

Mirror-Writing: Social-realism in the short stories of O. Henry and Prem Chand

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All writers are true inheritors and by virtue of their creative power contribute in the very process of inheritance. They take whether consciously or not, what their predecessors pass on to them, through the great treasure house of thought and feeling registered in their works. Then from their space in time and place, the socio-political conditions of the immediate world influencing their creativity and their contribution in turn, impact the lives of people ; individual lives and also certain section or class of society. This becomes more evident in times of political or socio-economic crises in the lives of nations when they are fighting for freedom, civil rights or some major changes are taking place in the social or political structure of society. Writers as social-realists reflect and thus cause changes in the society at a given point in time. This makes their writings more relevant and valuable for the future generations.

19th century and early 20th century witnessed this paradigm shift across cultures and literature written there around saw it projected with sincerity and firmness of purpose. In this article I take to find the changes that were taking place and how these were faithfully reflected in the short narrative writings of two master narrators, about their respective cultures and socio-political inheritance-O. Henry and Prem Chand. The short stories selected here are chosen to highlight the social realism in their writings.

Expansionism and political crisis alongside the social transformation, was an important historical fact of United States in the 19th century. This was a consequential result of industrial revolution. America in the early century was a loosely structured society and every section, every state, every locality; every group could pretty much go its own way. But gradual changes in technology and in the economy were bringing all the elements of the country into steady and close contact, better connectivity _transportation and the word (communication), played an important role in breaking through the barriers and breaking down isolation _ canals, toll roads, and rail roads on the one hand and publication of penny newspapers, and telegraph system gave a greater sense of togetherness to the people while big business provided order and stability. Yet the other side of the story was that for many Americans this change from a largely rural, slow moving, fragmented, national social order in the mid-century was abrupt and painful which was often resisted. Unfortunately sometimes resentment against change manifested itself in harsh attacks upon those who appeared to be the agents of change especially the newly arrived

immigrants who seemed to personify the forces that were altering the older America. In 1840's vigorous natives' movements appeared in most cities and the anti-foreign fever reached its peak in 1850's when huge numbers of Irish and German immigrants of the previous decade became eligible to vote. This so-called know-nothing movement directed against both immigrants and the catholic church, emerged as a powerful political force in 1854 and increased the resistance to change. Then civil war was followed by rapid industrialization and urbanization confronted with new problems including the spread of slums and poverty, the exploitation of labour, the breakdown of democratic government in the cities and states with a rapid movement towards financial and industrial concentration. Many Americans feared that their historic traditions of responsible democratic government and free economic opportunity for all were being destroyed by gigantic combinations of economic and political power.

In 1890's and later there were numerous movements for reform and reconstruction on the local, state and national levels that were too diverse, and sometimes too mutually antagonistic ever to coalesce into a national crusade. But they were generally motivated by common assumptions and goals_ e.g., the repudiation of individualism and laissez-faire, concern for under privileged and downtrodden, the changing role of women and their particular problems in the wake of changing social structure, the restoration of government to the rank and file and the enlargement of governmental power in order to bring industry and finance under a measure of popular control. Also to be seen were a new generation of economists, sociologists and political scientists, undermining the philosophical foundations of the laissez-faire state and constructing a new ideology to justify democratic collectivism; and a new school of social workers was establishing settlement houses and going into the slums to discover the extent of human degradation. Allied with them was a growing body of ministers, priests, and rabbi's-proponents of what was called the social Gospel-who struggled to arouse the social concerns and consciences of their parishioners. Finally, journalists called muck-rakers probed into the dark corners of American life and carried their message of reform through mass circulation newspapers and magazines. Their contribution was significant and brought an awakening leading to positive measures taken by the people at the helm of affairs_ brought about by the publication of revealing stories with gory details of American life full of suffering and pain, at this point of time. Some of these were the best and most memorable pieces of literature born out of worst of times and experiences.

