

their journey, however, the girl, to her horror finds out that she has put her husband's head on her brother's body and vice versa. Which of the two young men, in the new circumstances, should she accept as her husband is the question — the one with her husband's body or the one with her husband's head? The king, to whom the question is put opts for the one with the husband's head, for according to him, it is the head of a person which determines his personality.

Thomas Mann based his story *Transposed Head* on the story from the *Vetalpanchavimsati* and Girish Karnad based his celebrated play *Hayavadana* on Thomas Mann's story, if not on the Sanskrit original.

The *Jataka Tales* in Pali, apparently stories dealing with events in the previous births of the Buddha, may be looked upon as enforcing the doctrine of rebirth and transmigration. At the same time they may also be said to illustrate the moral teachings of the Buddha. Throughout there is the identification of the personages of the tales with the Buddha and his disciples. However, these stories (about 550 in all) can be enjoyed without these doctrinal supports and many of them create their particular ambience of moral values, generated in the story by the story itself. The fact that the story of the three rioters in Chaucer's masterpiece *The Pardoner's Tale*, is based on a *Jataka* story (Vedabbha *Jataka*: 48) will indicate how little we have to bother about the rebirths of the Buddha added to each story. The 'story' in each tale is the thing that will catch our conscience.

These tales, quite unlike the legendary stories about the Buddha outside the *Jataka* tales proper, are warm, human and amusing and even the slightest among them can hold our interest. The focus is on human frailty. Most of them are excellent in the way they satirise and ridicule human weaknesses, vices and follies, though, as we shall see, they have other aims as well.

It is time to consider these three collections of stories together, representing a veritable triumph of the comic spirit. Many of the stories are very daring in the way the story-tellers denounce religious hypocrisy. Several

stories in *Katha Sarit Sagara* and the *Jataka Tales* are directed against the religious who pursue their sensual ways under the mask of piety. Such stories are a far remove from the amusing tales where the fools, and at times even the knaves, are disposed of with good-humoured raillery. We laugh spontaneously at the foolish young man in *Katha Sarit Sagara* who brags about his father's chastity and cannot be shaken from his belief that he himself is a pure, mind-born son. *Salittaka Jataka* (107) is the story of a skilful marksman who reduces a talkative Brahmin to silence by flicking pellets of goat's dung down the latter's throat.

Some may conclude from the large number of tales directed against the inconstancy of women that the ancient story-tellers were incorrigible misogynists. But they very well knew the truth of the saying that you cannot clap with one hand only. Equally severe are they on masculine lust, though the treatment of the subject may not be as humorous. Barreidale Keith makes special mention of the *Katha Sarit Sagara* story of a woman who got rid of ten husbands, and apparently met her match in the man who had disposed of ten wives, but defeated him also and became so unpleasantly notorious that she turned into an ascetic. We wonder whether she was born a millenium later as the Wife of Bath in Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, a symbol of tyrannical womanhood. After having tormented four husbands to their death, she meets her match in a fifth, whom too she triumphs over. She continues to go on religious pilgrimages, as she used to do earlier too, ready for trysts. She boldly confesses

Blessed be God that I have wedded five!  
Welcome the sixth, whenever he appears.

It is very likely that the source of Chaucer's *Merchant Tale* is the *Andha Bhuta Jataka* (62) story. In both there is the lust-ridden dotard married to a young girl and 'blindness' is introduced to let the young lovers humiliate the old husband in both stories.

Perhaps I have erred in highlighting the 'comedy' in the *Jataka Tales* to the exclusion of other elements. One feature of the *Jataka Tales*, which is very close to the

'comedy', is the element of realism. About 'realism' in the *Jataka Tales*, the outstanding Sinhala novelist, Martin Wickremasinghe has said;

"The raw materials of the Jataka stories have been drawn from the life of the common people including robbers, murderers, sexual perverts, prostitutes and sex-mad kings. The Buddha in his sermons used the language of the common people. He drew his imagery and parables from the life of the common people and from natural scenes... The original Jataka stories in Pali verse and the verses of the Buddhist elders belong to the oldest realistic literature of the world. The Jataka stories in verse gave birth to a vast collection of realistic stories depicting all aspects of Indian life."

Both these aspects - realism of the setting and the background and realism of language - are important considerations in respect of the popularity of the *Jataka Tales* and their influence on contemporary Indian and Sinhalese fiction. The dramatic potential of the *Jataka Tales* has been fully proved by the popularity of their dramatization on the Sinhala stage.

