Bhartiya Manyaprad

International Journal of Indian Studies

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Bhartiya Manyaprad

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FORM-IV

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Contents

Synopsis

This study is based on the idea that the aim of literature is to build bridges, to bring people together and to highlight the underlying similarities despite the apparent differences in world literatures. Using Walter Benjamin's metaphor of "a ladder extending downward to the interior of the earth and disappearing into the clouds" it treats story-telling as a collective experience that not only brings together readers scattered in time and space but also connects different cultures and sensibilities. The ancient Indian ideal of *Vasudhaiva Kuttumbakam* or 'the world is my home' is invoked, a concept close to the African notion of '*ubuntu'* which refers to an open society (as against a small, enclosed one) and relates to the essence of being human, working for the benefit of a larger community.

Beginning with classics like the Indian epics, the *Panchatantra*, the *Kathasaritsagar*, and the *Arabian Nights*, this study cuts across geographical and cultural boundaries, from ancient to contemporary texts, from antiquity to the present age of information technology. Although texts may originate against diverse backdrops, they have a commonality that cannot be denied. Our stories may be rooted in a particular time and place but they are a part of a common heritage and comprise what we call world literature. The stories we tell, the

tales we love to hear and repeat, all share certain features which reach out across borders of time and space, bridging the gap between people and places. Living as we do in a globalized world today, we need to study literature against a broad perspective.

The author believes that although narratives have their roots in specificities of time and space, they attempt to break new ground; not only do they embody the ideology of the times, they also look back at the past and reach out into the future. The present study, with its varied, broad-based, expansive survey of disparate stories randomly chosen from across the globe, will be of interest to the lay reader passionate about literature. At the same time, it will be useful to the serious scholar looking for insights into the art of story-telling.

Acknowledgement

Introduction: Telling the Tale

"All classes, all human groups, have their narratives, enjoyment of which is very often shared by men with different even opposing cultural backgrounds. ...narrative is international, transhistorical, transcultural: it is simply there, like life itself!" **– Roland Barthes**

The subject of this study is the literary narrative in its multifarious forms, whether oral or written or even visual. The form it acquires at a given time depends on the age and its level of sophistication. In the days of old, when time was a linear concept measured by the unhurried motions of the heavenly bodies, the sun, the stars and the moon, it was the rambling oral narrative that held sway. Story-telling was a popular pastime of the community when the day's work was done and the inhabitants of a village would gather under a tree. Or when wandering merchants travelled with their wares from one place to another, carrying with them not only merchandise but strange stories from wondrous lands, myths and legends of the vegetation cycle, customs and rituals of the death and resurrection of the various gods that were worshipped. As civilization progressed, the written word took over and narratives came to be stored in books, a process further perfected with the invention of the printing press. Now, in the 21st century, the pace of life has quickened so much that books

have by now been relegated to a secondary place, the primary focus being the television. However, one may be tempted to agree with critics like Paul Ricoeur who believe that there is always time for stories: the narrative impulse remains alive even if books may have given way to other forms of story-telling. Narratives take on another guise, i.e., visual, and come packaged as soap operas or telefilms, or as popular cinema. Yet all three forms, the oral, the written/printed and the visual, have certain aspects in common which are witness to the fact that no text is independent unto itself, each being a link in a larger chain that we call narrative tradition. More often than not, a new text which is taken as a break from tradition is discovered upon scrutiny to be derivative, a repetition with a difference, a variation of precursor narratives. Not surprising this for, as the poet says, in our beginning is our end. Or, to put it differently, as T.S. Eliot does, the end of all our exploring is to arrive at the place we started from. Narrative turns a full circle even as it purports to explore uncharted territories.

Like life itself, narratives may be found everywhere. The critic, Teresa Lauretis, feels that on no account can narratives be ignored – one has to work either with or against them. Roland Barthes is of the opinion that narratives of the world are numberless; they are present everywhere, at all times, and in different forms. Ursula Le Guin uses the rattle-snake analogy and is convinced that there is no escape from the narrative. While classic narratology believes in a dualistic model for the study of narratives, splitting the work into the *fabula* and the *sjuzhet*, into *histoire* or discourse, one may, perhaps, be more inclined to agree with Barbara Smith who questions this methodological doubling, suggesting that instead of illuminating a text it actually misguides and distracts, preventing the reader from fully exploring the connection between the narrative, language and culture. Therefore, it may be advisable not to reduce narratives to a formula. For if a narrative is an attempt at ordering human experience, it may be prudent to remember that human experience is never simplistic; any attempt to reduce it to a defined body of words would not do sufficient justice. A narrative has a beginning and an end (Metz) but life is a living, growing, changing phenomenon which does not have a ready-made structure. If narrative is an attempt to capture some essence of this ceaselessly changing process it, too, must keep evolving, adapting itself to the needs of the times.

Another point of view that needs to be taken seriously is that no narrative is absolutely pure or original. Instead, a narrative is a response to infinite other narratives. Walter Benjamin sees the narrative as the art of repeating stories. Memory plays an important role in story-telling, for every good raconteur must be familiar with stories of old, build upon them, repeat their successes and avoid their failures in order to hold the interest of his listeners. Simultaneously, at work in the narrative process is a subtle power game. The narrative is a temporal sequence but the narrator has the liberty to disturb the time sequence, introducing anachronies, analepsis or prolepsis (i.e., disruption of time sequence, flashbacks and flash forwards) into the narration, thus exerting his authority over the story, over its cast of characters, and also over the narratee whom he/she authoritatively leads from ignorance to knowledge, from darkness to light. There may also be a reversal of the power game with the narratee calling the shots, reading his own interpretation into the story, questioning the standpoint of the author and there may be other power structures, too. What, for instance, does the narrator choose to foreground in the narrative and what is he/she silent about? What is said is important, no doubt, but equally important is what is *not said*. The selection depends on the focalization and is a comment on the underlying ideology. This ideology, when questioned, may lead to a counter-narrative that posits a contrapuntal experience against the narrator's. As Henry Louis Gates, Jr., puts it, people may arrive at an understanding of themselves through narratives, but counter-narratives contest the dominant reality and the assumptions of the narrator, offering instead contrapuntal readings of the text.

There is still more power-politics at work. If the narrator is a puppeteer of sorts, deftly manipulating the events of his story, his characters, even his readers or listeners, the whole process

is analogous to sexual activity. There is an erotic pleasure in the discursive process. Freud's views on creativity and sexuality are well-known and one may like to mention Robert Scholes who believes that the archetype of all fiction is the sexual act, in the way it gradually progresses, builds to a crescendo, only to be followed by an anti-climax or denouement. Roland Barthes, in *The Pleasure of the Text* celebrates the physicality of language, the jouissance, and its orgasmic pleasures. In more or less the same vein, Laura Mulvey compares the narrator with a sadist – in the sense that through the narrative, teasingly, tantalizingly, he/she keeps the listener or reader hanging on, waiting for what happens next, for the next bend in the story, the next episode, always holding back, cheating on the end, delaying it as far as possible. Theresa Lauretis sees the act of reading, like writing, as "a function of desire" with the book's ending corresponding to the pursuit of the unattainable love object, narrative closure impeded by ecriture, the dispersal of meaning. "More simply put… the archetype of this fiction is the male sexual act." (Lauretis 71)

Take Scheherazade, for instance, who although for different reasons, postpones the conclusion of her stories, keeping Prince Sharyar forever in suspense, thus prolonging her life, story by story, one day at a time. She, too, is exerting the power of the word over her listener although temporal power lies with her husband at whose behest she may be beheaded at the break of day. The sexual politics interwoven into the fabric of the narrative cannot be ignored. There is also some measure of narcissism in much metafiction, in the self-reflexive novel, for instance (which loops back on itself and becomes a comment on the act of writing), or even in metatheatre, where we have a play within a play, like *Hamlet's* "mousetrap" or like "Pyramus and Thisbe" in *A Midsummer Night's Dream,* or even the performance sequence in *Waiting for Godot.* A point to emphasize is that 'narrative' does not mean fiction alone: drama and poetry are narrative forms, too, and so are non-literary works (which, however, are not in the purview of the present study). What has been said so far would be equally applicable to texts across the genres, across man-made

borderlines of nation, class or culture, reaching out to the high and the low through elite forms and popular.

This brings me to the formal aspects of a narrative. The beginning and the end have already been mentioned, but what about the mode of narration? If we look back at the *Panchtantra* or the *Kathasaritsagar* or the *Arabian Nights,* it is easy to see a similarity in their structural framework. Each comprises a framed narrative with many stories held together by the overarching grand or master narrative. Like Chinese boxes or Russian dolls that fit one inside the other, these stories are held together by the framing narrative. One may also cite a comparatively recent text translated from the Malayalam – O.V. Vijayan's *The Legends of Khasak* – where the framing story is that of a newcomer into a sleepy village, his effort to find a place in the community, and ultimately his departure from the village. Within this frame numerous other stories are told – each character of the village has his own history which is narrated along with the superstitions and beliefs prevalent in that region. Together these stories, real and mythological, link up to form the substance of Vijayan's text. Thus the framing device is very much in use even today.

The metafictional technique, or the framed narrative, is thought to be an eastern concept. Framed texts that appear outside the Indian subcontinent (the *Arabian Nights, Decameron, Canterbury Tales,* for instance) are said to have their origins in the *Kathasaritsagar.* A.B. Keith believes that the frame narrative was a Middle-Eastern concept; he is of the opinion that the animal tales of the *Panchatantra* travelled to Persia and Arabia where they were framed in stories along with the local tales, and then travelled back to India. This is how the stories as well as the technique spread across the world and were adopted by the novel in the form of rambling narrative patterns with several story-threads, the kind that are found in India and also elsewhere.

How, one may ask, does this technique figure in poetry? Take a look at the best-known poetical work of the twentieth century – T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land.* What is it if not a sequence of scenes and sketches from modern life, held together by a

commentary, a statement of the theme that runs through the five movements of the poem? What Tiresias sees, in fact, is the substance of the poem, Eliot tells us, and the substance that he sees comprises the many grim and sordid situations of a world which is a meaningless, barren, waste land. The horror of this landscape informs the various sections of *The Waste Land.*

In drama the story-within-story, or rather play-within-play has various purposes but most of all it presents the world as a stage with us poor players, playing our parts. The outermost frame is occupied by the writer who pens the story, but on the stage it is the Chorus which holds the scenes together. Closer home, it is the *sutradhar* who performs a binding role. In the plays of Girish Karnad, for instance, the *sutradhar* connects the many levels at which action takes place. Similarly, in Vijay Tendulkar's *Ghasiram Kotwal* the human wall which sings and dances in between scenes performs the same role as the chorus of traditional plays. The framed sequence may also be found in popular forms of mass entertainment. Take, for instance, the film *Titanic* and its salvage sequences, the flashback and forward of time, the simultaneous narration of two different stories – one of the shipwreck and the other of the discovery of the wreck. This dual narration is what Tzetvan Todorov sees in the unfolding of a story, a technique found in popular as well as canonical texts, in a cult film like *Titanic* and also in an established work – like *Oedipus Rex,* for instance, where the crime has been committed before the commencement of action, *ante rem,* and must now be revealed step by step.

There is, thus, in narratives, a repetition of narrative tools, of stories and underlying ideologies and mythologies. Archetypes, if you will, which keep recurring from time to time, which have their origins in the primal instincts of man. These, when identified, enhance the pleasure of the text. Narratives and counter-narratives, visions and re-visions, each narrative challenges our complacencies and compels us to look at the world afresh.

This study begins with the generally accepted premise that the impulse to tell a story is as old as life itself, that there can be no rigidly defined rules governing the composition and structure

of narratives, and that the more we try to impose a pattern on the fluid nature of the narrative process, the more will it elude us. Further, it develops the idea that to the mimetic and diegetic task of the writer a third element may be added, i.e., the impulse to break new ground and to experiment. What goes into the literary text, thus, is in part "constant" and in part "variable", combining as it does tradition with innovation, the old with the new. As the narrative progresses through the polytropic principle towards its closure, it contains within itself traditions of the past even as it forges ahead into new territories. So, how radical are today's story-tellers? How original is their craft? These are some of the questions that need to be answered.

At a deeper level, the attempt is to draw attention to three different yet related concepts in narratology – philosophy, ideology and the story – beginning with certain basic assumptions: the philosophy of a text is taken as that which includes the ideology, the meaning and the thoughts transmitted from one party (whether individual or collective) to another. For an understanding of ideology, one may go back to the word created by Destutt de Tracy in his *Elemens d'Ideologie* to define the science that aims at understanding the representation, nature and characteristics of ideas.[1] After de Tracy, ideology has been used differently by different philosophers, but in the present context it may be worthwhile to take ideology in a simple, uncomplicated form as that which embodies ideas. Philosophy and ideology in a narrative are embodied in the story that is told. The act of story-telling itself is a mode whereby knowledge is passed on from the teller to the recipient, possibly designed for the entertainment of the latter, and often involving the indoctrination of the other. As Jean-Francois Lyotard says, narratives are the communal method by which knowledge is stored and exchanged, therefore, they "define what has the right to be said and done in the culture in question, and since they are part of that culture." (Lyotard 23)

It is also worth keeping in mind that the knowledge transferred is to a large extent shaped by the ideology of the narrator and this ideology gives the text its underlying philosophy. We may here recall the etymology of 'philosophy':

philosophy is derived from the Ancient Greek word meaning 'love of wisdom' and it is wisdom of one kind or another that is communicated through the stories that we narrate, the stories we are told and the tales we love to hear over and over again. A story-teller has some ideas to communicate to the listeners, a philosophy to propound, an ideology to promote, and a culture to preserve in the stories which are told.

