

CHAPTER ONE

SHORT STORY

AS A FORM OF LITERATURE

The short story is a form of literature which has come to us from ancient times. It has its roots in the instinct of curiosity in man. In the beginning, the stories were told primarily by the method of narration, but with the invention of the printing press, the vogue of the story spread widely. A number of stories, belonging to both the Western and the Eastern countries, are now found in such collections as The Parables of Jatakas, Aesop's Fables, The Buddhist Jatakas, Arabian Nights' Entertainments, The Pancha Tantra and The Hitopadesha.

There seems, however, to be an essential difference between the story as handled by writers of earlier times and that cultivated by modern exponents of this form. The ancient tale, generally, served as a means of entertainment or as an instrument of edification. The modern short story, on the other hand, lays particular stress on a certain aesthetic delight, derived from the contemplation of its artistic quality.

1.1 Definitions:-

Many practitioners of short story form have attempted to define short story but it is almost impossible to give a definite definition of the genre. No summary phrase can include in itself the diversity of possible story types, lengths and approaches. Consequently, no one theory of

short story form prevails. Here is a list of definitions of short story form made by its practitioners.

Walter Allen in his book The Short Story in English (1982:5) says that the short story, before the modern short story came into being, was a manifestation of the romance. Its aim was to entertain. Its province was the extraordinary. The short story deals with, dramatizes a single incident and in doing so, utterly transforms it.

He further says that 'the short story should be rooted in a single incident or perception that principally differentiates it from the novel. One should feel that it is the reading that is the fruit of a single moment of time, of a single incident, a single perception'(1982:7).

Edgar Allan Poe is of the opinion that the short story should have unity of impression and singleness of purpose. He says:-

“ In the whole composition, there should be no word written of which the tendency, direct or indirect, is not to the one pre-established design”

This conception of short story as a finished product of art is opposed by Anton Tchekhov. He believes that the short story should have neither beginning nor end. It should only be a “slice of life”. According to him,

“He (the short story writer) suggests a situation, and by the time we turn to know the conclusions he is going to arrive at,

we find that the narrator has disappeared”

R.J.Rees elaborates in his book An Introduction to English Literature(1973:263):-

“In every good literature, there should be ‘moral awareness’ that is to say, a feeling on the part of the writer and conveyed to the reader. The short story is a form or genre having rules of its own”. He quotes H.E.Bates, in whose view,

“The short story can be anything from the death of a horse to a young girl’s first love affair, from the static sketch without plot to the swiftly moving machine of bold action and climax, from the prose poem, painted rather than written, to the piece of straight reportage in which style, colour, and elaboration has no place... It has something of the indefinite and infinitely variable nature of cloud.”

Rees further quotes H.G.Wells who lays emphasis on its brevity and calls it,

“The jolly art of making something very bright and ,moving, it may be horrible or pathetic or funny or profoundly illuminating, having only this essential, that it should take from fifteen to fifty minutes to read aloud.”

Somerset Maugham, while defining the genre, says that

“A short story should be a finished product of art with a beginning, a middle and an end.”

This view is supported by Hugh Walpole. He says:

“A story should be a story; a record of things happening,
full of incident and accident, swift movement,
unexpected development, leading through
suspense to a climax and a satisfactory denouement.”

W.H. Hudson emphasizes on the singleness of purpose while defining the short story and says:

“A short story must contain one and only one
informative idea and that the idea must
be worked out to its logical connections
with absolute singleness of aim and directness of method.”

R.L.Stevenson thinks that

“The short story is not the transcript of
life but a simplification of some idea of it.”

In the book entitled A Background to the Study of English Literature(1950:162) B. Prasad says:

“The short story is not merely a greatly shortened novel.”

It shares, of course, the usual constituents of all fictional plot, character and setting but they cannot be treated with the same detail as in a novel. Each has to be reduced to the minimum in the interest of the impression they are together intended to convey. All, in other words, take the shortest route towards the ‘preconceived effect, the one pre-established design.’

After analyzing so many definitions, it seems reasonable now to say that a firm definition of the short story is impossible to make. No single theory can encompass the multifarious nature of a genre in which the only constant feature seems to be the achievement of narrative purpose in a comparatively brief space.

1.2 Development of short story in Great Britain:-

By the year 1860, the Russian, the American and the French short story had developed into an appreciable limit. Nathaniel Hawthorne and Edgar Allan Poe were among the earliest American authors to achieve success in the genre. They showed how to handle a situation and produce an effect. While Hawthorne was sometimes weak in inventing or evolving plot, Poe could do this with consummate skill. Poe also showed the use of details in the building up of a story and a mastery of picturesque descriptions, Bret Harte further enriched the short story by the introduction of local colour. He also made his short stories vehicles of single impressions. In the same way, Henry James showed how short stories could be made subtly suggestive, and how they could be utilized to describe the mental and psychological states of a character through apparently trifling but significant details.

Though the short story attained a great maturity in the United States, the French and Russian masters also helped to some extent in the evolution of the short story in England. They were the first who introduced

naturalism into the short story which aims at the minute and scientific presentation of life in all its realism with an apparent detachment of the author and his sympathies from the circumstances described. Russian literature produced some of the supreme masters of short story like Gogol, Turgenev, Dostoevsky, Tolstoy and Tchekhov, while France produced one of the greatest short story writers of the world-Guy de Maupassant. He wrote under the influence of Flaubert and Zola and learned from them clarity, objectivity and precision-the essentials of his technique.