Besides, comedy in *Jataka* stories is not incompatible with a tragic sense of awareness which many tales reveal. There are several *Jataka* stories which have a tragic ending or are tragic in tone. *Culla Dhamugaha Jataka* (574), dealing with the tragic destiny of love has been made into an outstanding Sinhalese play by Professor Ediriweera Sarachandra in his *Maname*. Two of the greatest *Jataka* tales deal with the subject of the final destiny of man and the transitoriness of life. *Assaka Jataka* (207) goes beyond the subject of rebirth and becomes a profound comment on man's ultimate fate. It is the story of how a king was cured of his love and grief for his dead wife by a 'revelation' of her present condition as a worm in a heap of cowdung rolling a gob of cowdung. *Upasatha Jataka* (166) also makes a tremendous impact. It tells of a certain man who was partial in his choice of burial grounds. Taken to the crest of a mountain, he was shown how there was no spot free of the taint from some dead body.

In the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana* there are excellent scenes of comedy. The scenes in which Bhima appears over-confident of his prodigious strength or the hermit Narada carries false tales about to create discord are well known. They conform to the two forms of farce of a later generation, farcical humour of horseplay and merriment and what may be called the comedy of intrigue or situations, to which we shall soon be returning. But the poets of the great epics could go further and make a significant use of comedy in the marvellous handling of moral and physical ugliness in such a way that it arouses in the reader 'deathless and incorrigible mirth'.<sup>22</sup> The element of the grotesque, where moral deformity is comically exaggerated and caricatured almost in a spirit of violence and fury so that there is created in the mind of the reader feelings of horror and amusement is well known to the poets of the great epics. Grotesque creations through caricature are used not only by the ancient poets but also by the anonymous artists of the great temple sculptures. But comedy in the epics is restrained, however excellent a comedy that may be; for the comedy is subordinated to a larger conscious moral intention, whereas the 'comic tale' in the *Panchathanthra* and the *Jataka* stories, for example, has a distinct form, flavour and tone of its own.

Before we examine these distinct features - the art of the comic tales - and find out how they happen to be what they are, there is an aspect of these comic tales which may be looked into sooner than later. Comedy with these story-tellers too is a serious activity. There is a twin focus in these stories from the three collections we dealt with. When the authors mock at and ridicule the folly, the corruption and the vices of men, they are well aware of the ideal values, moral and human. When not explicitly stated, these values are implied in the story.

So, these satirical stories have their own 'positives' implied in the stories themselves. The 'positives' that

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22. Baudelaire on the element of the grotesque in *The Essence of Laughter and Other Essays*, Meridian Books (1956), p. 110.



are implied or openly affirmed too, as often in the *Jataka* stories, are the moral and human values that have been the substructure of Indian society from early times and have found eloquent expression in the great allegorical epics. In other words, the immense body of comic tales and fables has as goal and objective the very same moral and human values which have informed and sustained the great epics.

So the purpose of the comic tales, as Professor Berreidale Keith succinctly sums up was not merely "the giving of pleasure and the passing of time" nor, as in the *Panchatantra*, providing "usual advice for political and practical life". Through the comic turn of events especially they served a higher moral human purpose, revealing the anomalies and contradictions of life, suggesting at the same time a way out of the medley and confusions of human circumstances. However, we should remember at the same time that these moral and humane ideals, which provide 'a way out' for man, are realised in the comic tales differently from the methods used in the allegorical epics. They are best realised ironically.

This progress of gentle or rakish comedy to a clearer understanding of life and the affirmation of moral and human values is often reflected in the art of the comic tale. It has been observed that the structure of the classical tale is very simple, often an 'intrigue' - that the comedy of the comic tale is a comedy of situations or a reversal of situations. In other words, the Indian comic tale may be said to belong to the genre of farce or farcical comedy. It is customary to consider the farcical form either in fiction or drama as inferior to other more reputable forms. This idea dies hard, although anyone familiar with the great works of creative literature will admit that farce is one of the greatest seminal sources in creative literature. So is melodrama, the thriller and the crime story. I wonder what kind of dramatic literature - tragic drama - we would have had during the Elizabethan period without the melodramatic revenge plays the blood and thunder drama of the period. Likewise, what kind of comedy would we have had during the same period if its greatest playwrights - Ben Jonson and Shakespeare - had not resorted to farce?

For farce contains a great archetypal principle of life, the principle of ironical inversion. It is irony, or ironical inversion, that is the main principle or law in comic tales and the comic episodes of the great epics, whether we consider the story as a whole or the characters in the story. In comic tales characters act in such a way that they do not conform to accepted standards of behaviour. Events of normal everyday life are unexpectedly turned upside down.

Of course comedy of situations can become a mechanical contrivance, as much comedy on the modern stage and the films will show. But in the hands of writers with insight and vision, the farcical form, raised to the level of irony, becomes symbolic of the contradictions of life and the deviations from the ideal standards, moral and human. This is what the comic tales and the fables do - unfold the contradictions of life. The farcical form of the tales and the fables embody the truth about human life and the human condition - that life is ironical, contradictory, however much we strive to resolve the contradictions.