The stories of the *Panchatantra,* for instance, are a means of passing on ideas, for communicating wisdom, and for spreading knowledge, a pattern discernible in all literary texts. The figure in the carpet may be hidden but it exists; it is like the guilty person whom Oedipus seeks (not knowing he himself is the one) – "seek and ye shall find him, unsought he goes undetected." There is a definite ideology underlying the various points of view – undercurrents, unseen yet present.

Whose ideology? Whose philosophy? one may ask. The author's? But, as Roland Barthes told us in 1967, the author is dead.[2] Whose, then, if not the author's? The reader's perhaps, if we go by post-structuralist principles, for the death of the author – so we are told – means the birth of the reader. It is the reader's responsibility to deconstruct the text and then reconstruct the underlying philosophy. The target is never a single reader, so the literary text becomes, like Wallace Stevens' blackbird, looked at from thirteen or more different ways, each reader reading his / her own meaning into the text. The meaning – rather, the meanings – are thus context-specific and change with the reader's positioning, his milieu, his location in time and space – the standpoint epistemology as it is called. The 'chronotopes' or the spatio-temporal specificities of a text, as Bakhtin puts it, determine the meaning. The philosophy a text contains would relate to the context, the age, the time, and the milieu; interpretation is oriented toward what Bakhtin calls the "conceptual horizon" of the recipient.[3] The text remains what it is but the message it conveys is subject to changes as it travels down the ages; it acquires new meaning – not because something is added to the ur-text but because some of the voices which were earlier silent or unheard, are now loud enough to be taken cognizance of, a fact which takes us to the Bakhtinian

concepts of dialogism and heteroglossia. The voices we hear affect our reading of a text. They may rise and fall, depending on personal and social factors; at times some may almost disappear while others may become dominant in the sense Jakobson uses the term.[4] The dominant keeps shifting, depending on the philosophy discernible to the reader at a given time and place, the voices that the reader can hear.

The present study focuses on how stories travel through time and through space. Doing so, they undergo changes with every age and every narrator. Sometimes the changes are drastic and the original tale is lost. The lessons conveyed by the stories also undergo variations with the passage of time and also with the teller. Moreover, in story-telling, the role of the narratee is as important as the narrator's, for every story needs a recipient. The meaning of the narrative (or its many meanings), thus, depend on several factors which will be studied in the chapters that follow vis-a-vis texts drawn from diverse geographical and cultural backgrounds.

NOTES

1.   Tracy coined the term "ideology" shortly after his appointment to the Institute National in 1796 to refer to his "science of ideas" which attempted to create a secure foundation for all the moral and political sciences by closely examining the sensations and the ideas about those sensations which arose in human beings as they interacted with their physical environment. His deductive methodology for the social sciences has much in common with the Austrian school of economics which emerged after 1870. For Tracy, "Ideology" was a liberal social and economic philosophy which provided the basis for a strong defense of private property, individual liberty, the free market, and constitutional limits to the power of the state (preferably in a republican form modeled on that of the USA). For Napoleon, "ideology" was a term of abuse which he directed against his liberal opponents in the Institut National and it was this negative sense of the term which Marx had in mind in his writings on Ideology (he called Tracy a "fischblütige Bourgeoisdoktrinär"—a fish-blooded bourgeois doctrinaire). http://oll.libertyfund.org/index. php?option= com_ content&task= view&id=41&Itemid=259

2.   "Thus is revealed the total existence of writing: a text is made of multiple writings, drawn from many cultures and entering into mutual relations of dialogue, parody, contestation, but there is one place where this multiplicity is focused and that place is the reader, not, as was hitherto said, the author. The reader is the space on which all the quotations that make up a writing are inscribed without any of them being lost; a text's unity lies not in its origin but in its destination." (Barthes 148)

3.   "Therefore, [the speaker's] orientation toward the listener is an orientation toward a specific conceptual horizon, toward the specific world of the listener…." (Bakhtin 282)

4.   The concept of the dominant, which Jakobson defined as "the focusing component of a work of art" that "rules, determines, and transforms the remaining components" — "in the evolution of poetic form it is not so much a question of the disappearance of certain elements and the emergence of others, as it is the question of shifts in the mutual relationships among the diverse components of the system… the shifting dominant within a given complex of poetic norms…."

Part I

Stories Down the Ages

The Panchatantra: Stories with a Lesson

 "The *Panchatantra* is like the evergreen banyan tree, spreading its branches and roots. Wherever an aerial root touches the earth it becomes a tree and starts giving joy to everyone by providing shelter, shade and fruits. Though the *Panchatantra* has travelled far and wide, its mother trunk is rooted in the soil of India and delights all those who read it." – Manorama Jafa

This study begins with a focus on popular folk tales from India which have shaped the lives and minds of many generations. As a starting point, it uses a familiar story:

> Once upon a time, perhaps it was around 200 B.C., in a goodly kingdom by the sea, lived a noble king who was greatly loved by his people for he was a just ruler and those were days of plenty. This king, whose name was Amarsakthi, ruled over the kingdom of Mahilaropya in southern India. The country prospered and the king's fame spread far and wide. Truly, it seemed to be a golden age. But his glory notwithstanding, the king was very sad for he had three foolish, good-for-nothing sons, called Bahushakti, Ugrashakti and Anantshakti, who were averse to all learning. Their state of ignorance gave the king sleepless nights and he wondered what could possibly be done to awaken their intelligence. Was there a teacher who could impart knowledge to them? The king's advisers and counselors came up with various suggestions. One of them offered to take them under his tutelage for twelve years in the course of which he would teach

them grammar, religion, diplomacy and the essentials of practical day-to-day living. However, the young princes being what they were, would not have the patience to complete such a lengthy educational training, so the offer was rejected. Next, someone suggested the name of Vishnu Sharma, a much-respected learned Brahmin who would be able to educate the princes in a shorter span of time. Pandit Vishnu Sharma was called in and offered substantial material gains if he agreed to take on the onerous task of educating the princes. The Pandit politely declined with the famous words: "Nahan vidya vikrayan karoni" (I will not sell knowledge) but agreed to take on the responsibility of initiating the royal young men into a state of knowledge.

So it was that Vishnu Sharma, the learned Brahman, was appointed the teacher of the errant princes. Living up to their expectations, he took them under his tutelage and began to instruct them through fables, each fable carrying a moral lesson. When wisdom was presented to the young princes disguised in the form of stories, they were receptive and in six months' time they actually possessed unsurpassed knowledge of all branches of practical wisdom. Vishnu Sharma's collection of stories, the *Panchatantra* had stories in prose and morals in verse taken from the Vedas. The teacher's modus operandi was simple but effective. Instead of administering homilies or sermons, he narrated stories to the young men. Each story carried a moral lesson which would be driven home effectively and painlessly. About two centuries after these stories were narrated by Vishnu Sharma, they were collected as the *Panchatantra*. *Pancha* or five - the collection has five *tantras* or divisions: *Mitra Bheda, Mitra Samprapti, Kakolukiyam, Labhdaprasam,* and *Aparik itakaraka* which roughly translates as *The Separation of Friends, the Winning of Friends, War and Peace, The Loss of Gain,* and *Hasty Action.*

A discussion on narratives and how they travel across time and space should rightly begin here.

The stories that reformed the princes are collected in the *Panchatantra* which dates back to a period before 570 AD. Divided into five chapters or *tantras,* they relate to the art of living wisely and well and form a *nitishastra.* This anthology of popular tales is a familiar one across the Indian subcontinent; we have heard the stories often in our growing years and as adults

we have repeated them to younger generations. In particular, it is essential to keep in mind that the tales of The *Panchatantra* relate to the practical aspects of day-to-day living, pointing to a just and upright path that human beings should aspire towards. They impart moral instructions administered in small doses and the lessons they convey are connected with the culture in which the text is located. Structurally the *Panchatantra* comprises units that are linked together to form a whole, moving towards a telos, a conclusion; it follows the oral tradition, comprising talk-stories, tales from folk lore, myths and legends that travel down the generations by word of mouth, adapting themselves to the environment and situation, inevitably changing with every narrator and with every narration.

Travellers from the east to Persia carried these fabulous tales there. King Khosraw I ordered his ministers to translate the fables into their literary language, Pahlavi. Then, as time went by, the Persian version was in turn translated into Arabic. By the 11th century, the tales of the *Panchatantra* were read and enjoyed in many different languages in Europe. In recent decades these stories have become popular through comic books such as the Amar Chitra Katha series (a comic imprint with hundreds of titles and easily available online). The comic book series is written by the leading Indian fantasy and comic book writer, Samit Basu and illustrated by Ashish Padlekar. In India, the importance of The *Panchatantra* tales may be assessed by the fact that the Government of India issued a set of four postage stamps in 2001 which depict four stories from *The Panchatantra.* These stories are 'The Lion and the Rabbit', 'The Tortoise and the Geese', 'The Crows and the Snake' and 'The Monkey and the Crocodile'. The denomination of these stamps is Rs. 4/- each. *The Panchatantra* stories became part of the national postage not only in India, but in Lebanon too where two postal stamps were issued, based on the stories of *The Panchatantra.*[1]

The Panchatantra tales are sculpted on the walls as the local guides and people of Orissa confirm. The Mukteswara temple offers a pride of place to tales from the *Panchatantra.*[2]

This 10th century temple has some of the most ornate carvings and renditions of the *Panchatantra* tales. Sculptures can be found of the

Panchatantra tales. Sculptures can be found of elephants, monkeys, lions, and other animals. Around the windows of the Jagmohana are monkeys engaged in a variety of humorous and lively scenes depicting popular stories from *Panchatantra*.[3]

The sculptural decoration of the Mukteswara is exquisitely done; *The Panchatantra* stories, etched on the walls with great skill and precision, are of interest not only to the art critic but also to the lay man.

The moral or didactic purpose of the *Panchatantra* cannot be doubted. The stories were told with the specific purpose of imparting instruction to the doltish princes. The maxims relate to morality, religion and philosophy. Their primary focus is practical day-to-day living and governance: How should one conduct oneself in routine matters? What makes a just and noble ruler? How should a king rule best and what should be his policy towards his people? In this respect it is possible to see a connection between the *Panchatantra* and Machiavelli's *The Prince*, for instance. Or even Kautilya's *Arthashastra*. The three texts overlap on various issues but there are striking differences, too. *The Prince* treats the state and the ruler as supreme, advocating the maxim that the end justifies the means, thus coining the term 'machiavellian'.

Scholars have also traced the influence of *Arthashastra* on the *Panchatantra*. A.B. Keith believes that "The *Panchatantra* appears to allude to Chanakya and follows Kautilya's *Arthashastra*. It is suggested by Hertel that it was originally conceived as a work for teaching political wisdom but it must be admitted that its character as a political textbook is never glaring. It is essentially a story book in which the story teller and the political teacher are unified in one personality." (Keith 112-113) *Arthashastra* deals with good administration, finance and statehood but does not compromise on ethics. Nor does it veil its teachings on governance behind fables or folk tales. The *Panchatantra* differs from *The Prince* and *Arthashastra* in that it remains a moral treatise; it deals with ethics and polity but nowhere does it advocate the use of foul means to reach a desired goal. It is dissimilar in another respect: its teachings are sugar-coated, couched in popular tales and thus easily understood even by those who are not gifted with mental alacrity.

C. Rajan is of the opinion that the *Panchatantra* "might have been originally designed for the use of monarchs as a mirror for princes, a pattern for a just ruler in the art of government and in the conduct of his private life and relationships. Because the private and the public areas of living are both parts of a whole, the two cannot be separated and compartmentalized. *Niti* applies at all levels. Further, this work goes beyond the education of princes. It is meant for all men and women. Many of the tales are about ordinary people going about the normal business of living rightly or wrongly." (Rajan xxviii)

The *Panchatantra* shares several stories with Aesop's *Fables*, thus giving rise to speculations whether the Indians were inspired by the Greeks or vice versa. Perhaps it would be safe to say that the two collections of stories are derived from similar sources. Lin Yutang is of the opinion that it was the Eastern tales that influenced the Greeks (in *Wisdom of India* 327). The influence of the *Panchatantra* has also been traced in the works of Boccaccio, La Fontaine, Gower, and the Grimm Brothers. These tales have travelled far indeed, and have been translated into as many as two hundred languages in different countries, in the Eastern corners of the world as well as the west.

Looking at the structure of the *Panchatantra*, it may be noted that it comprises a collection of stories that are independent yet linked. They are like beads in a rosary, or like many compartments in a larger structure. The framing device is obvious as is the multiple level of story-telling. The tales are interwoven with maxims and moral lessons. The outer frame, the Preamble as we know it, comprises the story of the ruler of Mahilaropya, King Amarshakti, his sons and the pandit appointed to educate the princes. Further, within each chapter or tantra, there are inlaid stories. Thus the metafictional technique is very much in evidence. These embedded stories are peopled by their own characters, some of whom become story-tellers. Thus there are multiple levels of story-telling, different narratorial voices that emerge for a while, are heard, and then disappear only to make way for other voices.

Each *tantra* is a duplication of the overall structure of the collection. So it is like many mirrors reflecting each other, giving

different perspectives on various issues, yet similar in their goal. The original narrator is Pandit Vishnu Sharma himself. After he begins narrating stories, the characters created by him take on the role of narrators. With each subsequent narration of the *Panchatantra* tales, different narrators step into the limelight, either as editors, compilers or translators. Ibn-al-Muqaffa, who translated the *Panchatantra* into Arabic, added another section to the book, thus including himself in the line of narrators. But, if there are several narrators, multiple diegetic levels, and multiple frames, there are also many narratees. Beginning with the three princes as the narratees of the tutor, Vishnu Sharma, the various levels of the *Panchatantra* gives us an array of listeners and at the end of the list comes today's listener, the recipient of our times, or the contemporary reader. The collection of fables is thus thickly textured and multi-layered text. It has a moral purpose but does not end on a dogmatic note. The conclusion is open-ended and the reader / listener is left to ponder upon possible meanings and arrive at his own conclusions. Vishnu Sharma was not only a good teacher but also a psychologist who realized that human beings did not like to be shown a mirror to their unsavory behavior. Hence he disguised all moral lessons in clever stories peopled by animals and birds, species decidedly inferior to human beings. The characters in the *Panchatantra* represent human vices and virtues, good as well as bad qualities. They are 'types' we can recognize.