William Sydney Porter, who wrote under the pen name O. Henry, remains one of the most widely read American short narrative writers... master alike of tragedy, romance extravaganza and tales of the mystery

of common life with a special skill in stories of the supernatural. Starting with *Cabbages and Kings* in 1904, O. Henry established himself as a writer with his second book *The Four Million* (1906). The third volume *The Triumph Lamp* (1907), contained some of his best stories of New York and *Heart of The West* is a collection of stories based on his experiences in Texas. Most of his stories depict the life he shared in a constantly shifting scenario suggestive of the city's colourful, endlessly varied facets. The life he portrays is the real New York of his day with its endless allure, its thousands of beckoning contrarities and denials and true to life characters. The toiling masses, the new work culture, women-over-the-counter, the laughter shading off into signs of sadness and even despair. O. Henry vividly pictures the given New York culture ...the police, the church, the welfare agencies and the labour unions tend rather to thrust the innocent (for whose love and protection society creates them), into the maw of predatory individuals (Elsie in *New York*). Thus poor Elsie, a little peacherino who might have had a number of safely respectable jobs, but for her protectors, winds up as a model whose fate (O. Henry assures us by quoting Dickens) is to be numbered among the "lost your Excellency". While Elsie admires herself in Russian sables in the mirror, her employer, Otter is gleefully reserving a private dining room for two, with "the usual band and the 85 Johannisburger with roast."and O. Henry concludes painfully with a dig at the individuals and the society:

Lost, Associations, and Societies,
 Lost, Right Reverends and wrong
 Reverends' of every order, lost
 Reformers and law makers, born
 With heavenly compassion in your
 Hearts, but with a reverence of
 Money in your souls. And lost thus
 Around us every day. (Collected stories of O. Henry. p.726.)

In his stories we find suffering damsels, joyless existence of the shop girls a picture of the new life culture- representative of the changes that gave a new look to and affected every walk of life in turn resulting in the changed attitudes and thinking of members of this new emerging society and their values. His short stories reflect a period just becoming fully aware of the hardening class structure which a burgeoning industrial era had imposed on America's democratic society and which the writer details so minutely and accurately. Hotels, café bars, cheap restaurants, theatres and roof-gardens were an important fact of the 19th, 20th century New York culture and many of O. Henry characters

seek refuge from the darkness of their existence to these “places-of-quick-flight”.O.Henry himself was a frequent visitor and preserved their atmosphere in his stories. The sociological import in his stories is too visible. In Brick Dust Row and An Unfinished Story his deep concern for the unfortunates, especially the victims of environment is highlighted. Where the former depicts the damaging effects on the lives of the inhabitants of inadequate and squalid surroundings The Guilty Party attempts to show that slum children, forced to play in the streets, are defeated in life even before they start. He paints it with exactness:

“Outside was one of those crowded streets of the east side, in which, as twilight falls Satan sets up his recruiting office. A mighty host of children danced, ran and played in the streets. Some in rags ,some in clean white and beribboned, some wild and restless as young hawks, some gentle-faced and shrinking some shrieking rude and sinful words ,some listening awed, but soon grown familiar to embrace-here were the children playing in the corridors of the house of sin. Above the play ground forever hovered a great bird...the bird was known to humorists as the stork .But people of Chrystie street were better ornithologists. They called it a Vulture”. (Collected stories of O.Henry.p712.)

Elsewhere he makes this realistic depiction of situation with such ease:

And then followed the big city’s biggest shame ,its most ancient and rotten surviving canker, its pollution and disgrace ,its blight and perversion, its forever infamy and guilt,forstered,unreproved and cherished ,handed down from a long ago century of the basest barbarity-the Hue and Cry. Nowhere but in the big cities does it survive and here most of all, where the ultimate perfection of culture, citizenship and alleged superiority joins, bawling, in the chase.” (Collected stories of O.Henry, p.714.)

The Guilty Party is a grim tale of parental neglect-a serious issue and relevant even today.O.Henry did not ignore even shop girls’ .And so in An Unfinished Story –that ends with the author at the bar of judgment being asked if he belongs to a certain group:

“Not on your immortality “, said I.”I’m only the fellow that set fire to an orphan asylum, and murdered a blind man for his pennies.” (Collected stories of O.Henry .p .692.)

It is said that these stories caused Theodore Roosevelt to admit that it was O.Henry who started him on his campaign for office girls. Often we find his characters are under a strain of some kind and under a delusion-these in fact were the toiling millions and his stories are a true

criticism of the American way of life and American capitalism that made the Soviets to issue a commemorative stamp in his honor on his centennial anniversary. story after story he reflects the changing American society of 19th and early 20th century and what this change meant to the people and how it affected their lives...bringing out the suffering and struggle against what they found difficult to adjust to and frustration for what they failed to comprehend and tragically often resulted in pathetic death or renunciation.

