The Hindi Short Story Read In An Occidental Light

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Of all species of Indian literature the Hindi short story is the one most difficult to channelize. It stands apart from other Indian literatures and genres for its spontaneous multiplicity of themes and techniques. The pre- and post-Partition narratives, rustic romances, casteist and untouchability themes, agrarian tales, institutionalization of socio-political conflict, human virtues and avarice, injustices and the overall struggle for survival, and all the possible threads that make for individual introspection are presented in a reflective background. A majority of these stories are firmly rooted in realism and afford a microscopic examination of the core of the discourse.

To an Indian reader these are part of an endemic system of thought and culture. The modern tendency of exploring the literature of colonised nations with the investigative tools of postcolonial theory is not at all unique. It has been going on ever since Edward Said posited the red-hot topic of Orientalism in his book of the same name. Though Said has been criticized for his extremely parochial and reductively Western reading of Oriental culture and literature, his insights could be used for the sake of a distant and dispassionate re-coding of the Oriental text. This is not an abject owning up of Western postcolonial theory, but an attempt to see a national literature in a supra-national perspective in spite of the preconceptions. To this could be added the cognitive psychological handle that treats human behaviour as a product of cognitive factors in the context called the environment.

In his critique of Said's *Orientalism* (1978) John McLeod highlights the binary division of culture along the Oriental and Occidental lines. He sums up his argument against Said by stating that Said's views are a wishful projection of the East rather than an honest acceptance of what it really is:

...Western views of the Orient are not based on what is observed to exist in Oriental lands, but often results from the West's dreams, fantasies and assumptions about what the radically different, contrasting place contains. (*Beginning Postcolonialism* 41)

McLeod continues by saying that Orientalism is a "fabricated construct" and one that relies on "types" that the natives are made to conform to. There are sweeping generalizations about gender and gender roles, and also the native's inbuilt resistance to the coloniser is ignored. He puts it most figuratively when he says that

there is an irony of the native resistance making use of the very maps drawn up by the coloniser. The net result as it turned out to be was that the anti-colonial slant was a "potential source of problems in the post-independence period" (*BP* 76).

These observations willy-nilly reveal the interdependent relationship of the two categories, the colonisers and the colonised. By the feudal metaphor one is overlord and the other vassal. In erotic terms one is the covetous male and the other the seductive female. Each has the power to give to the other what it needs and asks for and each feels the void when the other is extinct. If the coloniser's psyche were to treat his subject in an objective fashion he would be sure to see the heel of Achilles of his native that he is so familiar with, or at least thinks himself so confident of knowing. With such an assurance he sets out to explore the inscrutable Orient. The Oriental figure may not like this reading that overlooks the indigenous aspects of his breeding, but it will prompt him to come out of himself for once and take stock of what the world thinks of him.

Modern psychology, with its changing focus from behaviourist to cognitive, also a purely Western brain-child, seeks to read human interactions as proceeding from reactions within the environment. The concept of cognition is a key element in the working patterns of behaviour and therapy. With such theoretical foundations we may proceed to read a sample of sub-continental literature without undue fear of misapplication.

We now enter the domain of the modern Hindi short story and for reasons of expedience we rely on the English translations. It is proper to begin with Bhisham Sahni (b. 1915) who was a Professor of English at Lahore but who chose to write mainly in Hindi. He habitually crafts the short story to contain a situation that is full-blown and explosive and which exceeds logic. The germ of effervescence is in the exposition itself and takes monstrous shapes later. "The Boss Comes to Dinner" showcases the colonial subservience to a white-skinned boss at the cost of filial and domestic integrity. An old woman is reduced to a performing animal at the behest of a complaisant son who wants to please his American boss. The colonial hangover is still at work when such attitudes linger and extend to all of the same skin tone as the coloniser. In "We Have Arrived in Amritsar" Sahni portrays the flaring up of communal passions at the instance of mere physical co-existence. Years of negative reinforcement and cognitive structures of antipathy in the physical environment lead to the tangential behaviour of the two inimical groups, the Hindu and the Musulman. "Wang Chu" is about a Chinese scholar who is a victim of national paranoia in both China and India, which is at its worst with the outbreak of the Indo-China war in 1965. The Chinese government puts him to deft questioning when he works in China as a Hindi teacher and the Indian government regards him as a potential Chinese spy when he comes to India to avoid persecution at home. In India his only treasure, a sheaf of scholarly papers, is confiscated, dealing him his death blow. Sahni's stories thus seem to infuse colonial accretions with psychological interpretations. With the

exception perhaps of Nirmal Verma, such psychological handling of themes is unprecedented in the stories of the 50s and 60s.