Vladimir Propp, in all the tales he has analyzed, identifies eight broad categories of characters. If we try and locate these characters in the *Panchatantra*, we find the following broad divisions: royalty, courtiers, mystical characters, commoners and women. The five divisions of the *Panchatantra* together comprise stories which may vary from one collection to another. Each story stands independently but concludes by pointing a cue to the story that will follow thus giving an impression of linked unity and continuity. Arthur A MacDonell, in his *A History of Sanskrit Literature* has compared the narrative technique to a set of Chinese boxes. Each part contains "at least one story, and usually more, which are

'emboxed' in the main story called the 'frame-story'. Sometimes there is a double emboxment: another story is inserted in an 'emboxed' story." (Edgerton in 1924)

Vishnu Sharma has been criticized for his portrayal of women. The beginning of the *Panchatantra*, for instance, smacks of misogyny. Although he was a learned man, he apparently was patriarchal in his outlook, had an aversion for women, and considered them inferior and unclean – an attitude that is a reflection of the traditional male-dominated society of the times. Some of the stories present infidel women, others insatiable, cruel or dominating. The good woman is cast in the traditional role of wife, sister or mother, the socially unacceptable woman is the whore. This is a pattern we find in other classics, too, e.g., in the *Arabian Nights*. In his defence, however, one may say that no doubt he is harsh, but at the same time he is aware of the importance of woman's position in society.

"You are our only nectar; you
O woman, are our poison, too.
For union with you is the breath
Of life; and absence from you, death." (396)

The binaries in respect to women seem present the way they existed in those times. This flaw notwithstanding, the *Panchatantra*, remains a useful text, enabling us to grasp the need for a practical approach to living and helping us understand the cultural context of the age in which the stories originated. It remains a "treatise on the art of living wisely and well"… comprising "stories linked by wise and good sayings of a good and true poet aims to be of service to others here in this world, and lead the way to the World of Eternal Light…." (Rajan 435)

Stories such as these, linked with popular myth, as it emerges from the common imagination of the people, have the authority of history that is shaped by the oral tradition. Such stories retain their hold on the human imagination because of their subject matter, dealing as they do with human affairs and destiny, with the daily routine of everyday living and with issues that mankind has to grapple with. In his essay, "Myth, Fiction

and Displacement," Northrop Frye tells us that old folk tales, myths and legends tales give us uncomplicated, easy-to-remember story patterns. These are "no more hampered by barriers of language and culture than migratory birds are by customs officers, and made up interchangeable motifs that can be counted and indexed." (Frye) The greatest of writers take an interest in folktales and it is here that landmarks of literature originate. Writers like Shakespeare make use of them because they "illustrate the essential principles of story-telling." We find the same principle at work elsewhere, too: take, for example, Thomas Mann's writing, in particular his short story, "The Transposed Heads" which makes use of a folk tale from India and modifies it in such a manner that it continues its journey into times to come.

"A myth that survives over a long period takes on different shapes when handled by individuals of different generations." (Gay Clifford 5-8).

The greatest of literary texts seem to have a sanction in the past: a writer is best understood when he makes use of familiar devices, or when he works against a backdrop of accepted and traditional ideas (an idea supported by many literary theorists, including T. S. Eliot). Ancient myths and legends, when revived by later generations of writers, become means by which parallels may be drawn between contemporaneity and antiquity. An old story may, thus, be told over and over. But when it is retold it does not stick out like an obsolete signpost; instead, it is reworked and acquires new dimensions, becoming relevant to the times.

With their roots in the collective imagination of a community, folk tales often provide the structural frame-work for stories, a frame-work that is essential if a story is to be placed in a tradition. In this context, one may cite T.S. Eliot's essay on William Blake where he laments that missing in the work of the gifted poet (Blake) is the necessary backdrop against which great poetry should be written: "What [Blake's] genius required, and what it sadly lacked, was a framework of accepted and traditional ideas which would have prevented him from indulging in a philosophy of his own." Such a necessary

framework may be constructed from familiar folklore, ancient legends and myths which come down to us from a hoary past but retain their appeal and vitality; myths which may be interpreted either simplistically as entertaining stories, or intellectually as "a revelation of that vanished mind of which our mind is a continuum". Eliot advocated the use of myth "as a way of controlling, of ordering, of giving shape and significance to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history". This mythical method is what he appreciated in the works of James Joyce who, using the Homeric myth in *Ulysses*, succeeds in "manipulating a continuous parallel between contemporaneity and antiquity."

Eliot believed in the timelessness of certain recurrent images and themes in art. Northrop Frye calls them "archetypes of the unconscious," originating in what has been called our "collective unconscious": archetypes which are repeated time and again in some form or the other, familiar stories that we are willing to hear narrated again and yet again. Literary history reveals that much enduring literature is informed by pre-literary categories, for example, ritual, myth and folk tale, and the search for archetypes is like literary anthropology (Frye 12). In popular folklore, a motif that holds eternal fascination is that of transformation or metamorphosis, whether it is found in the *Bible*, in a children's story, or in a canonical text. Lot's wife turns into a pillar of salt when she takes a backward look, Philomel turns into a nightingale when pursued, a young princess turns into a golden statue at the Midas touch, the coach turns into a pumpkin at the stroke of midnight, the frog into a prince when the curse is lifted: these are stories that we are familiar with, stories that have survived the passage of time. They continue to live on because of the permanent human element in them: they deal with love and death, joy and sorrow, pain, anguish, and other forms of experience peculiar to our mortal world. Our attention is riveted to the nightingale, for instance, because the bird was once, and still is a girl: a girl seduced and later mutilated. The outer form has changed but the pain lives on and it is a human pain that we identify with and respond to. When the frog enters the princess's chamber,

we know that there is a human story behind it, an unfortunate prince trapped in the frog's slimy body, so we wait with baited breath for the inevitable transformation to take place.

When transformations take place in fairy tales, there is generally an element of poetic justice in the grand finale. Cinderella's story is another version of "virtue rewarded" when Prince Charming finally locates her and when the cruel stepsisters are punished. Rumpelstiltskin, the wicked goblin, is swallowed up by the earth when he stamps his foot too hard in rage. No attempt is made to explain or rationalize these events and none is expected in fairy tales, but the moral of the story is driven home all the same: the good will be rewarded, the wicked must suffer.

In the ancient mythologies of India, as in the Graeco-Roman mythological system, in the stories of Gods, Goddesses, and demons, transformation of evil characters taking on an attractive form to entice the unsuspecting, Gods taking on a mortal appearance to interact with human beings, animals turning into men and vice versa, are not uncommon incidents. They are as familiar as the story of Tiresias turning into a woman and then returning to a male form in the Greek legend. Sometimes the transformation is not complete and what we are left with is a creature that is half-man and half-animal, part human and part bestial. Ganesh, for instance, who has the head of an elephant and the body of a man, is not an isolated figure in world mythologies. He reminds us of other legendary figures, part animal and human. The Narsingh, for instance, is half-lion and half-man, symbolizing the intelligence of a man and the strength of a lion. The Egyptian Sphinx is partly human and partly animal. The Centaur or the Satyr of Graeco-Roman mythology is half-human and half-equine, the Minotaur half man and half bull. The idea underlying these myths is that the human and the animal attributes co-exist, generally in a balanced, harmonious form. However, human beings – because they are human – hanker after a state of perfection that remains elusive.

The present study is concerned with this idea of linking the past with the present through literature and in the present section the focus is on how certain motifs have been manipulated in texts across time and space. Take for instance stories related to change or metamorphosis which continue to fascinate readers. In the popular fairy tales of Hans Christian Anderson or the Brothers Grimm when we read of characters changing entities it grabs our attention immediately. Or when we take the works of Ovid or Kafka who speak of transformations of different kinds what remains with us is the eery transformation of one form of existence into another. With its immense popular appeal, this is a recurrent motif in literature. However, it may be interesting to see how an author would handle this subject in the in the present age of science and computers, atheism, scepticism and cynicism. It would also be of interest to study the kind of transformations that occur in Indian folk tales and in their western counterparts. This section focuses on one particular folk tale from the *Vetalapanchavimshati* in the *Kathasaritasagar* which has been used by two different authors, Thomas Mann and Girish Karnad, writers distanced from each other in time and space but drawn to the same motif. How do they handle a familiar theme? What are the traditional and innovative devices used in each case so that the ancient legend is not only made relevant to the twentieth century but may be understood regardless of all chronotopic barriers? These are interesting issues which would throw a light on what goes into the making of world literature.

NOTES

1. For this section on the *Panchatantra*, I am indebted to my doctoral student, Dr Harpreet Dhiman, who made a critical study of the text in her Ph.D. thesis on popular folk tales.
2 . See http://www.culturalindia.com/Temples/Mukteshwara. htm In India, *Panchatantra* stories have become part of temple architecture along with *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* stories.
3   Channabasappa S. Patil, 1995. *Panchatantra in Karnataka Sculptures*. Karnataka State Directorate of Archaeology and Museums, Mysore.

The Kathasaritsagar

The *Kathasaritsagar* is an ancient Indian classic; its structural aspects bear affinity to the *Panchatantra* in the metafictional mode, the multiple narrators, and the framing devices used. The outer frame is the story of Shiva and Parvati. Shiva narrates the adventures of the seven Vidyadhara princes to Parvati, is overheard by Malyavan who is cursed to be reborn on earth as Gunadhya. In his reincarnated form he has to spread far and wide the tales he has overheard. One of the books written by him falls into the hands of the Vidyadhara prince, Naravahandatta, who adds the *Kathapitha*, a preamble to it. Together, the *Kathapitha* and Gunadhya's stories (about the adventures of Naravahandatta) form the eighteen books of the *Kathasaritsagar*, comprising numerous stories that flow like rivers and streams, big and small, giving the anthology its name – the Ocean of the Sea of Stories. One of these cycles of stories is the *Vetalapanchavimshati or the Vetala Pachisi*, twenty-five tales told by the Vetala to King Vikramaditya. There are multiple diegetic levels, stories within stories, held in outer and inner frames, all of them compiled by Somadeva the Kashmiri Shaivite Brahman who, in the year 1070 AD, added some Kashmiri tales to the collection, thus giving the *Kathasaritsagar* its outermost frame. Since then, the *Kathasaritsagar* has been translated,

edited and annotated any number of times. With each edition a new narrator is added to the list, which means yet another outer frame to the collection.

The entire *Kathasaritsagar*, which gathers together an assorted variety of folk tales, is made up of 22000 slokas which makes it twice as long as the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* put together. It comprises stories that are complex and fall under various categories: history, myth, animal tales, tales from the *Ramayana*, folk tales, riddles, tales of magic and the supernatural, and stories related to everyday living. It is an amoral collection as well as a-religious. The concerns are purely worldly; of the four Hindu *purusharthas dharma*, *artha*, *kama* and *moksha*, the collection of tales is animated by *artha* and it is regarded as a celebration of life in its myriad forms.

Pointing to the different levels of narration, a critic says of the *Kathasaritsagar* that the main narrative is "lost in a maze of stories that are added to it. At the slightest provocation, a speaker recalls a tale in which a speaker recalls another tale; and the banquet consists fo nothing but hors d'oeuvres." (Van Buitenen 2) It is like peeling of layer after layer of an onion only to find that the essence lies in the layers themselves.

When we look at it closely, we note the wide range of stories and their varied characteristics, tone, and language. Often this gives the impression that these tales are narrated by multiple authors, the product of many minds at work. Like many other ancient classics, it is likely that they have come down from the oral tradition and were compiled at a much later date by Somadeva – who did not author the tales but simply compiled them.

Beginning with the outer frame of the stories, we have deities as the main characters: Lord Shiva and his consort, the Goddess Parvati atop their divine abode, the Mount Kailash. Parvati is bored and asks her spouse to entertain her with stories never told before. Lord Shiva happily obliges and tells her several connected stories about kings and queens, ghosts, witches and demons against a backdrop that shifts from the ethereal to the earthly and to the underworld. His efforts are not in vain for the goddess is pleased. Unknown to them, however, their trusted

guard Malyavan, on duty outside their chamber, has overheard the stories. Seeing how they induced in Parvati an amorous state conducive to intimacy, he decides to use them for his own purpose.

The *Brihatkatha* (the "Great Story") was purportedly written by Gunadhya in his earthly existence. It comprises the seven tales he had overheard Shiva narrating to Parvati. As the story goes, Gunadhya wrote it and presented the manuscript to the Satvahana King who rejected it because of its crude appearance: it was written in Paisaci language on the bark of a tree and in Gunadhya's blood. Dejected, Gunadhya began destroying the seven books, one at a time. He burned six of them but before he could destroy the seventh manuscript, the seventh Vidyadhara prince, Naravahandatta, salvaged what was left of it and added his own preface to it.

According to some critics, Gunadhya's contribution to the tradition of Indian literature may be rated as high as that of Rishi Vyas or Valmiki. In world literature the *Kathasaritsagar* holds a unique place, along with other texts like the *Panchatantra* or epics like the *Mahabharata* or the *Ramayana*. Gunadhya's text is dated roughly between 495 and 490 BC, corresponding with the dates of the Satvahana ruler of Andhra Pradesh. Later several translated versions were made available in Sanskrit and Prakrit. Among the versions that have survived are those compiled in Buddhaswami's *Brihatkatha Shloka Sangraha*, Kshamendra's *Brihatkatha Manjari*, and Somadeva's *Kathasaritsagar*. The *Kathasaritsagar* of Somadeva is larger than the other two versions. It is believed that Somadeva compiled the tales of Gunadhya for the Queen Suryamati, the wife of King Anant and gave it an appropriate title that loosely meant "Ocean of Stories". Although the title evokes the image of a boundless ocean into which flow all the rivers of stories, the *Kathasaritsagar* may actually be regarded as an ur-text from which originate the various traditions of Indian fiction. It weaves into its structure diverse elements of myth and history, imagination and reality, illusion and truth. Its tales are peopled by flesh and blood characters who are true to life and who are depicted in situations that are plausible. At the same time, there

is the *deux ex machina* the supernatural machinery that interferes with human existence and causes complications from time to time. Or else it enters the story world at a point when human endeavor is powerless to grapple with a given situation. Divine help then comes to the rescue in such cases.

