



Evolutionary Tradition of Short Story

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The evolution of forms within the narrative tradition is a process analogous in some way to biological evolution. Human beings, considering themselves the end of an evolutionary process, naturally see evolution as a struggle towards perfection. The dinosaur, could he speak, might have another opinion. Similarly, a contemporary novelist can see himself as the culmination of an ameliorative evolution; but Homer, could he speak, might disagree. Yet the epic poem is as dead as dinosaur. We can put together a synthetic epic with a superficial resemblance to the original, just as we can fabricate a museum dinosaur; but the conditions which produced the originals have passed. Nature will never recover that lost innocence which she displayed in the creation of those beautiful monsters, nor will narrative artist ever again be able to combine so innocently drawn from myth and history, from experience and imagination. (10-11)

Of course, the biological process and literary evolution are two completely different fields and the analogy cannot go on for long. It is very difficult to order and present the complex process of evolution of narrative.

The purpose of this study is to reveal and clarify the principal relationships which do exist and have existed historically among the major forms of narrative literature. The written narrative throughout the world emerges from an oral tradition. It often takes the form of heroic poetic narrative which can be called as epic. The epic is a result of a long and gradual process of intermixing of variety of narrative forms such as sacred myth, quasi historical legend and fictional folk tales, which have coalesced into a traditional narrative which is an amalgam of myth, history and fiction. The most important aspect of early narrative is the tradition itself as the epic story teller tells a traditional story. The primary impulse which moves him is not a historical one; nor a creative one; it is re-creative and its primary allegiance is not to fact, not to entertainment but to *mythos*. The word *mythos* precisely meant in ancient Greece: a traditional story.

Literature is not possible without the written form if follow the strict etymological sense of the word. By definition it is an art of letters. Ancestors were well aware of the distinction between “written verbal art” and “oral verbal art” which is implied by the world literature. It should be kept in mind that oral narrative and written narrative are distinct, formally and profoundly, but not culturally. Milman Parry, an authority on orally composed

heroic poetry writes: “Literature falls into two great parts not so much because there are two kinds of cultures, but because there are two kinds of form: one part of literature is oral, the other written.” (Scholes et al. 18)

Today, when the percentage of literacy is high and the illiterates are culturally and economically deprived, it would be a mistake to generalize solely from the modern experience that all unlettered persons in every age have been culturally deprived. Also, it has been not so that the scribe’s inked shapes were idealized in the all ages ignoring the oral recitation and composition. Socrates in his work *Phaedrus* tells a story in which Egyptian God Thoth having invented writing goes to god Thamus, the ruler over all Egypt, with intension of sharing with people and claiming that it would increase both memory and wisdom of the Egyptians. Thamus replies:

O most ingenious Thoth, one man has ability to develop a new skill, but another to judge whether it will be a curse or blessing to its users. Now you, the father of letters, through your affection see in them the opposite of their true power. For this invention will cause those who use it to cause lose learning in their mind by neglecting their memories; since, through this reliance on the letters which are external and alien to mind, they will lose their ability to recall things within themselves. You have invented not a medicine to strengthen memory but an inferior substitute of it. You are providing your students with a way of seeming wise without true wisdom; for they will appear to have learned without instruction; they will seem to know a good deal while they are really ignorant of many things; and they will become public nuisances, these men who look wise but lack wisdom. (Scholes et al. 24)

The sanctity of the printed words in the people’s eyes sometimes allows the worst of Socrates’ fear to be realized that the words in their printed form become more real than either the sounds on the lips of the living men or the concept they represent. Any lie or outrage after getting the dignity of the print becomes many times menacing.

Parry opines during his analysis of Homer’s *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, oral composition consists of two parts confirming the hypothesis that orally composed literature is distinguishable from the written literature on the basis of its form rather than its content. His investigation in Yugoslavia and from the reports of orally composed epics from the different other parts of the world, he conclude that the individual singers in a tradition of oral poetic narrative are as important as the individual poets in the tradition of written narrative, but the role of singer is widely different from that of the poet. Every part and partial including plot that he learns, the various episodes with which he elaborate them, and even the phrases out of which he makes his lines are traditional and having a formula in the broader sense. The conception that the poetic narrative could have been “corrupted” during the process of the oral transmission rests on a common misconception of the working of oral tradition. If, an orally composed poem is obscure, the difficulty may lie with either to an inferior performance or to corruption in the process of manuscript transmission. On the other hand an oral performance may be indifferent but it will not be obscure or 'textually corrupt'. A singer through continual practice can achieve perfection in his art and may surpass any performance he has ever heard. It can be said in this case that a poem has been 'perfected' in the process of oral transmission. The treasure of different cultures and civilizations has been preserved for ages and centuries without any adulteration by this very oral tradition, *Vedas*, *Puranas* and *Simirties* etc. are the

fine example of it. Lord Parry's experiments and experiences in Yugoslavia suggest that there may be number of way and alternatives for the transcription of oral narrative into writing but all of them resulted in inferior representation of live oral performances.