If events of everyday life are turned upside down and characters depart consciously from moral standards, such deviations or departures are ironical in the sense that they reveal the ironical contradictory nature of existence. Life turns out to be different from what you expect it to be. The hallowed memories of your beloved are negated by revelation of the worm in the dung. The old Brahmin in *Sattu Bhastu Jataka* (402) goes out to find a servant for his wife and returns to find his young wife enjoying herself with a young man. That is irony, irony as a fact of life, of existence.

However irony as a mirror of life has to be distinguished from irony as an artistic device. There is the foremost use of irony as an affectation or simulation of what you are not. Corbaccio in Ben Jonson's play *Volpone* deviates from natural human concern in wanting to kill Volpone. But how does he set about his scheme? He simulates great concern and solicitude for Volpone. He brings 'an opiate' from his doctor to make Volpone 'sleep' (of course, what he brings is poison).

Such a use of irony as an artistic device involves dramatisation, the dramatisation of character. In other words, the principles of inversion and dramatisation go hand in hand. In order to enforce their ideals, moral and human values, the story-tellers of the past do not present the ideals themselves but perversions of the ideals dramatically. They support virtue by dramatising vice.

Of course we cannot expect the same kind of dissimulation and dramatic intensity in the *Jataka* tales as in the modern masters of comedy. And in the *Jataka* tales there is the inevitable moralising at the end. But it is the same ironical manner that we come across in several of the best of them.

Irony of this inverted, dramatic nature is seen in the way characters are presented in modern Indian short stories and novels, where 'character' is the pivotal element of organisation. Karoor is a master of this kind of ironical humour, the special plea for the indefensible. But we realise that this mode of ironical portrayal of character was well known to the authors of the *Panchathanthra* stories. The 'utter unself-consciousness' of the characters is ironical in the sense that this kind of 'ignorance' is a way of revealing their deficiencies or weaknesses. A form of irony in reverse to the above is what comes through 'knowledgeableness' in an outspoken witty manner. But characters can completely conceal their 'knowledgeableness' and affect to be what they are not. It is tempting to draw on the characters from a novel like *Pride and Prejudice* to show how the 'knowledgeable' and the 'unknowledgeable' characters are presented by a great humourist. But we have enough examples in the past and present literatures of our own.

The writer may be ironical in his own attitude to the characters in the story, often deliberately feigning sympathy for persons whom he really wants to expose and ridicule. The response of the reader too can be ironical: he is held between mirth and a growing realisation of the 'significance' of the story.

Let us look at ironical writing from the standpoint of the writing as a whole. Very often we have to look for the 'truth' beyond the surface narration. The truth may lie close to the surface or deep within. This is irony in its simplest, most elemental form - 'telling the opposite of what you mean.' Two modern Indian writers, who are fine exponents of this form of irony, are the Malayalee writer Mohamed Basheer and the Anglo-Indian writer R.K. Narayan. One may make a distinction between the two writers in that Narayan approaches his 'prey' with a casual, unassuming air, preferring to use understatement, whereas Basheer is impatient for a smash-up in spite of his taciturn air. Basheer, often relating the stories in the 'first' person, finds this kind of irony extremely useful for his purpose.

The vitality of the great comic tradition and the moral humanism reflected through this comic tradition has never been in doubt in the development of Indian fiction. The comical ironical tradition from the past has exerted considerable influence on the modern Indian short story in respect of its moral content and the ironical mode of communication.

In Prem Chand's superb story *The Shroud*, the drunken revelry of his characters from the lower classes of society itself is diverting. But that drunken merriment is played out against the grim background in the squalid poverty-stricken environment where a 'death' has taken place. The humour, however boisterous and spontaneous it may seem is bizarre because it is focussed throughout ironically - 'unconcern', 'indifference', 'unknowledgeableness' against the dark grim reality of death.

In Palagunni Varadaraju's story in Telegu *On the Boat*, the humour is somewhat different. It is a rogue's tale, almost an adaptation of what might have been a humorous folk-tale. The two main characters are differently presented, though they share in different ways the fun of their escapades. There is daring unconcern on the part of both the lovers, but there is cruelty in the nature of the man. The violence of the action mixed with merriment has to be

set off against the woman's enduring love for her care-free shifty lover. We view such action as ironically throwing light on the tender loving nature of the woman.

Something similar to Premchand's *Synod* but with a wider range of implications we have in Chaucer's poem *The Pardoner's Tale*. The rioters in the poem live on such a level of ignorance that they come out in search of death to 'quell death'. It is Chaucer's genius that brings together the rioters and an old man, who is also in search of death because he is tired of life, of living. This encounter with the old man, which first holds out for them prospects of wealth and prosperity, leads to their own death. Chaucer's irony is many-tiered as Death quells those who are out to quell it - not in a deliberate act, but by 'mere chance'.