Simultaneously, even as the *Kathasaritsagar* gives us glimpses of diverging worlds, it presents certain non-debatable psychological truths about human nature through stories that depict an array of human beings of all shades and types. Human character is laid bare in all its complexities. In all the various shades and hues, it records the social structure then prevalent in India, traditions and customs which held sway right up to the time of the medieval ages, human aspirations in conflict with divine intervention, or with social propriety, all of which are mirrored here faithfully. The warp and woof of these stories is taken from a broad expanse across the Indian subcontinent, from far-flung places, the north, south, east and west. If we have tales from Kashmir, we also have some from the Deccan, from the present Srilanka, the Maldives and the Nicobar Islands. Within its broad framework the *Kathasaritsagar* contains several cycles of stories, like the Vetal stories, the Tota-mynah stories and the Singhasan Batisi. One cannot be sure whether these cycles were part of the original composition of Gunadhya or whether they were added later on. The age of the Satvahanas was that of the wandering merchant who would go trading from place to place, taking not only his ships or caravans to distant places but also carrying with him stories from one locale to another. The stories of Gunadhya were thus added to, modified, adapted to the local sensibility, and multiplied in multifarious forms as they spread in all directions.

The fables of Aesop, the stories of Alif-Laila, *1001 Arabian Nights*, may all be convincingly traced back to the *Kathasaritsagar*. The text is unique in that it is simultaneously simple and childlike as well as complex. The simplicity is based on the 'story' content of the tales: taken from everyday life, related to recognizable human situations and conflicts, the tales of the *Kathasaritsagar* are easily comprehended by the young and old alike. However, underlying the apparent simplicity is a

deeper current comprising the moral and ethical content on the one hand and the narrative framework on the other. Both these aspects provide fodder for the intellect and present a different face of the text to the scholar seeking intellectual inroads into world literature. They cover a sprawling canvas and it is easy to lose sight of the main story but the frames are well-contained, one inside the other; the stories are inter-linked and the narrators flow from one tale to the next, keeping the entire structure in place. The linked narratives do not fall apart.

First compiled in 1070 A.D., Somadeva's *Kathasaritsagar* has a number of stories that involve transformations from one state of being to another. As in the fairy tales and allegories of the western and eastern world, there often seems to be a moral lesson being driven home. The tale of the heads that get switched, from the *Vetalapanchavimshati*, for instance, debates a very valid question: what is it that makes a man? Is it his physical attributes, his emotions, or his intellect? The story underscores the idea that the head is the most important, it is the *utamanga* that identifies the body and rules the other organs. The Sanskrit tale, narrated by the *Vetala* to an adventurous king is just one of the twenty-four stories framed by the outer narrative of King Vikrama who makes endless trips to and from the cremation grounds to carry a corpse at the behest of a scheming mendicant. This framing device used in the *Kathasaritsagar* is said to be a source of inspiration for other similar "framed" serial stories of the western world: the *Decameron*, for instance, or *1001 Arabian Nights*, or even *The Canterbury Tales*. The structure is similar: one central speaker who controls the show and ushers in all the stories, many characters from diverse backgrounds, a number of unrelated stories that are ultimately linked together loosely to form a whole. The situations described are usually unexceptional: men and women caught in different circumstances, their interaction, their choices, and the consequences of their choices. The stories of the *Kathasaritsagar* have found an international audience as writers the world over recognize in them timeless motifs and rework them in diverse ways. A writer who has retold the transposed-heads story of the Vetala is Thomas Mann who came to Sanskrit literature through his study of the works of Schopenhaeur. Before discussing Mann's version of the story, however, a word about the original is necessary.

The original story from the *Vetalapanchavimshati* speaks of a newly-wed woman, Madanasundari, whose husband, on a sudden impulse cuts off his head as a sacrifice to the Goddess Parvati. Following his example, Madanasundari's brother does the same. The young bride is woebegone and tries to take her own life, but the Goddess speaks up, prevents her from doing so, tells her to place the heads on the bodies and they will come to life again. The instructions are followed, but in her confusion, Madanasundari mixes up the heads, so that when the bodies come alive again, the husband's body has the brother's head while the brother's torso has the husband's head. Which of the two, then, is her husband? To whom does she "belong"? This is the Vetala's question, the answer to which is supplied by King Vikrama: "The one with the husband's head; for the head ranks supreme among the members, just as woman among life's delights." (Zimmer 248)[1] This is the original story. As it moves through time it acquires different dimensions.

THOMAS MANN'S ADAPTATION

In Thomas Mann's "The Transposed Heads" (1940) the story of the transposed heads is given a mock-heroic treatment. The main characters are Sita, her intellectually-trained husband, Shridaman, and his friend, the robust and handsome Nanda. The two men, in love with the same woman, sacrifice their lives at the temple of Kali. Sita, on the advice of the Goddess, places the heads back on the body again, but confuses them (deliberately, perhaps, because the Goddess had warned her against this confusion). The two men come to life and are faced with the dilemma: to whom does Sita belong? A sage (who himself seems smitten by Sita's charms) gives them the answer that King Vikrama gave Vetala, and Sita gets for a husband a man she must have dreamed of: a man with the intelligence of Shridaman and the physical desirability of Nand. But the story

does not end here. If Sita was seeking the perfect mate, her satisfaction is shortlived because the two bodies start changing with time. The head being the supreme organ (the *utamanga* as in the Vetala's story, Nand's body is "refined" by Shridaman's head while Shridaman's body becomes tough, ruled over by Nand's mind. Thomas Mann's sequel speaks of a child born to Sita, a duel fought by the two men in which both are killed, and a 'sati' performed by Sita on their pyre.

When Mann retells the story, a decentering (in Derridean terms) takes place as a result of his innovations to the old folk tale which include, in the first place, a fresh perspective: the humorous aspects of the story, his blend of pathos and irony. We are told that when Mann read out the story to his family and friends, they laughed uncontrollably. (Mann 1975: 267) Secondly, there is – perhaps inadvertently – a prominent anti-feminist streak in his retelling of the story, particularly in his descriptions of Sita. Third, he shifts the focus from the central question of the Vetala – who is the rightful husband? – to the validity of the King's answer. If the head actually controls the human body, of necessity, a gradual change must take place with time in the two bodies. This is what happens, so that ultimately the three characters are back to square one. The finished story, as suggested earlier, was not taken seriously by Thomas Mann who later apologetically called it a "slight thing" (293). But the fact remains that in this "longish Indian story" (268), he did turn to an ancient legend from the East, improvising upon it, adding some farcical elements, some droll, and some sombre reminders of "human dignity" (273). He gives a circularity to the narrative which was linear in the *Kathasaritsagar*.

GIRISH KARNAD'S *HAYAVADAN*

The third version of the tale, Girish Karnad's *Hayavadana*, was originally written in Kannada (Karnad 1975). While continuing the body-soul theme, it takes the story further to explore man's search for a complete experience in a world that is essentially absurd. Here Devadutta is the true poet and

scholar, sensitive, dreamy and withdrawn, lost in his books. Kapil, on the other hand, is a rugged male, sturdy like a bull, with no time for poetry. The beautiful Padmini is married to Devadutta but sexually attracted to Kapil. So, it is the intellect of one but the body of the other that fascinates her. The two friends, caught in this triangle, behead themselves at the altar of the goddess Kali. The goddess promises to bring the two men back to life if Padmini places their heads back on their torsos and Padmini mismatches the heads. This, as in the original story, begs the question: which of the two is Padmini's husband? The body that she was married to, or the head by which the world will now identify the body? The problem is resolved by a flashback to the Vetala's story, reiterating that the head of a man, the *Utamanga*, guides an individual's destiny and Padmini must now accept Kapil's body which has Devadutta's head.

For Karnad, as for Thomas Mann, this is not the end of the story. The head may be the most important part of the human being, but the body has its own life, its sensations, desires, and memories which cannot be simply written off. The sequel, inspired by Mann's version, shows the two men gradually changing their physical appearance. The robust body with Devadutta's head becomes flaccid with time, while Devadutta's body, ruled by Kapil's mind, undergoes rigorous hardships and finally becomes strapping and muscular. In despair, as Padmini observes these transformations taking place, the realization dawns on her that nothing is ever static: life keeps changing. Caught in the flux of life, human beings keep on striving for a perfection that is unattainable. The perfect man, the *sampooran* human being, is nowhere to be found. If the original tale of the *Kathasaritsagar* is dominated by *artha*, as Arshia Sattar believes (Somadeva xvi) Karnad's adaptation is ruled by *kama* – a search for perfection, wholeness and completion: states of being which remain elusive.

The use of myth, says Karnad, nails a writer to his past even as he makes a contemporary statement (Karnad 1994: 3). Even though Karnad uses some features of the ancient tale and some

from Mann's story, he introduces some new devices for specific purposes. For instance, he brings in masks adapted from the Western theatre, comic episodes (the singing, dancing and horseplay), and juxtaposes the human and the non-human with the introduction of the puppets into the story: puppets who speak from time to time, and comment on the scene. On the one hand they act as the chorus and, on the other, as spokespersons for the author's point of view. At the same time, being what they are (puppets) they indirectly tell us where the characters stand when face to face with a powerful, inexorable destiny. They endorse the familiar idea of man being a mere puppet in the hands of puppeteering higher powers. Simultaneously, they also underscore the role played by the characters of a play in relation to their creator, the playwright, the Bhagawat, or the Sutradhar. The Sutradhar, the puller of strings, is also the controlling authority behind life on the stage, the omniscient narrator who can make or mar the destinies of his creations. Just as his male characters are Everyman, the female character is Everywoman. As in the allegory, the names that Karnad uses are deliberately neutral: "...characters in Hayavadan have no real names. The heroine is called Padmini after one of the six types into which Vatsyayana classified all women. Her husband is Devadutta, a formal mode of addressing a stranger. His friend is Kapila, simply 'the dark one'" (13).

This is an effort to ensure that the story reaches out to a wider audience, an attempt to present an atemporal vision, a story that would be comprehensible not only in an Indian context, but anywhere else. At the same time, Karnad's is an amoral vision. Whereas the original version and also Mann's adaptation smack of anti-feminism, Karnad's is apparently an unbiased perspective. Padmini is not discriminated against for her normal sexual desires. The story of the three main characters, presented just as fate, destiny, or *karma*, something that is simply writ and has to happen, reveals the ambiguous nature of human relationships (also see Kurtkoti vi).

From the *Kathasaritsagar*, Karnad revives the technique of placing the narrative in a multiple framework. Framing the story of Padmini and her two lovers is the story of Hayavadana.

The eponymous character of the play is half-human and half-bestial, with the head of a horse and the torso of a man, born of the union between a princess and a white horse. Neither man nor animal, Hayavadana seeks completion and finally his wish is granted: but he becomes a complete horse, not man. This, again, points to the sad fact that one never really gets the desired goal. But life, being what it is, a boon or a curse, remains one endless journey, a striving towards a goal, towards completion, towards perfection. The link between the two stories (of Hayavadan and the transposed heads) is the child, born to Padmini and Devadutta, who learns to laugh only after he hears the horse speak in a human voice. These two stories are introduced by the Bhagawat who brings himself into the narrative from time to time. So, the Bhagawat has a role similar to the Vetala of the *Kathasaritsagar*, that of the narrator of a series of stories (here, at least three: the transposed heads, the child, and Hayavadana), for which he also forms an outer frame. Presiding over all the various frames is the deity Ganesh, half-human and half-elephant, the embodiment of incongruity, imperfection and incompletion. *Hayavadana*, the play, begins with an invocation to the elephant God – and this is the outermost frame of the narrative. The framing technique, as in the Sanskrit original, leads to a process of *inclusion* on the one hand (examining at close quarters just one of the tales at a time) and *exclusion* on the other (temporarily shelving the other narratives which will be dealt with in due course of time). And yet they are inter-linked as each involves a common motif – that of metamorphoses through transposed heads.

Karnad's *Hayavadan*, like Mann's *Transposed Heads*, speaks to its audience not in a univocal manner but through many voices that rise and fall, some sombre, some frivolous, some from the elite world and some from folk art. One may apply the Bakhtinian concept of *heteroglossia* to the narrative, to show how, in the Shakespearean manner, there is something in it for every section of society, for the masses as well as the elite. There is, at the same time, a timelessness in the tale which accounted for its appeal in the ancient times, and also in the twentieth century. The *Vetalapanchavimshati*, *The Transposed Heads*, and

Hayavadana: these are three different versions of the same story, revolving around the same myth. The authors may change but not the underlying story of transformation which combines with the quest motif – describing its characters trying to move from a state of incompleteness and imperfection towards completion and perfection. Because of its open-endedness, the original story has undergone changes with time and so it may continue into the future, in a tangential form, adapting itself to the times, and also to the whims and eccentricities of the author, opening itself to any number of different interpretations. But it will remain essentially the same, conveying its message down the ages, across all chronotopic barriers, through boundaries of time and space, reaching into contemporaneity from the remotest recesses of antiquity.