India of 19th century presented a confused and complex socio-political and cultural situation-the time of British rule in India. The administration was curious blend-largely Indian in pattern, though it was now British in direction and superintendence. The Emperor being replaced by the mystical entity, the company Bahadur; and its representative, the governor general, moved about with equal pomp. Though the officers acted in a mughal spirit, the higher direction was exclusively European and the administration at sub district and village level went on much as before. Yet change was there in the feel of the air. The commercial classes generally benefitted but the Indian industry was sacrificed to the new machine industries of Britain and ruined such ancient crafts as cotton and silk weaving .Government support was declared for the cultivation of western learning and science through the medium of English. The complex state of affairs was discernable from some Indian attitude where some Indians rejected all things western, retiring to their houses and estates to dream of the past, there were those who were clients and employees of the British as they had been of the Mughals and the Turks before them, without any intention of giving up their traditional culture. Yet there were those who, while remaining good Hindus or Muslims, began to study the ideas and the spirit of the west, with a view to incorporate in their own society anything that seemed desirable. Socially and economically there was much dislocation in the land holding class all over northern and western India as a result of British land-revenue settlements, setting group against group. There was thus a suppressed tension in the country side, ready to breakout whenever governmental pressure might be reduced. A combination of factors produced, besides the normal tensions endemic in India, an uneasy, fearful, suspicious, resentful frame of mind and a wind of unrest ready to fan the flames of any actual physical outbreak.

The six decades between the end of the “mutinous” war of 1857-58 and the conclusion of World War I, saw both the peak of British imperial power in India and the birth of nationalist agitation against it. The period was haunted by dark memories of the “mutiny” between British and “native” communities throughout India. The caste ridden Hindus, with such tragic and embarrassing customs as sati and Muslims with their frustration and growing sense of exclusion from the main

stream politics, together made things disastrous and the society a pathetic picture of suffering. This was reflected in the writings of the period with all sincerity, particularly the short narrative that appeared in newspapers and later got published separately.

Munshie PremChand is credited with having created the genre of serious short story and transforming fiction in both Urdu and Hindi languages-from rambling romantic chronicle or didactic tales to a high level of realistic narrative. His nearly three decade career span 1907-1936, was politically and socially important for India and was enlightening for its thinkers and writers who were passing through a phase of immense western literary influence. Socio-cultural ambience was undergoing a radical change and the traditional and modern exchanged places.

In his earlier writings *Duniya ka Anmol Rattan*, *Sheikh Mehmood*, *yehi Mera watan*, *Silay Matum* and *Ishke Duniya* or *Hubi Wattan*, stories like *Bade Ghar ke Beti*, *Garib ke Hai*, he often turns to the past that provides him an opportunity to criticize foreign oppression without singling out the British-(yet this did not save his first collection of stories from being banned in 1909). The plots of most of these early tales, full of chivalric idealism and noble sacrifices, disguises the extraordinary adventures, and shows the influence of the Urdu *Dustan*-his favourite youth reading. The early Rajput period with their exemplary valour is recreated in many of his stories. In *Dunya ka Anmol Ratan*, the writer declares that every drop of bloodshed in the service of nation is an invaluable jewel. This was written when he was a school teacher and freedom movement turning in protests and processions moved him a lot. The contemporary realities and a profound sense of social inequalities permeate his works of this period-when Britishers had strengthened their nefarious designs of plundering the state economy and the condition of common man was going from bad to worse. In his stories he also projects the social ills rampant among the ignorant masses who awkwardly stood at the political and historical crossroads. Prem chand like a missionary cautioned against an evil alien influence and carefully steers readers into a world of farmers, labourers, clerks, (Babus) officers dhoti clad as well as those donning the western attire, village girls, daughters of the rich, sane as well as scatter-brains, honest as well as dishonest, Thakurs, Pundits, the exploiters and the exploited the world as he saw it around him and as he visualized it. *Punchayet*, is a brilliant depiction of cultural rootedness -where traditionally people (masses) believed that God himself spoke through the "Panchas"- where one rose to the position of natural justice ...incapacitating one of any selfishness or foul play. The institution is considered sacred and every word of the Panchas respected and revered.