It is worth noting, while examining irony, how it is related to other comic devices like the use of farcical situations, caricature and the comic exaggeration of particular traits and parody. Apart from the 'relevance' of comic devices, we could often find many of these comic devices used for forwarding the irony in the story or the play. These 'other' devices create the ironical form and tone of the work through which the writer conveys his 'meaning'.

#### 9. The Anti-mythical function of Irony

Irony has another important function, that is, when it becomes anti-mythical, directed against mythical stories and stories in which fantasy is an important ingredient. Myths, legends and other such stories strangely lend themselves to ironical treatment in literature and are therefore deflated deliberately. There is one episode at least in the *Ramayana*, which in its sacrilegious anti-mythical mirth cannot be equalled by anything in Western Classical literature. I refer to the Ahalya-Gautama episode, in which the sovereign God Indra in a human encounter loses his testicles and is fitted with goat's testicles by the lesser gods, who feel sorry for him. What is interesting here quite apart from the deed itself, is the ironical treatment of divinity, making divine powers themselves objects of scorn and ridicule.

It looks as though comedy must necessarily originate from such stories of 'high seriousness'. Irony must erupt on the scene and invert the serious purpose so that the mythical stories may fulfil some other purpose. The outcome is entirely different from and completely opposed to what is supposed to be promoted by the venerable old myths. Implied, ironically suggested, is something else, not anything concurrent with the surface story as originally intended.

This anti-mythical irony may be said to have a freer, fuller development in Western Literature. While the story of knighthood and the ideals of chivalry and knight errantry are presented with a solemn air in Aristo's *Orlando Furioso*, Cervantes's air of mock seriousness, of ironic mockery may be said to have administered the death blow to the ideals of chivalry in the Middle Ages. So, the purpose of Cervantes is to show, not how much of the old chivalric ideals are present in the modern world, but how little of such ideals can be tolerated in the ordinary humdrum world, which life is for most people.

Euripides presents the same world as Sophocles and Aeschylus - the world of myth and legends. But how little of the old ideals of virtue and heroism is left in Euripides! "There appears a loss of confidence in the innate significance of the old stories and a readiness to give them an unnatural twist in order that they may fulfil momentarily a new purpose."<sup>23</sup>

Aristophanes makes Euripides claim in the *Frogs* that he brought into tragedy the familiar every day things of life. And Aristophanes himself brings before us Socrates suspended in a basket between heaven and earth in order to ridicule sophistry, knavery in logic and disputation.

Francis Fergusson makes this function of irony quite clear in his essay *Oedipus Rex: the Tragic Rhythm of Action*

"Where Sophocles' celebrated irony seems to envisage the *condition humaine* itself - the plight of the psyche in a world which is ultimately mysterious to it - Euripides' ironies are all aimed at the incre-

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23. *The Oxford Classical Dictionary* S.V. Euripides by D.W. Lucas, p. 421.

dible 'gods' and at the superstitions of those who believe in them...His use of myth and ritual is like that which Cocteau or, still more exactly, Sartre makes of them - for parody or satirical exposition, but without any belief in their meaning...he wants us to feel the suffering of the individual without benefit of any objective moral or cosmic order."<sup>24</sup>

It is interesting to see how the mythical tradition and the inverted ironical allegorical tradition, that is the anti-mythical tradition co-exist in Malayalam poetic literature. While Thunchath Ezhuthacchan performed the astounding feat of translating the great Hindu epics into what may be termed works of great originality in the latter half of the 16th and the early part of the 17th century, making the devotion to God the primary goal of his works, Kunchen Nambiar in the eighteenth century in his *Ottam Thullal* plays<sup>25</sup> broke away from the prestigious dramatic tradition of Kathakali because he deemed Kathakali dramatic tradition was too weighed down with heaviness of thought and expression. Superb satirist that he was, his method was to apply humour and irony to the great Puranic themes which had inspired Ezhuthacchan. It was not exactly an inversion of the mythical. Through the mixture of the serious and the comic he was attempting to portray human nature in its diversity, besides seeking an opportunity to deal with the corruptions in the society of his own day. His *Pathracharitham* and *Kalyana Souganthikam* are two among his numerous poetic plays which have mixed profit with delight for Malayalee audiences for generations.

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24. Francis Fergusson, *The Idea of a Theatre*, (Anchor Books) p. 46.
25. Kunchen Nambiar's *Ottam Thullal* plays. These plays come to life in solo performances. One person plays many parts with amazing virtuosity. Dance and speech go hand in hand with drumming too, all executed by one person. Kunchen Nambiar, the creator of this dramatic form, performed in his own plays, giving us the first instance of the poet, dramatist and actor, or performer, as one person.

The general drift in Nambiar's plays can be seen from the fact that, along with his Ottum Thullal plays he also wrote what are called *Parayanthullal plays* - supposed to be danced and recited by a Paraya - a person from the lowest caste in the Hindu community. The play itself becomes symbolic of the 'speech' that the oppressed and the down-trodden will eventually find.