Later oral performances were transcribed and in the process it lost the quality and originality during the process of transcription. Whether a singer dictates to a scribe or he himself try to write, his performance will slow down than the normal performance. Under such circumstances he may lose the beat and the chain of his thought. An attempt to write down an oral performance by its two 'authors', the performer and the scribe, led to a quasi-literary tradition affecting the genuine oral tradition. Hence a genuine oral tradition faces challenge from a spurious, pseudo 'oral tradition' emerging out of a newly established textual tradition. Today the term 'oral tradition' is misapplied by literary scholars for the oral recitation of a fixed literary text which has been composed in modern way with pen and paper. It is a method of composition not the mode of presentation which distinguishes the original oral tradition from the written. There is no difficulty in recognizing genuine oral composition from mere oral recitation of a written text because one is formulaic where other is not.

Here the main concern is to know and understand the tradition and journey of the short story from folk tales of the oral tradition to the modern art tale. Earliest recorded reference to the term short story as per *The Oxford English Dictionary* dates to 1877. Anthony Trollope first time used the phrase 'certain short stories' in his *Autobiography* (1883), but he makes it clear at another place that "It was a short story, about one volume in length" (qtd. in Scholes et al. 11). Here he was referring to prose fiction that are shorter than the usual narrative. William Collins called his short fiction as little novels, whereas writers like Thomas Hardy, Rudyard Kipling and Robert Louis Stevenson preferred to use the older designation i.e. 'tale'. Joseph Conrad made no distinction between longer and shorter fiction and called them 'stories'. Henry James rejected the distinction between novel and short story and liked to use equivalent term novelette. Even pioneering critic Brander Matthews was not certain about the name of the term. There was much debate and confusion about nature of the short story during the last years of the nineteenth century.

Many writers of the period used the terms 'tale' and 'story' interchangeably without any clear distinction. The editors of the periodicals of the late nineteenth century encouraged and paved the way for differentiation, demarcation and definition of the two terms. 'Short story' being a plotted narrative, written instead of recited, even though writer regarded it as equivalent of the 'folk tale'. H. G. Wells praised 'short story' as a form for its elasticity against its rigid forms and austere unities (Hunter 2-3). So it is important first to understand the artistic appeal of the short story before tracing the prehistory of the form and tradition in which short story writers felt during their working in the field.

The beginning of 'tale' it can be imagined back with invention of the speech and language in some early human civilization. This debate and discussion here which was that civilization will be fruitless, useless and mere wastage of time. Here is a consideration of the five sub-genre of the tale: parable and fable, the creation of the myth, novella, fairy tale and art tale for understanding the background and process of the progress of the short story.

Parable is a kind of fictional or real narrative, with an aim to instruct the reader or the listener for religious or moral purpose using analogy. Fable also has some purpose but its

major differences are the endowment of human quality and speech to animals and other natural things, with a generalized sense of setting or place and use of irony. In fables stock characters such as ass, lion, fox and dog in a non specific location. These characters are not merely types but signify some quality and specific characteristics such as lion stands for power and authority, fox for cleverness and dog for faithfulness etc. *Panchtantra* is a collection of ancient fables believed to have been composed in third century B. C. by Pandit Vishnu Sharama. The stories of *Panchtantra* are instructing Indian masses from generations, particularly the children about the moral and social values and shaping their mind into an ethical future. *Hitopadesha* is a collection of Sanskrit tales in prose and verse written with a purpose of exposing young princes to the statecraft in a simple, easy and digesting way. The earliest manuscript dates 1373. Aesop's fables are very popular in the western world serving the same purpose of entertaining and instructing the children generations after generations.

Myths not only describe the moral order of the world but also how the world came into being. Hindu mythology contains a large body of traditional narratives in Sanskrit including epics like *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*, *Puranas* and *Vedas* etc. The myth of Manu is a fine example of it. According to the myth Manu was the first Indian King and a king of kings. One day Manu was washing his hand in a bowl, he saw a tiny fish in it. The fish requested Manu to save his life. The fish was shifted to larger vessels one after another as its size went on increasing. Finally the fish was sent to sea. Then the fish advised Manu to build a great ship to save himself and other creations of God on the earth. The fish instructed Manu to carry with him a couple of each animal as well as seeds of every kind of plants. When flood came Manu tied his ship to the large horn growing out of the fish. The fish brought the ship to Himalaya pulling it through the rough waters and Manu tied the ship to one of the mountains. After receding of the water Manu arranged a *yajna* and got a wife named Shirdha with whom he began to repopulate the earth. In this way myth deals with humanity's perennial concern with its origin; search of identity; and working as the cornerstone of human cosmology. *The Epic of Gilgamesh* and *King James' Bible* are also fine examples of creation of the myth.