Prem Chand relates the inner conflict in the minds of individuals to the social environment. Even family relationships are viewed as being determined by social forces where, on the one hand, we have the writer projecting the industrialist and the successful professional man—the doctor, the lawyer, the financier and others who have climbed the social ladder—corresponding to these urban types, on the other hand, we have in the country side the zamindar, the money lender, the holy man, (who is also a professional man in his own way). In general the exploiters and the workers, the cultivators, the landless labourer, the casual wage earner and the tenant from whom the landlord can demand forced labour. Then there is the harijan – the untouchable who led a life of humiliation and perpetual pain and torment. Sadgati depicts the trauma of these unfortunates whose very existence is a bitter comment on the Indian caste system and the traditions and customs of Indian society. Here a Brahmin, a professional priest who accepts money and gifts from his clients for performing sacrificial ceremonies and for advising them regarding auspicious and inauspicious dates, subjects a poor chamar Dukhi to ruthless physical labour refusing him even water to drink, leading to his tragic death. When the dead body of this poor untouchable man is lying in the way to public well, it seems to him and the Brahmins of the village an unpleasant, intolerable site. The corpse is to be removed but the big question is “how”? The chamars insist on a police inquiry into the death of Dukhi and refuse to take it away...and there is no question Brahmins will touch it. Then comes the ugly turn in events—jackals, vultures and dogs devour the mangled corpse while the Brahmin sprinkle holy Ganges water all over the house for purification and reads a hymn in praise of the Goddess Durga. Prem Chand's sensitivity to the injustice and the suffering of the victims of prejudice is portrayed in minute details that makes Sadgati a well written piece of the ugliness of shackled minds. The fact remains that he was for change that would get Indian society out of sick customs and traditions because these hampered the growth and progress of different sections of society. He does not hesitate to question even the freedom that fails to serve this purpose. His stories can also be read as critical comments on life. For him literature was a criticism of life—with its chief function of presenting an honest critical view of the truth or the reality outside and around. Kafan is another story about the bitter reality of our world. Here poverty stricken father and son collect money for the shroud of the daughter-in-law of the house and by the time they collect it they are too tired and thirsty and spend the entire begged sum on cheap liquor. They get drunk and delirious; rationalizing that providing pleasure for the feeling, and living is a better way of spending money than getting a shroud for the feeling less dead. When Madhavs (the dead woman's husband) euphoria subsides, he feels dejected and pessimistic and breaking down talks of how painful was her (Budhias) death. To console his son his father Ghisu

,asks him to be happy that his wife was released from the web of this transitory world and that she was fortunate to have broken worldly bonds so quickly. After which they sing and dance, jump, leap and fall down unconscious.

With Prem chand the religious and the political motifs are shown to be based in the ultimate analysis on economic considerations. The Mahant, Swami, Panda and the prohit are shown as clever men who know how to play upon the religious fears, hopes and superstitions of the ordinary men in order to enrich them. The same is true of the fake nationalists, the self seeking vote catcher. In his stories the major trends of the change such as the nationalist movement especially one influenced by the emergence of Mahatma Gandhi ,the new concept of social progress and the consequential reform movements ,a new religious consciousness based on the rejection of customs ridden practices ,shallow rituals and superstitions together with the ideal of economic justice, equality based broadly on the concept of socialist society , the struggles of the peasants and workers against exploitation, find expression. Prem Chand thus makes his writings representational and reflective of the time, registering the importance of historical events in the life of the people and the nation. He evolved a new fictional world of feelings emotions, ideas, characters and situations....standing tall in the gallery of the great writers of the genre of short narrative writing.

Thus we find the two master narrators through the art of social realism in their writings , projecting and leaving this wealth of ideas for future generations, their deep concern for their people- different sections of the society and different groups ,men, women alike , who were grappling with the high tide of change , brought about by the political events on the shifting sands of time. Both perhaps were less concerned with politics but the sociological aspect of these happenings which often meant immense suffering and pain of the weak and the down trodden, the less privileged and the lowly born as a whole, prompted the commitment of these agents of change. Man remained the subject of their narratives - benefiting from the wisdom of their predecessors like true inheritors, they churned out what made them more than mere writers, for their future generations to look up to and revere.

Note

All text quotes of O.Henry's stories are from Collected Stories of O.Henry. New Delhi, Rupa and Co.1988.

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