THE EPICS: IMMORTAL TALES

"…every Ramayana written before is an interpretation, not the last word…. There is a fanatical way of reading a text, and an intellectual way…." – Ashok Banker

NOTE

1.   The sexist overtones of the answer may be noted.

The Ramayana

There are many interpretations of the *Ramayana*. Take, for instance, this version: the story of a newly-wed young man who, in order to keep up a commitment made by his father, renounces his legal rights in favour of his brother, leaves the country, remains in exile for many years, enduring hardships, struggling against odds and much more, before he finally returns to his country of origin. His wife stands by him in times of trial, only to be abandoned once the husband (not-so-young now) comes back into good fortune. Why does he abandon her? Because in his newly acquired status as the king he needs a wife with a clean reputation but something in her history may be considered questionable, so he abandons her. As the proverb says, Caesar's wife must be above reproach.

This is one way of narrating the story which is accepted as sacred by a huge chunk of population across the Indian subcontinent: the basic framework of the ur-story remains the same but every time it is re-told, it acquires different nuances depending on who the teller is. Even as the older generation would laud the young man's filial devotion, or his love for his siblings, feminists would like to lynch someone like him as a weak man who cannot stick up for his wife. This, even as most – at least in the Indian subcontinent – see him as the ideal

man, the dutiful son, the loving brother, the upright ruler and the highly principled husband. In fact, the text chronicling his life is actually taken as a religious text and any criticism levelled against it is treated as blasphemy. This is *The Ramayana* in which we are told we have the right kind of ideals – right behaviour, sacrifice, morality, ideal relationships and so on. In its many versions the basic framework remains the same but the interpretations differ with each narrator, each teller of the story. Prince Ram Chandra has to leave home, Sita has to be abducted – these are the 'givens' of the tale. The rest are add-ons by different narrators who bring in their own philosophical and ideological takes on the story.

The *Ramayana*, or the Story of Lord Rama, written circa 4th century B.C., occupies a special place in the socio-religious culture of India. Traditionally, the authorship is ascribed to the sage Valmiki. As the story goes, this sage-poet who was a contemporary of Lord Rama, was one day approached by Narada Muni who narrated the story of Ramayana to him which so impressed the sage that he kept musing over it. He was then inspired by Lord Brahma to sing the entire tale in verse to his disciples. Thus was Valmiki's Ramayana born. He sang of Lord Rama and his consort, both born on earth as mere mortals, experiencing sorrow and exile, undergoing hardship and privations. Valmiki's narrative is a matrix into which are embedded several hyponarratives, side-stories and parallel tales. The main narrative is the story of Rama and Sita.

The framed narrative gives an opportunity to the teller of the tale to participate in the action of the story, either from the margins or from a central location. Like Rishi Vyasa, Valmiki is a character in the Ramayana. However, as we go deeper and deeper into the story we tend to lose sight of the teller of the tale. Instead of a single narrator, we may have multiple narrators. In the *Ramayana*, in the first place we have Narada Muni and Rishi Valmiki as overt narrators, but Valmiki addresses his audience (disciples) directly. Moreover, while Narada is heterodiegetic, Valmiki is a homodiegetic narrator: he is a character in the story who gives shelter to Sita when she is abandoned by her husband. In his cottage she gives birth to her twin sons, Lava and Kusha. The twins also take on the role of homodiegetic narrators when they are invited by Rama to recite the Ramayana before an assembly of men. So the story proceeds thus:

Narada →Valmiki →Lava-Kusha →Rama

Rama takes on the role of the narrator in the seventh kanda when he narrates the story of Nriga to Lakshmana. So, Valmiki, Lava-Kusha and Rama are narrators as well as narratees. Not surprisingly, the story moves back and forth in time, analepsis and prolepsis, weaving in and out through the lives and backgrounds of other characters whose lives touch the main protagonists.

Ostensibly, the Ramayana is divided into seven books in chronological order dealing with the life of Rama: Baal Kanda, Ayodhya Kanda, Aranya Kanda, Kishinda Kanda, Sundara Kanda, Yuddha Kanda and Uttara Kanda. Historians are of the view that the first and the last books are later additions. Along with the main story there are side-stories like those of Dasharatha, Shravana Kumar, Jatayu, Ravana, etc. As in most epics, the metafictional technique is used freely and stories are framed within other stories, the common thread connecting them is the story of Rama's exile from Ayodhya and the train of events that follows. The supernatural machinery, *deux ex machina*, is also used to explain implausible events. In the epic tradition, when human action is not effective enough to take the story forward then divine machinery or superhuman powers come to the rescue. The impetus to the story comes from various sources, one of them being the necessity to kill Ravana who had become a problem for the Devas. Therefore, Rama, an avatar of Vishnu, has to take birth in order to kill him.

The original version of the *Ramayana* is believed to be Valmiki's. But there are innumerable other versions scattered across the globe. Kampan's *Iramavataram* (Tamil), Jaina versions, Kannada, Thai, Indonesian, etc. Along with the shift of population from India to other parts of the world, stories from the Indian subcontinent also travelled places, were adapted to the local scene, and changed their character to suit the environment.

The *Ramayana* bears a resemblance to other epics of world literature in that it has all the features associated with a cultural text. Based on the ethos of the age and its people, it reflects the spirit of the times. Cutting across genres, it uses myth, legend, folk-tale, epic, the oral narrative, the embedded tale, and other forms of story-telling. The sweep is vast and characters countless. It has thus the magnificence that is associated with the epic form. The story is located in a fixed geographical terrain – beginning at Ayodhya in the Indo-Gangetic plain, it moves southwards, across the Deccan plateau towards Srilanka, before it winds its way back to Ayodhya again. And yet, despite its specific location, it bears a resemblance with its counterparts in other parts of the globe.

Lord Rama is considered to be the ideal man, the *maryada purushottam*, and example to entire mankind on the correct and most upright way of life. He had a role to play in the world: he was born to assert the victory of good over evil. He is thus an agent, the pattern of whose life is determined by higher powers. This is in keeping with leading world classics where the fate of a nation hinges upon the action taken by a particular person in a strategic situation. Such a person may suffer personal loss, his family or kin may lose rather than gain from his struggle with evil, but the fact remains that he has a role to fulfil and he must not be found wanting. Just as Yudhisthara must play the game of dice and lose, just as Draupadi's clothes must be ripped off by an evil Dushasana, so must certain pre-ordained events take place in Rama's life, too. He, like other characters, is a pawn in a larger game that must be played out. This is the impression one gathers from the epic.

Like any other story, the Ramayana has been interpreted – and misinterpreted – in various ways. "The *Ramayana* does not belong to any one moment in history….The appropriation of the story by a multiplicity of groups meant a multiplicity of versions through which the social aspirations and ideological concerns of each group were articulated. The story in these versions included significant variations which changed the conceptualization of character, event and meaning." (Romila Thapar in *Many Ramayanas*)

The philosophy contained in *the Ramacharita Manasa* is said to emphasize our reaching the impersonal through the personal.[1] Not all re-tellings of the story, however, subscribe to this ideology. Ashok Banker, who has penned a revisionist version of the epic, believes that "every Ramayana written before is an interpretation, not the last word…. There is a fanatical way of reading a text, and an intellectual way. And then there is a human way. I chose the human way."[2] Many of these versions question stereotypes. The popular film *Lajja* (Rajkumar Santoshi) for instance, through different female characters, questions the stereotype of Sita as the true Indian woman. But, at the same time, the film producer is aware of the hazards of putting forward an unconventional viewpoint: a character in the film who questions the conventional image of Sita, is consequently lynched by society and sent to a lunatic asylum.

In yet another version of the epic, Lord Ram is depicted as an Aryan invader who colonizes the Dravidians. The controversial workbook developed by Susan Wadley, a Professor at the New York University, Syracuse, depicts Lord Ram as an invading-outsider, imperialist, oppressor, misogynist, and a racist. There are other versions of the *Ramayana* that have raised a lot of controversy and aroused the ire of devout Hindus. Differences of opinion on the stories and the characters continue unabated. Madhu Kishwar mentions a poll among women aged between 9 and 22 years in Uttar Pradesh to show that Sita is not a removed ideal but a role model whose sense of dharma is superior to Rama and who is seen as emotionally stronger.[3] The point being made is that each of these versions of the Ramayana is created with its own underlying ideology, its own philosophy. Interpretations differ from place to place and from person to person. In earlier times dissenting opinions were not encouraged but now, in more tolerant times, there is space and opportunity for other voices to be heard.

The impact of the *Ramayana* and also the *Mahabharata* in India may be gauged from the extreme popularity enjoyed by the televised versions of the epics. On the days when the serials were telecast, life would come to a standstill; the entire nation would be glued to the television watching the next episode of

their favourite epic. Not only were they popular texts, they also catered to the religious sentiments of the majority. Many in the audience would watch with folded hands or touch the ground with their foreheads as a mark of respect and veneration whenever Lord Krishna or Sri Ram Chandra ji appeared on the small screen. Such is the power exerted by these epics on the popular imagination of the people in India.

NOTES

1.   "The Philosophy of The Shree Raamacharita Maanasa" http://www.indianphilosophy.cc/p1-94.html).
2 .   www.ashok.epicindia.com.blog
3.   *Questioning Ramayanas.* Edited by Paula Richman. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001.

The Mahabharata

"What is found in the *Mahabharata* may be found elsewhere but what is not found in it cannot be found anywhere else."

--*The Mahabharata*

A line in the text declares that what is found in the *Mahabharata* may be found elsewhere but what is not found in it cannot be found anywhere else. In other words, this great Indian epic, which narrates the tale of two royal houses, is a microcosm of the world in which we live, presenting life in all its complexities and contradictions. It is also a *Dharamshastra*, a treatise on *dharma*, the laws that govern us and the principles that should govern our day-to-day living. Along with the *Ramayana*, the *Mahabharata* is the text that Indian literature harks back to not simply in its philosophical and ideological content but also in the narrative patterns employed. These patterns are comparable to the Greek *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* in the immensity of their scope and content as well as in their impact on succeeding literature. 'Mahabharata' literally means 'Great India' and this epic is a celebration of the greatness of the life on the Indian Subcontinent. Scholars and researchers know the epic by another name, *Jaya*, which means victory. Again, the title connotes a celebration.[1]

The *Mahabharata* is said to be the longest epic in the world, longer than its Greek counterparts. It is considered to be eight times longer than Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey* put together, and three times as long as the *Bible*. Divided into eighteen books concerned with the legendary eighteen-day war between the armies of the Kurus and the Pandavs. The original text is believed to be composed by Rishi Vyasa, the son of the sage Parasara. According to popular belief, Vyasa, who also compiled the Vedas, dictated the epic to Lord Ganesha who wrote it down with one of his tusks.

The *Mahabharata* has a complex narrative structure with multiple narrators. Some Indologists, particularly those with a western orientation – tend to get perplexed with its multi-layered texture and describe it as chaotic while others, familiar with the epic tradition, extol it for its sweep and magnificence. In a nutshell, it is the story of a family feud between the Kauravas and the Pandavas. Simultaneously, it expatiates on human goals and aspirations: *dharma, kama, artha, moksha*. It dwells on the duties of a human being towards himself and his society and also explains the role of karma in human existence. The text itself gives a wholistic view of Indian society, culture and tradition. Popular belief has it that Vyasa first narrated the story to his son, the Sage Suka who passed it on to the *gandharvas*, the *rakshasas*, and the *yakshas*. The same story was narrated by Narada to the *devas*. One of the chief disciples of Rishi Vyasa was the learned Vaishampayana who passed on the narrative to Sauti or Sutaputra Lomaharshana on the one hand and also to Janamejaya, the son of Parikshat (and the grandson of Abhimanyu). From Sauti (or Sutaputra Lomaharshana) the story was passed on to Rishi Shaunaka and his circle in the forest of Naimisa. Thus the history of the composition of the great epic would run something like this:
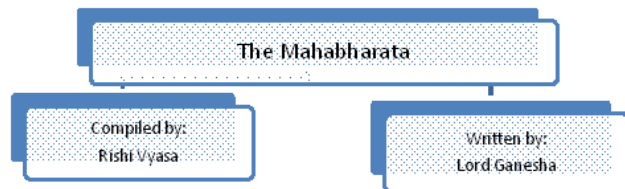
Further, the levels of narration would be charted as roughly this:
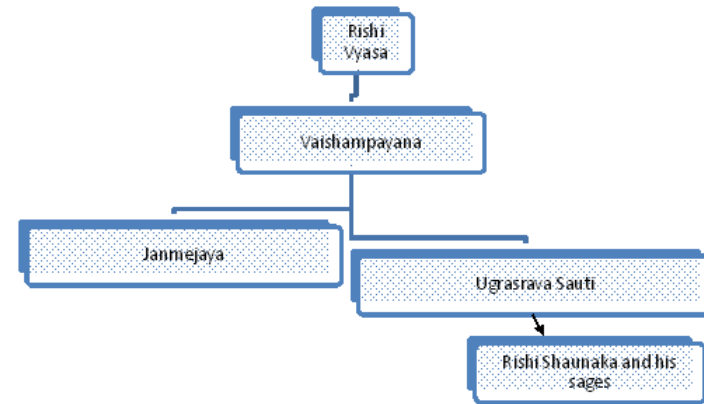
And on another level, the story is further transmitted thus:
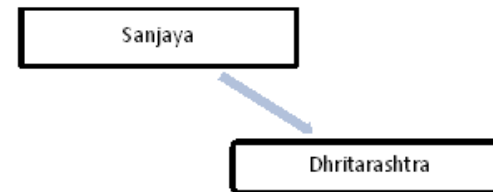
The narrators are thus Veda Vyasa, Vaishampayana, Suta and Sanjaya. The narratees are Vaishampayana, Janamejaya, Suta, Rishi Shaunaka and disciples, and Dhritarashtra. We note that some of the narratees take on the roles of narrators, too, as the story travels down to a wider audience. The main story is that of the conflict between the two kingdoms, the Kurus and the Pandavas, but at the same time there are a number of side stories, or stories within stories that are being narrated. This is an essential ingredient of the epic, a technique that lends magnificence and stature to the tale and allows it to cover a wider field. The *Bhagavada Gita,* for instance, or the Nala-Damayanti story, or that of Ganga-Shantanu, are among the numerous lesser stories that form part of the grand tale. The characters take on the roles of narrators and what we have is

multi-levelled narration. In other words, the metafictional technique in operation.