Creation of the myths has taken place throughout the world, i.e. the myths of Ancient India, The Norse Saga, Native America, Ancient Egypt, Judo- Christianity and Greco- Roman culture. Myths are like parables but have religious sanctity and the events are considered fundamentally true.

Novella, in modern usage refers to a short novel but until the end of the fourteenth century it was a story that could be true or fictional, new or simply unusual, written or recited. The tale collections of *Panchtantra*, *Vikram- Betal*; Giovanni Boccaccio's *Decameron* and Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales* (1387) harness the contrasting definitions. In 'The Golden Ass' Boccaccio made a new experiment by mixing serious and comic modes, for example, such as court romance and fabliau. He also parodied pre-existing forms like legend and exemplum. Boccaccio brought a new kind of sensitivity in his certain kind of writings by using everyday speech, and was followed by Chaucer in his *The Canterbury Tales*.

Popularization of framed narrative influenced the collectors of the folk tales. *Singhasan Batisha*, *The Thousand and One Night*, *The Arabian Nights* etc. have the structure of framed narrative popularized by Boccaccio and Chaucer in the Western world. In Straparola's *The Debauched Nights* thirteen ladies and gentleman who flee from political prosecution to an island,

tell each other seventy five stories, out of which fourteen are wonder tales. Though most of tales are either European or Oriental origin but he rewrote them in Italian vernacular and framed them to catch the reader attention. The tales may reflect the moral observation but due to the addition of the riddle in the end, function as parables. Basile during his tenure of civil service in Italy and oversea, overheard and recorded folktales from working people of lower strata of the society and put them in the form of *Il Pentamerone* or *The Tale of Tales* (1634-36). Basile's comic, violent and sexually explicit fifty tales including frame stories that open and close the collection are narrated by a group of hags summoned by Prince Zola. Though the tales of both Basile and Straprola were written for the amusement of aristocratic readership but the stories remained linked to their folk roots. Charles Perrault in his *Stories and Tale of Time Pass* rationalized the structure of pre-existing fairy tales for aristocratic readers in order to make the narrative smoother, ordered and logical. He explains the magical elements more logically and makes the protagonist more sensitive to emerging notions of gender and sexual conduct. His heroine unlike Basile's Cinderilla is passive, generous even to her step mother and sisters and serve as a role model of grace and beauty for the girls of aristocratic families. In this way the tales became a tool to teach the children how to become civilized and in the process the fairy tales were removed from its folk origin.

Oral narrative invariably employs an omnipresent, authoritative and reliable narrator gifted like great poets as Valmiki, Ved Vayas and Homer with the ability to observe an action from every side to tell the secrets of the human heart. Readers have become habitual to identify this omniscient narrator with the author, and think that author is everywhere present to interpret and valuate the characters and events of the narrative for them. Readers consider this reliable, omniscient, omnipresent narrator as "objective" without any doubt.

A traditional narrative cannot be transmitted without transmission of the outlines of the events, i.e. plot. Thus the plot is the articulation of the skeleton of narrative. In this way a myth is a traditional plot which can be transmitted. Aristotle considers plot as soul of any literary work that was an intimation of an action. Sacred myth, a narrative form associated with religious ritual is one kind of mythic narrative; but legend and folktales are also mythic in the sense of tradition, as in the oral epic poem. The greatest movement in the history of development process of narrative has been the gradual movement away from narrative dominated by the mythic impulse to tell a story with a traditional plot. In Indian as well as in Western Literature this movement can be traced twice: once in classical languages and again in vernacular languages. To understand this development properly it must be taken into account both nature of separation between the two great branches of narrative and the interaction and recombination of the two.

The two antithetical types of narratives which emerged from the epic synthesis may be labeled as empirical and fictional. Both can be seen as the ways of avoiding the dominance and monotony of traditional in the story telling. Empirical narrative turns its allegiance from mythos to reality. One can divide the impulse towards the narrative into two main components: the *historical* and the *mimetic*. The historical component owes its allegiance particularly to the factual truth and to the actual past rather than the traditional version of the past. It needs for its development means of accurate measurement in time and space, and concept of causality referable to human and natural rather than to supernatural agencies. In ancient world

empirical narrative manifests itself first through its historical component as writers like Herodotus and Thucydides carefully distinguished their work from Homeric epic. The mimetic component seeks its allegiance to the truth of sensation and environment instead of truth of facts. It depends upon the observation of present instead of investigation of the past. Its development is based on sociological and psychological concepts of behavior and mental process, such as those which inform the characterization of Alexanderian Mime. Mimetic narrative is antithesis of mythic in the sense that it tends towards plotlessness. Its ultimate form is 'a slice of life'. Biography and autobiography are both empirical form of narrative; historical impulse dominated in biography and mimetic in autobiography.