Among the writers in Malayalam who use the comic form Mohamed Basheer is outstanding. There is no doubt that he is one of the finest ironists in modern Indian fiction. In his story *Mathilukal* (The Walls) Basheer assumes that the basic contradiction in life is the division of man or woman into the two sexes, so that fulfilment for one is dependent on the other. The greater irony is that when we seem capable of overcoming this contradiction by our ingenuity and resources, our efforts are often thwarted by chance, by fortuitous circumstances.

With Basheer's celebrated short novel we return to irony in its anti-mythical form and intent. In *My Grandpa Had an Elephant* Kunjupathumma has to live through the sudden collapse of her family's fortunes and all the misfortunes which came in its wake. But she has been nurtured on the glory of her family's past with the legend of her grandfather's elephant made to occupy an important place in her consciousness. She has gone beyond superstitious fantasies about life in general adapted from religious lore. In a brilliant evaluation of the novel Ms. Savithri Shanker observes:<sup>26</sup>

"The story is rich in texture and woven in multiple layers. Its vitality springs primarily from the tension between the day-to-day world of a young Muslim girl living in twentieth century Kerala and the Old Testament-like cosmology of Islam. The phantasmagoric account of divine order is real to Kunjupathumma in the beginning."

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26. Ms. Savithri Shanker in *Malayalam Literary Survey* Jan-March, 1984 A Kerla Sahitya Akademi Publication, p. 12.



It is on this mythical world that Basheer focusses his irony, a world of legend and superstition which he shows to be unreal, disabling human beings from facing the challenges of life. But irony is also given a concrete embodiment in the actual circumstances of life. Irony is not a device for manipulation in the hands of the writer. It is there in the unexpected decline in the fortunes of Pathumma's family, the sudden appearance of Nizaar Ahmed on the scene, and there is at the heart of the novel a character who with all her wrong upbringing is not "naive or obtuse".

It is after all this illiterate girl that Nizaar, the enlightened hero, chooses as his wife in the end. For, as Basheer slyly shows, Nizaar's mind too is filled with fantasies - that the girl he was going to marry should be an ideal woman, brilliant, so brilliant that she carried within her head all the knowledge that one can conceive of. It is a conscious ambivalent irony that Basheer enforces on the novel which makes fun of not only the old superstitious fantasies but some modern ones too.

#### 10. Anti-fantasising in contemporary literature

The natural habitat of fantasy as a literary form was the myth, the legend and the epic to which it provided its seminal, creative, motivating power. Fables, folk-tales and supernatural stories fall into the same category.

If myths gave rise later to the anti-myth in classical literature, it is proof enough that the myth was losing its potency. The general tendency is for fantasy too, when religious beliefs became more secularised or lost their sanction, to become alienated from the former cultural and religious supports and become independent, personal, aggressive, satirical. And they began to be cultivated independently of or antithetical to their former natural habitat.

If the first phase of the alienated anti-fantasising in Western literature is found in Greek playwrights like Euripides and Aristophanes, Rabelais during the Renaissance immediately strikes us as being one of the greatest writers

working with a fantasy that is vigorous and positive, though alienated. Isn't grossness of appetite preferable to religious hypocrisy? that is what Rebelais asks us.

Fantasy in a distorted form discredits fantasysing, no doubt. But it becomes at the same time one of the greatest instruments for social satire, as we find in Rabelais, Swift and the contemporary Gunter Grass with his masterpiece *The Tin Drum*.

As Grass owes a great deal to Swift, so does Salman Rushdie to Grass in his *Midnight's Children* "glittering with redundant stories and outrageous red herrings".<sup>27</sup> *Midnight's Children* contains many passages of brilliant writing, especially when Rushdie does not resort to imitating Joyce - which is only spuriously clever. But the main weakness of the novel is lack of integration of the several parts and layers. Vivisection sets in on the level of creation too.

Such fantasysing and anti-fantasysing are perhaps inevitable in creative literature at present with the divisions and conflicts in society becoming more and more prominent. More specifically, the literatures of the Indian sub-continent do not reveal such marked anti-mythical, anti-fantasising activity as Western literature. A drawback? Perhaps. But the great ironic, comic activity of the past still survives. The ethos, both moral and human, in the less developed countries has its compensations, as we shall see. The literatures of the present, coming down from the past in its two major trends, too compensate.

Marx found it difficult to explain, according to Edmund Wilson, "why the poems of Homer were so good, when the society that produced them was from his point of view, that is from the point of view of its industrial development - so primitive."

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27. Hermione Lee in *Observer* (London)

And a 'primitive society' on the Indian sub-continent had its great epics, comic tales and fables to entertain and enlighten it. These two literary traditions, however, embody one great moral tradition - the tradition of moral humanism. And they are not isolated entities in the Indian literature of the present.