Technically speaking, almost all the narrators in the *Mahabharata* are intra-diegetic narrators, which means that they are part of the main story and narrate events in the first person. The narratees too are part of the story. The narrators are covert as well as overt in the sense that Seymour Chatman uses these two terms: while some fade into the background and are inconspicuous, others may be well in the foreground and are important players in the action. They wield an authority over the story they narrate although this authority varies from one teller of tales to another. The narrator of an epic story is traditionally authoritative and exercises control not only the story but also his listeners.

Sanjaya, who narrates and comments on the events of the war to the blind Dhritarashtra, is the closest to the events of the *Mahabharata*, in physical and chronological terms. He is part of the story, an active participant in the war, and also a witness who takes on the role of raconteur. He narrates the story to the king who can nether participate in the war nor see or observe the course of events. In this respect, Sanjaya has powers greater than the king. He has the gift of vision as well as the authority of the narrator. The two, Sanjaya and Dhritarashtra, are intradiegetic characters. On the other hand, Vaishampayana has an narratorial authority different from Sanjaya's. Although he too narrates the story to a king – Janamejaya, who is interested in the exploits of his ancestors, he (Vaishampayana) is far removed from the scene and has heard the story straight from Rishi Vyasa.

Sauti, who is also a narrator, repeats the same story but he is even farther distanced from the action than Vaishampayana. He is a professional story-teller and his audience comprises not royalty but the ascetic class.

The main narrative of the epic is unraveled in various ways, not simply through action but also through dialogue, through conversations and comments by characters who are actors/participants in the story as well as commentators and narrators. We find characters in conversation with each other all the time. The narration shifts continuously from first to third person as roles keep changing. A character assumes the role of narrator when he begins to speak and there are many such characters. The epic, it may be recalled, is presented against a huge backdrop, a vast canvas peopled with diverse forms of existence, animate and inanimate, human and surreal. It narrates the story of a whole community or nation and in this schema individual histories have significance only in the manner in which they relate to the whole. The grand tale, told from multiple perspectives, presents different voices to its audience and the meaning of these voices does not remain the same across temporal, geographical and cultural borders.

As the great Indian tale is narrated, it is intermeshed with philosophical discourses that transport the narrator as well as the narratee from the physical plane to a transcendent, spiritual realm. These discourses relate to social, cultural, political and individual issues. The *Bhagavada Gita*, for instance, comprising the discourse of Lord Krishna to Arjuna on the battlefield, is one that expounds on the concept of dharma, duty, right thinking and right action without the hope of individual gain. The treatise, despite its strong roots in the Indian ethos and in the value system of the period, bringing in ethics and politics, actually helps the narrative transcend local boundaries, reach out and connect with world literatures.

The epic story is brought alive through characters who are not flat but rounded. They are like the flesh-and-blood human beings that we may be familiar with, neither good nor bad, neither angel nor devil. Unlike the *Ramayana*, the *Mahabharata* does not deify its heroes. On the contrary, it humanizes them so that we may readily empathize with them.

At the same time, supernatural characters are brought into the story to assist with the main action, to carry the story forward, and to remind the people of the epic world, and also the audience, that there is a world beyond the human, that there are divine powers that exercise control over human action, and that ultimately we petty human beings may struggle and strive but there are matters on which we have little control. *Deux ex machina,* or divine machinery, is an important

ingredient of the epic as it elevates the story beyond the real and the mundane, taking it to a realm close to myth, legend and folklore.

Coming to the influence that this epic has had on world literatures, there are conflicting viewpoints. While some critics believe that there is negligible influence, there are others who feel that, like the *Ramayana*, it has left its mark on the literary imagination. In Indian literatures we have numerous examples that bear witness to the influence of the *Mahabharata*; it is used repeatedly as a metaphor in Indian writing and the story is retold, revisioned and reinvented from time to time. Literary devices and techniques from the *Mahabharata* have been used repeatedly. Indian writing in English, too, bears its impact. Shashi Tharoor's *The Great Indian Novel*, for instance, is a re-working of the epic in such a way as to make it relevant to the contemporary age.

While the *Mahabharata* traces the history of two warring families, the *Ramayana* is primarily the story of Prince of Ayodhya's exile in the forest, his victory over Ravana and subsequent return to his kingdom; both contains within their structures a number of lesser episodes, characters and incidents related to the main story. These smaller stories form independent links in the larger framework. *The Odyssey* (800-600 BC) follows a similar pattern as it traces the adventures of Ulysses through his journeys through ten years after the fall of Troy, before he finally returns to Ithaca. The *Shahnama* or the Book of Kings, by Firdausi, which comprises 62 stories and traces the history of Iran from the beginning to the 7th C A.D., narrates stories of the various Kings of Iran. It includes the cycle of stories describing the exploits of Rustom: the Seven Stages (or Labors) of Rostam, Rostam and Sohrab, Rostam and Akvân Dîv, and Rostam and Esfandyar. The parallels between these classics are obvious: the central character begins at a high point in life, but must labour, toil and struggle against many odds before he can finally enjoy peace and prosperity again. The journey motif, with a beginning and an ending, may be clearly traced in the story of their fluctuating fortunes. At the same time, the narrative technique also bears a similarity. Each of these texts comprises an outer framework within which there are smaller and smaller frames. So there are several stories being told simultaneously, multiple narrators and parallel perspectives being unfolded as the reader moves from one page to the next. They belong to different geographical locales yet there is a similarity in their form and content, their sujet and discourse, langue and parole.

NOTE

1. According to the *Adi-parva* of the *Mahabharata* the text was originally 8,800 verses when it was composed by Vyasa and was known as the *Jaya* (Victory), which later became 24,000 verses in the *Bharata* recited by Vaisampayana, and finally over 90,000 verses in the *Mahabharata* recited by Ugrasrava Sauti.

Arabian Nights: Revisions and Re-workings

Tell me a story, says the child.   The mother reaches out for one of the big illustrated books stacked by the bedside, selects a story, and reads. The child listens for a while, his eyes wide with excitement. Then sleep overpowers him. He tries hard to stay awake to hear all of it. But the body is tired and demands its accustomed rest. Very soon, the eyes close, the chest heaves with gentle snores, a smile plays on that cherubic face. The child is dreaming of kings and queens and genies, of hidden caves, magic lamps, and flying carpets, of ghosts and demons, of a world of the imagination far beyond the ordinary, where everything is possible. Such is the magical world of the *Arabian Nights.*

A Thousand and One Arabian Nights still stands out vividly in the memory as an important landmark of our childhood years. Those magical days filled with possibility when we were green and easy, living in the never-never valley of gold before Time, that kill-joy, took us by the hand and led us out of the age of innocence. The thousand and one stories of the *Arabian Nights* have been heard, enjoyed and accepted. Readers have been unquestioningly hooked on to all those tales which began with Shahryar, the blood-thirsty ruler craving for virgin blood, taking a new bride every day only to behead her the next morning. In the web of stories spun by Scheherazade (in some versions Shahrzad) the young and the old, the high and the low, have all been delightfully entangled. These stories, which kept the interest of the cruel ruler alive and persuaded him to spare her life at the end of 1001 days, much to the relief of the mesmerized reader, have retained their appeal over time. The collection is also a valuable source on the social history of the Middle East in medieval and early modern times. It "shuns singularity and revels in multiplicity." (Mack ix)

The original of the *Arabian Nights* derived from a lost Persian book of fairy-tales called *Hazar Afsaneh* (a thousand legends). Translated into Arabic around 850 AD. The tales of the *Arabian Nights* are said to originate from three different cultures – Indian, Persian and Arab. Whereas the serious classical works of Arabic literature are difficult to follow and cater to just a handful of intelligentsia, the stories of the *Nights* are popular because they express the popular, lay and secular imagination of the region. Narrated in a style that is simple and colloquial, they depict "a unique world of all-powerful sorcerers and ubiquitous jinns, of fabulous wealth and candid bawdry." (Dawood vii)

These stories have an appeal that cuts across readers of all ages and cultures. For this reason they have been translated into many languages and have travelled across the world. Even today they are recognized as masterpieces of the art of story-telling. And yet, inventive though they are, they owe their lineage to the ancient folktales anthologized in the *Panchatantra* and the *Kathasaritsagar*. The stories cover a variety of subjects, all of them peopled by recognizable characters placed in a realistic, medieval Islamic world.

N.J. Dawood tells us that the Prologue has been traced back to Indian folklore in the framework technique. There are unmistakable parallels but the Arab story-tellers, the *rawis*, "knew how to add local coloring to a foreign tale and how to adapt to native surroundings. In the course of centuries other stories, mainly of Baghdad and Cairo origin, gathered round this nucleus, and, to make up the number of a thousand and one nights, more local folk tales, generally of poor composition,

were unscrupulously added by the various scribes." (Dawood viii) It is generally believed that towards the end of the 18th century what we call the standard version of the *Nights* came into being. The authorship remains unknown.

Antoine Galland, a French orientalist, introduced the tales to the western world through his *Mille et Une Nuits* (in 12 volumes between 1704 and 1717). He adapted the tales to European tastes. There followed several translations into European languages almost immediately. In 1706-08 came the first English version translated from Galland's French version. The most influential was Sir Richard Burton's translation in 10 volumes between 1885-86. Burton's version, however, took the tales far from the original as he translated it "as the Arab would have written in English." The result was a "curious brand of English" that was never spoken nor written by the Englishmen. (Dawood ix)

The *1001 Arabian Nights* is in many ways comparable to the *Kathasaritsagar* in its framing device, in the manner in which it portrays a complete cultural milieu, and the way it brings together characters from different situations. In the *Nights* a hapless new bride Scheherazade keeps death at bay by churning out one story after another; with the executioner's sword dangling over her, she keeps postponing the conclusion of her stories, keeping Prince Shahryar in suspense, giving herself a fresh lease of life, one day at a time. The stories she narrates thus prove life-giving – or at least life-preserving. Similarly, in the Vetala stories of the *Kathasaritsagar* we have King Vikramaditya, on the penalty of death, patiently listening to endless stories narrated by the ghost. Narratives are thus linked with the life process, marking time as the characters move ahead towards an uncertain destiny.

Other western texts that may be mentioned in the same context are *Decameron* and *Canterbury Tales* which also draw upon the oral tradition, follow the metafictional mode, and comprise a number of independent stories strung together to form a whole. Based on the spoken rather than the written word, these texts, the *Arabian Nights*, *Decameron* and *Canterbury Tales* all are established, canonical texts that bear the influence of the *Panchtantra* not only in the *fabula* but also the *sjuzhet*, not only in the *histoire* but also the *discourse*, in the surface as well as the deep structures. If we choose, we may agree with Northrop Frye on the archetypal patterns underlying narratives. Or with Tzvetan Todorov who feels that "a narrative is always a signifier: it signifies another narrative." (Todorov 125) Or with J.M. Coetzee who mentions in his Nobel Lecture that there are just a handful of stories in the world. Alternatively, we may dismiss such comparisons on the grounds that they attempt to impose a highly suspect 'universality' on arbitrarily selected texts. However, there is no denying a structural similarity in the framework used by the texts mentioned. Each comprises a framed narrative with many stories held together by the overarching grand or master narrative – like Chinese boxes or Russian dolls that fit one inside the other. Each has a lesson to convey. The tradition travels through time. Even the texts produced in the last hundred years or so have something in common with their literary ancestors. They seem to be original, and yet, on a close scrutiny, they hark back to narratives of a long time ago.

The stories of the *Arabian Nights* are spell-binding: Sindbad the Sailor, Alladin and the magic lamp, Marrouf the Cobbler and many more. One story leads to another, looping back to the original, taking off at a tangent again. A desperate young bride's attempts at preserving her life with the help of her ingenuity, her resourcefulness and her imagination, the stories mark one thousand and one nights spent in royal terror, with the sword dangling over her menacingly before reprieve is finally granted. But, one may well ask, what happens after the 1001 nights? Did they "live happily ever after" as all married couples in fairy tales are fabled to? Or was there greater misery in store? This is a question that would strike any discerning reader. These tales of fantasy are accepted on their own terms but they do provoke a host of unanswered questions. Not surprisingly, the *Nights* has been re-worked time and again. The result is counter-narratives and revisionist texts which present the story from a totally different perspective, adding events and sequels peopled with new characters, or reinventing

the characters of the original stories. Two such contemporary writers, who have attempted to revive, adapt and re-tell these stories are Naguib Mahfouz from Egypt and Githa Hariharan from India.

NAGIUB MAHFOUZ

Naguib Mahfouz, the best known Arabic writer today, recipient of the 1988 Nobel Prize for Literature, in *Arabian Nights and Days*, first published in Arabic as *Layalialf Laylah* in 1982, turns back to the ageless stories of the *Arabian Nights* to take up the thread where Shahrzad left off. The questions that kept troubling Mahfouz's mind were many: What happened to Shahryar and Shahrzad later? What was the sequel to the tale? How did the other characters of the *Arabian Nights* fare in later life? For a mind alive with curiosity, desirous of knowing more and more, there had to be a story beyond the ending, beyond the "Tamam Shud".

In Mahfouz's novel, the Sultan's vizier, Dandan, learns that his daughter, Shahrzad, has succeeded in saving her life by enthralling the sultan with her wondrous tales. But she is unhappy for she distrusts her husband who might be still capable of bloody doings. All is not well outside the palace either, where the medieval Islamic city is fraught with intrigue and corruption. Human existence is precarious as there are mischievous evil spirits roaming at large, playing havoc with the destiny of human beings.

