katha Sarit Sagara*, Berriedale Keith says,

> 'The merit of the *Katha Sarit Sagara* does not rest on construction. It stands on the solid fact that Somadeva has presented in an attractive and elegant if simple and unpretentious form a very large number of stories which have for us a very varied appeal, either as amusing or gruesome or romantic or as appealing to our love of wonders..."

Yet when we think of the *Katha Sarit Sagara*, we think not so much of the romantic tales or the tales of the marvellous and the exotic but of the wonderful comic tales, amusing or amusingly grim with the elements of horror and sardonic humour perfectly blended together. The twenty five Tales of the Vampire, the *Vetalapanchavimsati* in *Katha Sarit Sagara* may be considered bizarre and grim, but there is no gratuitous indulgence in the weird and morbid for their own sake. However, there is terror and violence fully focussed throughout, showing how these can erupt at any time on the surface of life. In fact, we have here the first examples of what are called problem-comedies or dark-comedies. For murder, suicide and violence are also the proper background for those insoluble problems of human destiny which rise under normal and abnormal conditions of stress.

Are we then really satisfied with the solutions to the problems given in the stories? For instance, how will we resolve the conflicting claims of the body and the mind of the persons involved in the tangle of human relationships in the following story?

A young man accompanied by his wife and his wife's brother, were passing through a forest. Leaving these two behind, the young man goes into a deserted temple. There, overcome by a terrible sense of despair, he beheaded himself before the image of the goddess of the temple. His brother-in-law, who goes in search of him seeing what had happened, does the same. The young lady follows them into the temple and, seeing the dead bodies decides to kill herself. But the goddess appears to her and asks her to join the trunks of the two young men with their heads. She did as she is told and the two are revived through the compassion of the goddess. When they resume