We shall not go over again the difference between these two literary traditions. Some hold the view that the connection between comedy and humanism was through the critical spirit and that the other tradition - the allegorical tradition - has other links or connections with the moral and humanistic tradition. Personally I believe that all great literature is the product of both the intellect - the critical spirit - and the emotions. But what really matters is the fact that moral humanism finds artistic expression in the great epics and that other extraordinary literary form - the comic tale. More relevant is the fact that we must keep in mind the moral and humanistic traditions coming down from the past, when we try to account for the origin and the identity of the modern Indian short story and the novel.

#### 11. Humanism and Culture in the Technological Society

Douglas Bush, writing on Humanism, says that the liberal humanists in the West, once considered 'the party of progress', became in the eyes of the scientist a party of reaction. The humanists, however, took their stand on permanent values rather than on a changing body of knowledge. Humanism was concerned with *homo sapiens*, with the good life, while science, when positively irreligious and naturalistic was concerned with *homo faber*, the technical expert and the physical world.<sup>28</sup>

The problem of the technological society is beginning to affect people in all societies. The local and national context of our less developed backgrounds is also being transformed into the context of the technological ethos,

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28. Douglas Bush on *Humanism* in *A Dictionary of World Literature* ed. Joseph T. Shipley, The Philosophical Library, New York, p. 304.

in which we, as elsewhere, "are kept amused by canned delights of various kinds which persuade us that technological advance is real progress."<sup>29</sup>

However, Dr. David Craig, the eminent Marxist critic, in a recent article speaks of a 'slump in morale' which has affected Western society; Marxist and non-Marxist, both manual and white collar, are alienated from the forces of production, "several times removed from tangible reality", are "sheltered from want and guaranteed like every civil servant". But "the shelter and guarantee are turning fragile."<sup>30</sup>

Indian culture and society, we claim, is yet regional, local, national. However, what kind of local life, I mean vigorous local life, is one to find, one is likely to interpose, among the impoverished peasantry of Kerala and other oppressed sections of the community like the low caste untouchable labourer, the petty trader, the minor Government employee and the Swabasha, vernacular school teacher? These are ordinary people engaged at times in a frightful struggle for survival against the intolerable pressure of poverty. I should not be thought of as making a cult or philosophy of poverty. But I believe there is not the 'slump in morale' that Dr. Craig speaks of among these people.

Leonard Woolf saw this difference between the nature of living in the West and countries like India. Although the story *Pearls and the Swine*<sup>31</sup> was written more than fifty years ago, most of what he says there is true even now.

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29. From a review of *The Technological Society* by Jaques Ellul (translated by John Wilkinson, Caps), in *The Listener*, 2 April, 1965, p. 569.
30. Dr. David Craig in 'The Middle-class Tragedy', *Critical Quarterly*, vol. 26, no. 3, autumn 1984.
31. Leonard Woolf, in the story *Pearls and the Swine* included in *The Reprint of Leonard Woolf's Diaries and Stories from the East 1908-1911 in the Ceylon Historical Journal*, vol.4.

"Out there (in India) you live so near to life, every morning you smell damp earth, if you splash in your tin bath...you feel there is everything, even in the sunrise and sunset, everyday, the inexorableness, mystery in things happening. You feel the whole earth waking up or going to sleep in a great arch of the sky: you feel small, not very powerful. But whoever felt the sunset or sunrise in London or Torquay either. It doesn't. Therefore you just turn off the electric light."

The story however is not really about the oneness of man with Nature. It is about the oneness of man with man in an Indian setting in the midst of squalor, misery and suffering.

No attempt is made here to belittle anyone or anything. It is a universal problem - the conflict between humanistic values and technological changes. These enormous technological changes that are taking place around us have affected us in every aspect of life, in human, cultural and literary activities.

While many may talk glibly of the 'global village', the world-culture of the electronic devices and of the mass media, it seems more necessary to speak emphatically, not of world-languages and world-literatures, but of individual cultures which promote oddity and even whimsicality, of a 'babel of tongues' that are different one from the other. I fully endorse the view expressed by Gerald Moore that "the true road to universal status in literature - if such a phenomenon exists - is not through the abandonment of one's cultural and national identity, but through the most intense and searching realisation of it."<sup>32</sup> In other words, the most enduring and universal art is that which has the deepest national and local roots.