In Mohan Rakesh (b. 1925) who is best known as the harbinger of the New Story Movement, analytical psychology gives way to the memory technique and the forces of the troubled conscience. E. V. Ramakrishnan in his introductory section "Writing the Region, Imagining the Nation" to his edited anthology of Indian short stories in translation says thus:

The new short story of the 50s and 60s thus speaks of the suppressed rage and gnawing self-pity of the individual. These writers distance themselves from the public world of commitments and the social world of attachments. (*ISS* 213)

Mohan Rakesh crafts a technique that cuts across time and deploys the synthesizing faculty of memory. Even when there is a fatalistic determinism the psychological challenges are notwithstanding. There is always a suggestion of the manageability of life and astute handling of experience. In "Lord of the Rubble" Abdul Ghani has come to Amritsar from Lahore seven years after Partition. He confronts his son's murderer Rakha Pahalwan who receives him sheepishly. All around him there is suspicion and xenophobia triggered by the arrival of a Musulman. Although Ghani is not in the least bit vindictive he is a potential threat to the peace of the community. The aftermath of colonial rule seems to be forging defense mechanisms of all the stakeholders in the fray.

The male writer describing the embattled female raises questions in Rajendra Yadav's (b. 1929) story "Where Lakshmi is Imprisoned". Lakshmi is Lala Ramdev's daughter who is held captive by her father who thinks her a mascot as she is the namesake of the goddess of wealth. He does not want Lakshmi to leave his house and confines the hapless girl to a room. Govind, a college student who takes up residence in Lala's house, is drawn to the mystery surrounding Lakshmi. Lakshmi has become an epileptic patient due to prolonged torture and ineffectually appeals to Govind through the magazines he lends her brother to release her. Male hegemony versus male introspection forms the backdrop that problematizes the assault of the woman. The question that surfaces is, can a man save a woman? Is a woman's mind a well-defined territory? The male-female psychological opposition and debate renders a solution impossible and the story ends where it began.

Modern feminist ideology features Western-born or Western educated intellectuals like Julia Kristeva and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. In her essay "French Feminism in an International Frame" in the volume *In Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics*, she ruefully hints at the inadequate representation of "Third World women" in the First World scholarship of feminism. According to her, there are obvious pitfalls when women in progressive societies envision the strengths and handicaps of Third World women. Despite the fact that all women are sisters under the skin the vantage point of the privileged counterpart cannot close the hiatus between the two different gender realities. Spivak asserts that this is all too evident in the speech of the subaltern. Enough to say that in the light of modern feminism

the representation of the Oriental woman in literature is less gynocentric than generally humanitarian. It is nevertheless true that in Oriental life and literature there are clear examples of high feminine individualism. Here again one should beware of the Occidental "construct".

Given such a standpoint how do we read the stories of women short story writers like Krishna Sobti, Mannu Bhandari and Usha Priyamvada? Krishna Sobti (b. 1925) is known to have a sentimental outlook while Mannu Bhandari (b. 1931) is analytical and Usha Priyamvada (b. 1932) comes midway between sentimentalism and down to earth realism.

Krishna Sobti's "The Encircling Clouds" is a femininely sentimental account of a consumptive who remembers a consumptive before him who was ostracized and who died in seclusion. It was during his visits to his relative, the vibrant Manno, that he caught the infection from her and later he finds himself confined to the same old cottage. The encircling clouds that he noticed when Manno was dying are a metaphor for the killing of the spirit by the bad world outside. This should pass for a typically feminine ecriture in which a metaphor for assertion and liberation is sought, as the dark and drifting nature of clouds implies.

Mannu Bhandari sidesteps the perennial questions of feminine existence and dwells on the clashing wills of different generations of womanhood. "Trishanku" is a story that puts to test the highly educated and heterodox mindset of a modern woman whose individualistic daughter is on the verge of amorous escapades. The mother's prudent intervention curbs the mischievous tendencies of the daughter's young male friends, but at the same time she has to bow to the wishes of the new generation to be true to her advanced outlook. This brings to the fore the question of a woman's independence as given by the roles she is called upon to play. Can a woman who advocates change in conservative society stomach all that change brings in its wake? Does she have to rein herself in at some point? What price feminism?

Usha Priyamvada is not unduly sympathetic to the modern woman's need for existential liberation. She takes a more or less deterministic stance when it comes to the role of the woman in the family. If a woman seeks freedom outside the house it is an appended trait, not a congenital one. And a woman is capable of making a man tense in her own right. "Return" is the story of a retired man who is compelled to take up a new job and leave his home after excessive demands are made on his person and money by his wife and children. His very presence in the house is resented by the women in the family apart from the sons. Western theorists look for their food in the form of a content that showcases the victimization of women and are also gloating when the woman proves the stronger force. Either way the discourse functions to their satisfaction. This is only in the case of the diehards among them. And modern psychology again comes to the aid of the woman who is aggressive on the rebound.

The vast landscape with its marvellous hill-stations and the arid plains of North India have begotten an iconology that lends itself to readings other than purely Indian. On the creative plane it could suggest to the Indian variegated projections of his culture and intellectual property abroad. In this predicament (if he sees it as one) an internationally potent discourse will have to be invented which would supplant the current modes of reading. Right now it seems wishful but it is well worth trying. Perhaps the solution lies in a new and resurgent Indian Unitarianism that surpasses the social and cultural schisms which have been the work of centuries of history.

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Owing to certain bibliographical limitations the exact dates of publishing of the stories could not be given.

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