This is the backdrop against which are narrated seventeen interlinked tales of love and passion, jealousy and revenge, social injustice and retribution, human affairs and supernatural intervention. Mahfouz borrows this backdrop from the old, familiar folk tales but in his re-telling, infuses the stories not simply with a contemporaneity but with an all-pervasive timelessness, taking up issues that relate to human life in general and cross all barriers of time and space. There is magic, there are inexplicable happenings, supernatural events beyond the ken of man. But ultimately the message that the writer conveys is that there is no magic wand to heal the sorrows of the world. There has to be a reformation in human character, a change of heart like the one Shahryar must undergo at the end of this narrative – or else there will be no mercy.

The concluding page of the novel spells out its didactic intent, a message worth repeating for its wide applicability:

> "It is an indication of truth's jealousy that it has not made for anyone a path to it, and that it has not deprived anyone of the hope of attaining it, and it has left people running in the deserts of perplexity and drowning in the seas of doubt; and he who thinks he has attained it, it dissociates itself from, and he who thinks that he has dissociated himself from it has lost his way. Thus there is no attaining it and no avoiding it –it is inescapable."

Some basic truths simply have to be confronted, whether one is willing or not.

Mahfouz's Arabian stories are independent yet connected. At the centre of the city is the Café of the Emirs, the hub of all action. This is where all the characters, the high and the low, meet to exchange news and events. It is here that the dreams of Sindbad take concrete shape. The Café thus becomes a technique that connects all the disparate segments of the book and imparts a unified structure to them. The scenario bears a close resemblance to Boccaccio's *Decameron* where all the story-tellers meet at a common location outside the city of Florence which is plague-infested; or Tabbard's Inn in *Canterbury Tales* from where the pilgrims will set out on their pilgrimage, each character embodying an individual story. Calvino's *The Castle of Crossed Destinies* may also be placed in the same category.

Arabian Nights and Days employs the classical Arabic narrative form with its imaginative sequences. This is a device far removed from Mahfouz's earlier works which began in the form of historical romances with *Whispers of Madness* in 1938, moved on to the realistic mode of *The Cairo Trilogy* (1956-57), the allegorical style of the controversial *The Children of Gebelawi,* and the social and political realism of *God's World* and *The Thief and the Dogs.*

It is not difficult to trace the connection between the literary output of a period and the socio-political climate in which it is produced. "By telling stories and by hearing stories told we

come to know our world, each other, and – ultimately – our own selves." (Mack ix) Although Mahfouz's text builds upon an ancient work, it has relevance to the times in which it was created. Mahfouz's writings have evolved over a period of time and are in synchronicity with the history of Egypt. When the country was still a British protectorate, the writer's ambition was to write historical romances in the manner of Sir Walter Scott. With time, however, his concerns changed and he focused more and more on the realistic portrayal of the life and times of his people. Between the two world wars – *l'entre deux guerres* – he was caught up in the ongoing struggle for national independence. After 1952, the year in which Gamel Abdel-Nasser overthrew the monarchy and proclaimed the formation of a republic, Mahfouz's efforts concentrated on finding new ways to express Arabic culture. *Arabian Nights and Days* is one such attempt. These re-worked stories of *1001 Nights* revive a fabular world lost in time even as they explain the familiar contemporary situation. Mahfouz, who has often been called the Balzac of Egypt, may be firmly rooted in his time and place but he is well-acquainted with world literature, with the works of European writers like Flaubert, Tolstoy Balzac and others. His work is, no doubt, original but it is shot through with their influence.

GITHA HARIHARAN

Githa Hariharan, who ranks among the most widely acclaimed of Indian writers today, has also written what may be called a sequel to the *Arabian Nights*. Her 1999 novel, *When Dreams Travel*, takes up the story where the *Nights* left off and gives it another twist that is recognizably Indian.

"Is there no way out of this old story?" asks the slave girl Dilshad, a character in Hariharan's book. Building upon the *Arabian Nights*, Hariharan continues the story, adding other dimensions to it. The framework is the same as the *Nights*. *When Dreams Travel* begins with the first night, traverses all the thousand and one nights, and moves into a sequel. Then it circles back again to the beginning. In this revisionist text, the

focus is not on Shahrzad [spelt thus] but on her sister, Dunyazad, or Dinarzad, who does not play an important role in the original story. There are two narrators in *When Dreams Travel*: Dunyazad and Dilshad. Dunyazad here is the middle-aged widow of Shahryar's brother, Shahzaman. Shahryar himself is a widower, his story-teller wife having passed away recently. Their son, Prince Umar, who ascends to the throne, hands over to Dilshad the transcripts of Shehrzad's stories written in gold. There is thus a collection of stories within the frame story and from this point on follow seven stories narrated by Dunyazad and Dilshad. These stories last for seven nights and days. They fall into two categories: those told by Dilshad focus on the interior of the palace and are close to the original tales of the *Arabian Nights*, while the stories Dunyazad narrates focus on the outside, bringing in Sanskrit folk tales from India, making references to the Buddha, and thus extending the Arabian context to an Indian cultural scenario.

Distanced in time, Dunyazad is in a position to visualize the scene in its entirety; from an outer frame she can see the elaborate game that her sister, Shahrzad had to play in order to stay alive, the spell she had to create, the stories she had to weave with dexterity to keep her prospective killer's attention diverted. From Dunyazad's vantage point her sister is no longer simply the teller of stories: she becomes an actor in the scene, scheming for survival. Hariharan also adds a feminist angle to the stories: whereas in the *Arabian Nights* it is the cruel king (with his brother) at whose behest the stories are told, in *Dreams* it is women narrators who calls the shots: Dilshad, Dunyazad and, tangentially, Satyasama, a freak in the king's harem.

Marzolph and van Leeuwen (2: 647) see the *Nights* as "a mirror for princes", the aim of which is to educate the ruler (very much like the *Panchatantra*) by "employing a mixture of admonition and entertainment". However, Edward Said disagrees, believing that the aim is simply to entertain and not transform the ruler:

> stories like those in *The Arabian Nights* are ornamental, variations on the world, not completions of it; neither are they lessons, structures, extensions, or totalities designed to illustrate either the

author's prowess in representation, the education of a character, or ways in which the world can be viewed and changed. (Said 81)

Looking at the technique used by Mahfouz and Hariharan, and the manner in which the older narrative is developed from a different standpoint, at first one may take the method as innovative. However, this is not a novelty. The technique is as old as the *Ramayana*. We know that in one of the early versions of the epic the hero, Sri Ramchandra, hears the stories of his own exploits narrated by his twin sons, Lav and Kush, in the forest. He thus "sees himself become a story" as Ramanujan says. (Ramanujan 22) this artificiality of narratives is called "narcissistic" by Linda Hutcheon – that which talks about the creative process.[1]

We find the same technique at work in *Don Quixote,* where the hero of Book I hears stories of himself and sets forth to rectify all that is wrong with them. Simultaneously, Cervantes, the writer who occupies the outermost frame, has to take on such a role in real life when he discovers that there are fake sequels of Don Duixote's exploits doing the rounds, he makes the hero of his narrative jump into the midst of the action and take on the role of the director / story-teller in Book II.

In the *Nights* there is no religious fanaticism. The cycle of stories was "the product of a medieval culture that was confident, tolerant and pluralist. The Christian broker and the Jewish physician are as much at home in the Hunchback cycle of stories as the Muslim tailor and barber." (Irvin ix) "The young woman and her Five Lovers" and "The Tale of Kafur the Black Eunuch" are "short farcical skits, the first satirizing bureaucratic corruption, the second the extravagances of mourning in Islamic countries." (Dawood xii)

The tales are relevant to the times in which they were composed (or rather translated / re-written). They are interlaced into an organic whole, peopled with characters who are credible and realistic. We find a lot of social criticism in the stories. "Sindbad the Sailor" is set in a time when Baghdad and Basrah had reached the zenith of their commercial prosperity (says Dawood). "Khalifah the Fisherman" is based on Baghdad folk tales and has Haroun Al-Rashid as the hero. There are also

similarities with Homer's *Odyssey*.[2] But, Dawood points out, the authors of *Nights* did not know of Homer; they did, however, know of the Odysseus legend which had reached them in the form of "a romantic tale of sea adventures." (Dawood xi) Originally the cycle seemed to be independent but, as mentioned earlier, it has much in common with the *Panchatantra* and the *Kathasaritsagar*. It is believed that many of these stories are influenced by the older texts.

There is, thus, in the tales we tell, in the stories we hear and repeat ad infinitum, a repetition of underlying ideologies and mythologies. Archetypes, if you will, which keep recurring from time to time, which have their origins in the primal instincts of man, and which cannot be confined to any fixed time or locale. Narratives and counter-narratives, visions and re-visions, each narrative challenges our complacencies and compels us to look at the world afresh. They also underscore the idea that despite the diversity, despite the variations in texts across the world, there are commonalities that permeate world literature, literary nuances that weave in and out through diverse cultural traditions, emphasizing the fact that they are all a part of a global heritage and ultimately coexist in one world. Literature, thus, is that which "revels in difference and the adventure of a shared humanity."[3]

NOTES

1   It is roughly equal to Robert Scholes's idea of "fabulation", William Gass's "metafiction" or Raymond Federman's "surfiction" – all of which focus on the postmodern tendency towards self-referentiality.

2.   Both have the sea as the background; the tale of the third voyage has much in common with Book IX; the Black Giant is Polyphemus the Cyclops seen through Arab eyes.

3.   rev. of Cosmopolitanism, Publishers Weekly, http://www.powells.com/biblio/17-9780393061550-0

Oedipus Red: The Courage to Know

"In time you will know this well: For time, and time alone, will show the just man, though scoundrels are discovered in a day."

Sophocles, *Oedipus Rex*

Among the ancient classics that continue to hold the attention of readers across time and space a text that certainly deserves mention is *Oedipus Rex* by Sophocles. Although the story is distanced from us spatially as well as temporally, it maintains its authoritative position and continues to demand the attention of serious readers of literature. Before going further into a discussion of the text, it would be worthwhile to look at the features generally associated with a classic and then see how they figure in a text like *Oedipus Rex*.

When we speak of a classic we generally refer to a text that has an appeal extending beyond its immediate existence. A classic is that which is based on tradition, has enduring qualities as well as features that help it continue into the future ages. Thus it stands at a juncture where the past, present and future meet, like the three roads that meet in the Oedipus story. It is a text which has certain qualities that preserve it for posterity. It is read over and over again, each reading yielding a new meaning, a new significance and relevance to a fresh generation of readers. It is always the same and yet different. It traverses through the ages with all its gravity and splendor. Although a classic has contemporary significance, it is also perceived as an important text for times to come.

Other definitions of a classic may be cited. It is a widely read text, it is a book that has an indelible impact, it is revolutionary, one that is read and enjoyed by all age groups, or one that is essential reading for any scholar worth his/ her salt. Italo Calvino, when answering a very valid question – 'Why read the classics?' – is of the opinion that the test of a classic is its durability, its re-readability, innovativeness and stylistic daring. According to him, every time one reads a classic, one reads a new book; one discovers new elements of surprise. We read the classics partly to go back to a world lost in time, to rediscover it and to re-define our relationship with it. Doing so we, living in contemporary times, we have a better understanding of the past and of our relationship to times gone by.

Cutting across time and space, a classic is not confined within time-space borders. However, the text conveys a different message to readers in different places and times. Again, Bakhtin would have a logical explanation for this reception through the concept of heteroglossia and polyglossia: many voices, different tongues. A text has many voices, it speaks many languages but not all the voices are heard by everyone or at all times. Depending on the time, the place and the orientation of the reader, the voices heard vary. Some voices remain silent because the times in which the text is being read may not be conducive to certain ideas, while other voices assume dominance. If we wish, we may here resort to Jakobson's concept of the dominant and the residual. This is why every time we read a classic we may hear new voices and the text may convey a totally different meaning.

It is also relevant here to refer to the archetypes in literature which helps us understand why certain stories continue to appeal to us through the ages. According to Northrop Frye, there are certain primal myths with which humanity has always been concerned – e.g., birth, death, love, family, struggle, quest, loss, grief, good versus evil, the wheel of fortune, and so on. These are patterns shared by all cultures and they retain their

appeal across all time zones and spatial distances. Such story-patterns help the text transcend time and space. Certain motifs recur in literature because the human imagination delights in them and relishes stories based on familiar patterns that may be identified easily. For instance, the quest motif which is found in much enduring literature: whether it is the story of the voyages of Ulysses, or of Lancelot in search of the Holy Grail, or Sri Ram Chandra ji in search of Sita – the pattern holds our attention. Similarly, the wheel-of-fortune motif, from rags to riches or vice versa, is one that a reader can well empathize with. Or even the idea of conflict – between good and bad, the virtuous and the vicious, the oppressed and the oppressor – which speaks of human endeavour in the face of difficulties. Aristotle could well evoke emotions like pity and fear to explain the reasons why we are drawn to such subjects. A related pattern is that of the Fall, yet another popular motif: the fall from innocence to experience, or from prosperity to adversity. Frye tells us that the search for archetypes is like literary anthropology in that it tells us that literature is informed by pre-literary categories like ritual, myth and folk tale. Great classics go back to these archetypes repeatedly, much to the delight of the reader.

The journey from birth to death may be charted in literary texts with variations. *Oedipus Rex*, for instance, has been seen as the enactment of a ritual, the slaying of the old king, the crowning of the new. This, according to Gilbert Murray and others who follow James Frazer, is like the cyclical change of seasons, or the replacement of an older generation by the new, a pattern that is found repeatedly in literature. With this background, it may be rewarding to look at the features that have an enduring appeal in Sophocles's *Oedipus Rex*. The play has been around since the 5th century BC and yet it holds our attention. Each age has its own attitude to it, its own relationship and response. Critics have seen it from various perspectives, adulatory and other wise, and it continues to be a yardstick against which literary landmarks are still measured.