Dr. Criag in the article I quoted from above has this to say about the contemporary English novel: "The English

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32. Gerald Moore, Introduction to Twelve African, Writers (Hutchinson) p. 11.

speaking novel (in Britain, Canada and the United States of America) has been for some years fraught with a sense that there is nothing valid left" (to write about). James Wolcott, writing in *Granta*, says, "Triviality is what many critics feel is most cripplingly afflicting American Literature now."<sup>33</sup> This is a serious charge - the charge of triviality - against modern fiction in the English speaking countries. On the other hand David Lodge, in his book on modes of writing in modern fiction, would have 'futility' considered an important theme - not a trivial theme - in modern literature, and he also thinks the use of myths a legitimate way (through the examples of Joyce and Eliot) to represent the contemporary "demythologised" world. "The representation of a demythologised world, a world 'fallen into the quotidian' (Heidegger's phrase) is thus ingeniously redeemed by allusion to the lost mythical world - aesthetically redeemed by our perception of the structure, and spiritually redeemed by our perception of the structure, and spiritually redeemed by our perception of human continuity between the two worlds."<sup>34</sup> All the Lodge says amounts to this - that the representation of the demythologised world of ours comes to life through contrast with the more living reality of the past represented in ancient myths and legends. But futility is futility, even though you can make it come to life artistically through contrast with the past. So, between the overwrought symbolism and overpoetic language centring on futility and the drab realism of the modern writers of fiction, of whom Dr. Craig speaks, is the realism of the writers in the Indian regional languages who have not severed themselves from their humanist heritage, both in form and content, who are fully alive in their own regional, local environment.

Of course there are major writers in the West who deal with subjects beyond futility or triviality. I think particularly : Thomas Mann, Heinrich Boll, Solznenitsyn and Isaac Bashevis Singer, who deal with the living

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33. James Wolcott in *Granta* 9, Notes from Abroad, p. 244.

34. David Lodge, *The Modes of Modern Writing*, (Edward Arnold, 1977, 1983), p. 139.

reality of modern life. But as for writers from the countries of South Asia, they write about a reality different even from what the writers I mentioned deal with. Against the background of their humanist heritage they deal with what is their contemporary reality, that is, the Indian sub-continent, writing in their own regional languages about things regional, parochial, national. That is their strength. If there is weakness, that is not because of the parochial local background they choose their subjects from.

It is also worth mentioning that the best minds from Britain kept a door open on India. Humanism was a spent force in English literature after the great work of Dickens and George Eliot was done. Besides, these two writers were very 'English' and operated wholly within an English environment. The proclamation of Queen Victoria as the Empress of India in 1851 was symbolic of the tremendous political and military power exerted by the British Raj over its imperialist possessions, especially India. It was left to a few English humanists in the present century to redeem English humanism, or rather, to give new life to the humanist tradition which had fallen into desuetude and decay. They realised that India (the country and its civilization) represented one of the greatest humanistic forces in the world, and a powerful antidote against British Imperialism itself.

In the field of fiction, with the exception of D.H. Lawrence, the best British writers were enlivened and enriched through their contact with India. In fact they matured as major writers through their contact with India. Forster frankly confessed, "India was the great opportunity of my life." Leonard Woolf, after his short stay in Ceylon as administrative officer, returned to England and wrote his well known novel, about Ceylon *The Village in the Jungle* setting forth the burdens of a primitive village community under alien rule. Some of Conrad's best works were written through his personal contact with the eastern possessions of Imperialist powers (though not with India), and Rudyard Kipling wrote all his novels and many of his short stories against the background of India. His greatest work *Kim* is a generous, spontaneous tribute to the Indian environment, although the deeper levels of Indian life escaped him. And more recently Paul Scott, whose real

fame as a novelist rests on the *Raj Quartet*, was inspired to write about India on the eve of her becoming independent, not because he wanted a historical or exotic subject, but because India stirred within him, as nothing else had done before, his own spirit of humanism - of kindness and sympathy for an oppressed people, and essential decency in personal and social relationship. And there is L.H. Myers who, after a period of experimentation with fiction reached his creative maturity in two novels set in India during the period of the Moghuls - *The Root and the Flower* and *The Pool of Vishnu*. The most memorable character in *The Pool of Vishnu* is the militant Guru, who is prepared to sacrifice himself for others, for his own humane ideals.

The stories from the Indian regional languages I have cited earlier and the characters in the stories (and the Indian novels I have made occasional reference to) are meaningful emblems of peoples united by a common culture and having a common identity. Underlying them is a common outlook, which I have preferred to call by what it signifies - humanism, Indian humanism. This humanism has a long history. But it has withstood the passage of Time and the circumstances incidental to such passage of Time - invasions, betrayals and arbitrary political decisions imposed on the people. But Indian humanism remains a living reality and a living force. And the best evidence of a common culture, a common civilisation and the living reality of humanism is the literatures of the Indian people in their several languages. With all the differences, the literatures embodying the spirit of humanism point to a oneness, an unity of a way of life that is enduring or should be made to endure.

Of course literature cannot presume to do things, but it helps one to see things in their correct perspective. So Indian literature has tasks to fulfil more than purely literary, tasks perhaps more than in the past, especially because there are some who come with 'gifts' like Greeks to the Trojan camp. There are others who talk glibly and disparagingly of unity and nationhood as though such things are outmoded concepts which are not in our best interests.