While short story had become popular all over Europe, it developed very slowly in Britain and established ^{itself} towards the close of the nineteenth century. Two factors were responsible for this. Firstly, the Victorian novelists had laid down the tradition of volume and verbosity which was opposed to the spirit of short story. Secondly, they had made the novel ^a vehicle for moral preaching. Therefore, until 1890, the short story had only a casual existence as the occasional by-product of the novelists in England. Sir Walter Scott, Charles Dickens, Mrs. Gaskell, William Thackeray and Anthony Trollope; all tried their hand at it with varying success.

But whereas in the case of these writers, the short story was only a by-product of their genius, with R.L. Stevenson, it was an essential product of it. It was Stevenson who mastered the secret of the short story. But he was not alone in the field. The present age is the great age of short stories. Thomas Hardy, Rudyard Kipling, John Galsworthy,

H.G.Wells, Katherine Mansfield, A.E.Coppard and Joseph Conrad are some of the chief exponents of this form.

All these writers, so different from one another in their outlook on life, their temperament and their methods, have yet found in the short story one of the finest vehicles for the communication of their experience of life. In order to understand the development of short story in England, it is essential to be acquainted with the work of chief exponents of it.

1.Rudyard Kipling:-

It was Rudyard Kipling who first took to the art of short story writing and imparted to it originality and power. He was a conscious artist. He did not imitate the French naturalists or the Russian realists. His stories are based on personal experience and observations of his stay in India. Apart from his poetry and his novels, he wrote literally hundreds of short stories. Most of these stories are collected in books like Plain Tales From the Hills, Soldiers Three, The Phantom Rickshaw (all three published in 1888), Many Inventions (1893) and Debits and Credits(1926). Apart from these, The Jungle Books, Just 50 Stories and a number of mixed volumes of tales were written by Kipling.

2. D.H. Lawrence:-

D.H.Lawrence started his career as a poet but later it was in the novel, and above all in the short story, that he found his means of

expression. In general, the short story before Lawrence had been an entertainment depending mainly upon the interest of its plot. But in the stories of Lawrence, the plot is always of secondary importance, and what matters more is situation or atmosphere or sensuous evocations of nature. His stories deal with the elemental and impulsive life of man, especially the absorbing passion of sex. He made the short story more sensuous, more elemental and brought it nearer to life.

3. Somerset Maugham:-

A considerable part of the reputation of Somerset Maugham is based upon his achievement in the field of short story. He followed the technique of Maupassant. He handled his incidents and situations with dramatic effectiveness to unfold his characters. His short stories are remarkable for their beauty and completeness, for their skilful manipulation of events to a dramatic climax and a suitable conclusion. There is a fair sprinkling of wit, humour and satire in his stories. He tells a story objectively and shows the artist's regard for the economy of effect.

4. Katherine Mansfield:-

Katherine Mansfield was a writer of great talent. She presented slices of experiences in her short stories. She described the ordinary life around her with great vividness. She was particularly expert in picturing people who were lonely or misunderstood or socially unfits. Children

appeared in many of her stories. She wrote about them with an understanding that came from memories of her own childhood. Her stories reflect human relationships in all their variety and subtlety. The stream of consciousness technique that she adopted in her stories influenced many short story writers after her death. Her stories are collected in four collections-Bliss and other Stories, The Garden Party and other Stories, The Dove's Nest and other Stories and Something Very Childish and other Stories.

5. A. E. Coppard:-

Coppard was of the view that a story is primarily meant to be told. His earlier stories illustrate his theory. He published twelve volumes of short stories, of which The Black Dog (1933), The Field of Mustard (1926) and Dunky Fitlow (1933) are particularly notable.

6. H.E. Bates:-

A few years after Coppard began his career, H.E. Bates appeared as a close rival to him. He drew inspiration from the best masters like Tchekhov, Tolstoy and Conrad. There are two difficulties with Bates as a short story writer when we try to analyse his importance. The first is that some of Bates' novels are short enough to be called novellas while some of the short stories are almost of novel length. A second difficulty is that of making any general statement about his work without being misleading.

What is perhaps more important about him is that he had a fuller understanding of England and of ordinary English people than most living writers.

7. Arnold Bennett:-

Arnold Bennett wrote novels of many kinds but he is best remembered as a 'regional' novelist. He also contributed two volumes of short stories-Tales of the Five Towns (1905) and The Grim Smile of the Five Towns(1907). He came under the influence of the Naturalistic school of Balzac and Zola and depicted the pathos, the beauty and the ugliness of life with great realism.

8. Arthur Conan Doyle:-

Conan Doyle's fame chiefly rests on a series of detective stories published as The Case Book of Sherlock Holmes. He was the first in England to explore crimes for artistic purposes. The later English writers of detective stories were unquestionably his disciples. His notable works are – A Study in Scarlet, The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes and The Return of Sherlock Holmes.

9. H.G. Wells:-

H.G.Wells is one of the outstanding figures in modern English literature because he was the first writer of science fiction. Stories like

“The Time Machine”, ‘The Invisible Man’ and ‘The first Man on the Moon’ are little more than amusing fancies. He offers us a look into the future which is even more frightening than Brave New World.

10. Joseph Conrad:-

Joseph Conrad is among important ‘English’ writers as he learned English as a foreign language. His mother tongue was Polish, and it was his career as a sailor that led him to work in English ships and eventually to become a master mariner and to adopt England as home. His novels, based on his own experience at sea and his knowledge of the far East, made him famous. Conrad has written nearly 30 stories which have appeared in seven collections. In my dissertation, I have tried to assess these stories in thematic point of view.

The short story has a splendid vogue in modern times. It is growing more and more popular both with the readers and writers. It is specially suited to modern taste and to the hurry and bustle of modern life. We can say with confidence that its variety and vividness shall continue to grant to it a recognised place and position in future.