The fictional branch of narrative shifts its stress from the traditional to the ideal. The impulse of fictional narrative can be subdivided into two main components: the *romantic* and the *didactic*. The fictional writer is free from the bond of tradition and bond of empiricism as well. His main target is not the external world but the audience, which he wants to delight or instruct keeping in view the needs of the audience. Empirical narrative aims at one or another kind of truth, fictional narrative aims either beauty or goodness. The world of romance is ideal world, in which poetic justice prevails and all art and adornments of language are used to embellish the narrative. Where mimetic narrative aims at psychological reproduction of mental process, romantic narrative presents thought in the form of rhetoric. In the movement from *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* topics of Kalidasa and *Odyssey* to *Argonautica* one can see epics becoming more literary and fictional and moving towards pure romance as the *Aethiopica* and *Abhigianskuntalam*.

The Didactic version of fiction may be called as *fable*, a form which is ruled by the intellectual and moral impulse as romance is ruled by aesthetic one. *Fables* display the sharpness of human intellectual with brevity and inclined to lean heavily on romance for narrative articulation if the narrative artist has anything like a sustained flight in the mind. The tales of *Panchtantra*, *Hitopadesha* and *Aesop* are typical examples of the form, but its usual combination with romance Xenophone's *Cryopaedia* and narrative allegories of Middle Ages and Renaissance are the major examples.

Till now this study has been dealing the breakdown of epic synthesis into two antithetical components. It is of prime importance to consider the new synthesis in narrative which has been the main development in the post- Renaissance narrative literature. This was gradual process but it is most obviously discernible in Europe during the Seventeenth and Eighteenth centuries. The new synthesis can be seen clearly in a writer like Cervantes whose great work is an attempt to reconcile the powerful empirical and fictional impulses. From the synthesis he effected out the emergence of novel as a literary form. The novel is not the opposite of romance as is usually maintained, but a product of reunion of empirical and fictional elements in narrative literature.

Novel is dominating literary scene and narrative for last four centuries experimenting and intermixing empirical and fictional impulses in different proportion. Industrialization, Globalization and endless race for securing means of maximum physical comforts left no time for reading and enjoying a genre like novel. Keeping in the mind the need of readers and demand of the time, some writers tried their hands on one aspect of life of a character or some specific trait which could be delineated and enjoyed in one sitting. It is called short story not

just because it is short but it has its own parameters which make it the short story like any other narrative form. Short story has become the life line of many newspapers and magazines. There are still rich and vast avenues for development and experiment in this form of narrative in today's complex and typical life.

Generally short story is defined as a piece of prose fiction complete in itself with a moderate magnitude. It is easy to recognize but difficult to define. It can also be defined as work of fiction whose word count is less than 7500 words. It is often brief in description and dense in concentration. It does not have any fixed length. There is no official demarcation between an Anecdote, Novel, Novella, Novellette and short story in terms of word count. It consists of very few characters which dwell on self-contained incident, with the purpose of creating or evoking a single effect. It consists of five basic elements viz. character, setting, plot, conflict and theme. M.H. Abrams defines short story as "a brief work of prose fiction, and most of the terms for analyzing the component elements the types and the narrative techniques of the novel are applicable to the short story as well." (Abrams 202)

Edgar Allan Poe defines short story as narrative requiring from half an hour to one or two hours in its perusal and during the hour of perusal the soul of the reader is at the writer's control. There are no external or extrinsic influences resulting from weariness or interruption. The question that strikes one's mind while dealing with the short story is how to define a short story. Most of the people are of the opinion that the best way to recognize a short story is by its briefness, economy of words and short length. But being short in length is not the only criteria of identification of a short story. It requires a particular kind of literary composition. Although Edgar Allen Poe says that it should be finished in single sitting in order to preserve its unity of impression. Poe in his review of *Hawthorne's Twice-Told Tales* defines a good short story as:

A skillful literary artist has constructed a tale. If wise, he has not fashioned his thoughts to accommodate his incidents; but having conceived, with deliberate care, a certain unique or single effect to be wrought out, he then invents as may best aid him in establishing this preconceived effect. If his very initial sentence ends not to the out bringing of this effect, then he has failed in his first step. In the whole composition there should be no words written, of which the tendency, direct or indirect, is not to the one pre-established design. And by such means, with such care and skill, a picture is at length painted which leaves in the mind of him who contemplates it with a kindred art, a sense of the fullest satisfaction. The idea of the tale has been presented unblemished because undisturbed: and this is an end unattainable by the novel. Undue brevity is just as exceptionable here as in the poem; but undue length is yet more to be avoided.

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