But the Indian writers in the regional languages have a different view of unity. From our consideration of the identity of the short story in the Indian regional languages we realise that the Indian writers have used the fictional form to express an idea of Indian unity which however goes deeper than a physical, demographic unity. There is nothing more imperative for the Indian writers than the sense of their Indianness at a deeper level of thinking and feeling.

#### APPENDIX I

##### The identity of the Indian Novel

The question may be raised - what about the identity of the Indian Novel? Has it an identity different from that of the Indian Short Story? And what about the achievement of writers in the two fields?

Although I have not generally discriminated between the two forms of Indian Fiction and have drawn from both short stories and novels to illustrate the argument on identity, there are vital differences in respect of identity, content and form. In the course of my search for the identity of the Indian Short Story in the Indian regional languages, I found that the identity of a literary form is closely related to moral and human values which are embodied in the work and which give life to a work. The same kind of moral and humanistic values form the basis of the Indian novel too. But there is definitely a diminution in the *quality* of the values communicated through the Indian novel. How do we account for this difference in quality in the Indian Novel?

The Indian Novel, prior to Independence, may fall into one of two kinds. On the one hand are the historical, romantic novels dealing with the past of the country. In spite of many stereotypes - the heroic chieftain uniting his people against foreign invaders (vide Bankim Chandra Chatterjee's *Durgesa Nandini*, the ideal mother, wife or lover - another favourite stereotype), behind the images of the past is often a substratum of ideas and the truth

of the past, the ethos and the hidden idealistic perspectives of people living in the past. So it is not quite right to dismiss such romances as so much piffle.

Most of Indian fiction belong to the second category, the political novel, dominated by the political events during the struggle for freedom. Characters are made even out of real political figures against the milieu of those times. It is not attempted here to decry the struggle for freedom. But the gains in the kind of political novel which arose from the struggle for freedom, with some exceptions, were often mediocre in quality. The outcome was the same in respect of the novels which were based on the horrendous events during and after the partition. Not altogether perhaps. There were many short stories written on the terrible events of that time which have appeared in journals without a name and fame, which are now virtually lost to the readers of a later generation. Of what use are such authentic records to those who dominate the world of publishing?

It is during the post-Independence period that the novel in the Indian languages reach a measure of maturity, although the events dealt with may often belong to the pre-Independence period. The genre of the ostensibly political novel of the Gandhian era, which provided a kind of literary diet for the educated (and bilingual) middle classes was giving way to the novel of contemporary social circumstances or the novel of the mixed genre of political and social circumstances. It is this category of the contemporary social novel that we have to keep an eye on. And here we come to a new identity for the Indian novel at some remove from political events, and this identity comes close to the identity of the Indian Short Story too which we have been discussing earlier. When acquisitiveness in a growing commercial and industrial society results in the corruption of moral and human values, there is formed a common meeting ground for the Novel and the Short Story on the basis of moral human values or the denial of them.

Some of the greatest novels written in India (I wonder whether there is any point in drawing a distinction between the Anglo-Indian novel and the Indian novel) belong to this

category - for instance the Bengales novels *Father Panchali* and *Aparajito*, the more recent novel *Arogya-niketan*, the Kannada novel *Samskara*, The short Kannada masterpiece *Kadu* (woods) and the two great novels in Malayalam, *Chemmeen* and *Aenipadi* (The Steps of the Ladder) *Half-an-Hour* by the Malayalee novelist Parppurathu has not been translated into English, although by the excellent opportunities available for translation in India the novel has been translated into most of the other Indian languages. The stories of R.K. Narayan and the early novels of Ruth Praver Jhabvala especially are very 'Indian', although both these writers write in English. And there is no doubt that Raja Rao's *The Cat and Shakespeare* and *Comrade Kirillov* remain two of the finest novelettes ever written.

However, the greater achievement is in the genre of the Short Story. Compared with the relative abundance and excellence of the short story, in the regional languages, the achievement in the genre of the novel is limited in scope. Despite extensive backgrounds, many of the novels written in the regional languages lack individuality and depth - the true distinctions of merit. On the other hand national and local themes within the limited range of the short story have become enduring art too. Without necessarily being political, the concentration on the human condition gives the stories their permanent significance.

And it was one of the most fortunate coincidences in the history of Indian literature - a great discovery of the creative mind of the modern story writer in the Indian languages - that the episodic unit of the long epic poem and the allegorical form of the epic were found well adaptable for the modern short story. It is worth noting that some of the finest writers of the novel in the Indian languages often resort to indirection as a mode of communication. Salmon Rushdie sums up the method of indirection in Indian Literature, allegorical or other, as one in which "the sensory world is a facade concealing but also symbolically revealing a deeper order of reality."