Oedipus Rex has its origins in popular folk lore. Sophocles builds his narrative out of a well-known story firmly rooted in the consciousness of his people, handed down the generations by word of mouth. The Oedipus story, with some variations, is found in Homer's *Iliad*, in the poems of *Hesiod*, in a lost epic called *Oedipodeia*, in epics like the *Thebaid* and *Cyprian Lay*. The story, familiar to his times, gave him the grist for his Oedipus trilogy dealing with the Theban household: *Oedipus Rex*, *Antigone* and *Oedipus at Colonus*. According to the ancient legend of Thebes, one of her kings had unknowingly killed his father and married his mother. Over a passage of time, this story was handed down from generation to generation and finally it went into the making of the trilogy by Sophocles.

Oedipus the king is not an ordinary man; he cannot be ordinary if he is to be a tragic hero. He aims high, seeks knowledge and will leave no stone unturned in his effort. He stands out high above the masses, yet he is recognizably human. He is well-rooted in the times of his creator in that he has the virtues as well as the vices of the Athenians. He loves his city and is – like his compatriots – proud, hasty, impulsive and volatile in temperament. He is a multi-dimensional character who fascinates and repels simultaneously, evokes our sympathy, pity and fear. He is stubborn: he knows that disaster stares him in the face yet he is determined to get at the truth. Aristotle, in Chapter 13 of his *Poetics*, explains the idea of *hamartia* with reference to Oedipus and Thyestes (who, in ignorance, ate the flesh of his own children). In Oedipus we see pride and arrogance that lead to tragedy. But, it is to be noted that he is not willfully wicked or vicious; his crime is committed in ignorance, just as in the case of Thyestes. Ultimately what we have in Oedipus is a character pitted against his destiny and against the writ of fate which he can do little or nothing to change. The helplessness of his situation, the inexorable writ of fate, his fortitude and courage are qualities that stand out and carry the play onward, from one circle of time to another, from one socio-cultural backdrop to the next.

All events take place in the course of a single day, rather two days – the first is the day on which the discovery of Oedipus' crime is made and when the tragedy of his blindness is enacted. The other is a day in the past which is recollected through the

accounts and experiences of various characters. The two narratives merge to form a single story. This is an example of what Gerard Genette calls the "dual temporality in all narratives" – i.e., the time that is narrated and the time the story takes place, the event and the narration of the event. The *donnees'* of the story (the givens / constants) are fixed. Oedipus has to kill his father and marry his mother; he has to go blind by the end of the play. There is a terrible *moira* – destiny – awaiting him and he is led towards this destiny by a series of *kairoi,* [1] or critical moments, beginning with the temple of Apollo, moving towards the point where he kills his father, then to the Sphinx, and finally to Thebes where he determines to discover for himself who has murdered King Laius. The *moira* of the protagonist is written and cannot be changed; he is trapped in an *aporia* from which he cannot exit. There is no doubt that Oedipus is a caring king: "Many, my children, are the tears I've wept. / And many a maze of weary thought." So he tells his suffering people. Yet he has his share of human failings that lead to disaster.

Oedipus Rex confirms to the essential rules for classical tragedy laid down by Aristotle. It presents action that is serious, complete, and of a high magnitude; it uses an elevated language and style; and it arouses pity and fear, leading to a catharsis of such emotions. There is song, spectacle and drama of high intensity. Following the principle of mimesis, it is an imitation of life and action which is depicted through a series of related incidents in the plot. *Praxis* (action) is actually the "action of Knowledge" (says Crossett), the dawning of truth. There is *peripeteia* – reversal, or shift from happiness to unhappiness – and recognition as the play unravels. From ignorance Oedipus has to arrive at knowledge and this coming of knowledge brings tragedy in its train which in turn inspires pity and fear in the audience. The essential parts of a classical tragedy include the Prologue, the Episode(s), Exode and Choric Song (parode and stasimon). These are to be found in *Oedipus Rex.*

Further, according to Aristotle, a perfect tragedy has a complex, not simple, plan; it traces the main character's change of fortune from good to bad, prosperity to adversity. The person in question, i.e., the tragic hero, is not a virtuous man – for that would be too shocking to accept – nor a bad man, but a character we can identify with, someone like ourselves. His misfortune must be the result of some error of judgement or some human frailty, or *hamartia.* He is not an ordinary person but one who occupies a special place in the world of men. As Shakespeare, in another context, says:

> *"*When beggars die there are no comets seen*;*
> The heavens themselves blaze forth the death of princes."
> Julius Caesar (II, ii, 30-31).

Tragedy, in order to be moving, has to be that suffered by someone in a high state. In these respects, *Oedipus Rex* certainly falls into the category of the classical tragedy. However, it is not a period piece fixed in the Greek world. Sophocles' text has far-reaching ramifications and in the literary history of the world there are numerous examples of its impact on later writers and texts. The central ideas around which the play revolves are those that have fascinated writers earlier and hold good even today: the irresistible power of fate and destiny; the sanctity of primary natural ties and the horror of violating these norms; the ignorance of man that may lead to his ruin; and his helplessness in the face of forces too strong for him.

The play, its characters, and action, are all steeped in the national spirit of Greece in general and Thebes in particular. However, these elements cut across national borders, too. James Schroeter points out that, like the chief figures of other national literatures, myths and religions, Oedipus is brought up by foster parents. One need only look at the stories of King Arthur, or Lord Krishna, or Mohammed or Christ to note the validity of this statement. Oedipus has two sets of parents representing two nationalities. He is associated with royalty as well as the masses (the royal couple that gave birth to him, the one that adopted him, and the shepherd who rescued him); his life is governed by prophetic / divine prophecy as well as human failings, its graph extending from abandonment on Mt. Cithareon to a state of kingliness in the palace of Thebes, thence to abject misery as a blind man exiled from the city state. In other words, neither is Oedipus nor is his chequered life confined to any specific category. As such, his story cannot

remain esoteric. The tragedy defies compartmentalization as it cuts across a wide spectrum.

Based on a familiar pattern, the search for knowledge and the discovery of truth, we know that *Oedipus Rex* was held in high regard by Aristotle who based his theory of tragedy on this work. It is important to note that the text is trans-generic as it blends the classic with the popular. Major themes found in the play reverberate through world literature. Take, Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, for instance. What is it if not a re-working of the story of a man seeking the identity of his father's murderer? In *Hamlet* the father has been murdered and his son must find and punish the murderer. This is what happens in *Oedipus Rex*, too, and it is not hard to see the influence of the older play on Shakespeare. In Hamlet, the hero, we have on the one hand the agony and pain of one who has lost a parent, on the other the frustration and despair of a sensitive soul caught in an existential dilemma, to be or not to be, to kill or not to kill. Oedipus's emotions are of a different kind and they evolve in the course of the play. Beginning with kingly arrogance and confidence, he has to undergo a whole gamut of emotions, from disbelief to horror, from despair to self-recrimination before he finally inflicts punishment on himself and exits the scene.

In *Oedipus Rex* we have the beginnings of the murder/crime mysteries of popular literature. If we look at the text carefully, the main ingredients of a whodunit, as enumerated by W.H. Auden a century ago, are to be found in *Oedipus Rex*. A crime has been committed – King Laius has been murdered – and Oedipus, in the role of the detective, must find out who has done it. There are hindrances, false suspects, red herrings and misleading trails; and ultimately it is revealed that the criminal is the least suspected person, the sleuth himself. As the tale unravels, there are actually two stories that are being told simultaneously – that of the murder committed and of the discovery of the murderer's identity. This, as Tzvetan Todorov tells us, is the pattern followed by detective fiction. While one thread of the story moves forward in time, the other moves backward. Both strands begin in time present. These are the main characteristics of detective fiction which have also been listed by Robin Winks in his writings on detective fiction. If we apply the formula to *Oedipus Rex* we find that it does, indeed, fall within the genre. *Oedipus Rex* is therefore often regarded as a fore-runner of detective fiction and its influence may be traced on the whodunit that emerged later. In particular, if we look at the features it shares with Shakespeare's *Hamlet* composed in the Renaissance and contemporary detective fiction of the twentieth-century, we note that there is a common thread running through them. So, while the play is an acclaimed classical tragedy, it also has ingredients of the popular. The two blend harmoniously making it a text that appeals not just to the intellectual academic but also to the popular reader.

Among the familiar patterns of story-telling we also have narratives that are woven around the theme of mistaken identity. In literary tradition a mistaken identity invariably leads to comic situations but here, in *Oedipus Rex*, it is linked with tragedy. It is not just the identity of Oedipus that is questioned but of all the major characters in relation to Oedipus, be they in Corinth or in Thebes. Similarly, there is a lost-and-found pattern that may be discerned in the play. Oedipus is the lost child abandoned in the woods and then found later. Again, in most stories on this theme the reunion leads to a happy turn of events, a celebration and comedy. However, when Oedipus is found it does not lead to joy or celebration. On the contrary it heralds the beginning of the end, a tragic sequence of events escalating rapidly, leading to his doom.

> "Once ranked the foremost Theban in all Thebes,
> By my own sentence am cut off, condemned
> By my won proclamation 'gainst the wretch,
> The miscreant by heaven itself declared
> Unclean –"[2]

The story of Oedipus deals not only with the relation between Oedipus and his parents but also between man and God, between destiny and character. Is it a willing choice (*proairesis*) that is made by Oedipus that leads to his fall? It is hard to tell. Like the plays of Shakespeare, the tragic tale has elements that appeal to all times and all people. Michael J. O'Brien is of the

opinion that *Oedipus Rex* is a play of inexhaustible interest to experts on religion, on anthropology, psychology, etc. Sigmund Freud, in *The Interpretation of Dreams*, says that the curse of Oedipus is actually applicable to all men for all have a latent desire to destroy their father and strive towards a union with the mother. Freud calls it a primeval wish, a psychic disposition that exists in all men. We may or may not agree with Freud but the fact remains that his theories have carried weight and are accepted in psychoanalysis. In the present context it may be noted that the story of Oedipus is kept alive even today thanks to repeated references to it in the writings of Freud and his disciples.

Finally, the reason why we continue to be fascinated by Oedipus and horrified by his fate is his very human character, his flawed traits and imperfections that lead to his downfall. It is this undoubtedly *human* element in the story that is carried across through time and space and surfaces in unexpected ways in literatures across the globe, reminding us of the sameness of human experience across vast distances of time and space. *Oedipus Rex* is thus for all times and all peoples. It was understood and appreciated when Sophocles wrote it twenty-five centuries ago and it is valid even today.

NOTES

1. These Greek literary terms have been used deliberately to underscore the rootedness of the play. Yet, despite the fact that Sophocles's play is so firmly entrenched in time and place, it travels across the world, is translated and adapted in different cultures.

2. http://www.ancient-mythology.com/greek/oedipus_rex.php

Divine Comedy:
Influences and Anticipations

[a great poet] "must be aware that the mind of Europe—the mind of his own country… is a mind which changes, and that this change is a development which abandons nothing *en route*, which does not superannuate either Shakespeare, or Homer, or the rock drawing of the Magdalenian draughtsmen."
– T.S. Eliot, "Tradition and the Individual Talent."

A subject of perennial interest to human beings relates to mortality and immortality, this world and the next, life and afterlife. This issue continues to grip the imagination because there are no definite answers to the questions that plague us on what happens after we cross the great beyond. The fate of the human soul, when the body has ceased to be, remains a mystery. Different systems of thought offer different solutions but, because there are no certainties, all these speculations remain in the realm of incertitude and the mind continues to be tortured by unanswered questions. The unknown remains a mystery.

It is, therefore, not surprising that much human endeavour in the field of philosophy focuses on life after death. Also understandable is the fact that all spiritual gurus exhort their

followers to focus on *that* world rather than *this*, to transcend the physical and the mundane, and lead an exalted life that will prepare them for the unknown journey ahead. For the same reason, we note that most of our enduring literature seems to deal with life and afterlife, with the noble, moral and the ethical path that will prepare us for the divine kingdom, the ultimate goal that all major religions of the world speak of.

One such text is Alighieri Dante's *La Divina Commedia* or *The Divine Comedy* as it is popularly known. Originally it was called simply *Le Commedia,* the epithet *Divina* being added by posterity once its fame spread and Dante's genius was recognized. Although it was written some seven hundred years ago, it is still regarded as one of the greatest masterpieces of the literary world and continues to hold the attention of serious lovers of literature. It has its roots in Italy but it has been translated into various languages and casts its spell over readers the world over. There are many threads running through the text but the ultimate subject of Dante is sin and expiation; he traces the journey of the soul out of the temporal world, through hell and purgatory into Paradise, but he is firmly located in the Italy of his times. Florence forms the backdrop and current economic, social and political developments of the times find their way into his magnum opus.

In order to fully understand and appreciate the work of Dante it is essential to be familiar with certain facts of his personal life and also some political events that went into his poetry. A name inextricably linked with his work is that of Beatrice, a woman whom he loved dearly and who died rather young. The actual identity of Beatrice is hard to establish but she is generally believed to be Beatrice Portinari, the wife of a wealthy banker. Dante's relationship with her, as it emerges in his work, is more of a spiritual one. He does not refer to her personal circumstances but his *Vita Nuova* is an expression of his grief and disorientation following her death. In his vision she becomes a heavenly being, a divine light guiding him through the journey of his life. References to Beatrice, surrounded by the angels of heaven are repeated in *Divine Comedy*. She is an ethereal creature, an objective correlative of sorts, a touchstone against which Dante evaluates all ideas, thoughts and people, a yardstick for judgement.

At the *fin de siècle* of the thirteenth century the city-state of Florence to which Dante belonged, Firenze as it is called, was by no means a peaceful place to live in. His was an age when religion was a 'given' and people had faith. Their lives were moulded by their religious beliefs and day-to-day living was shaped by their religious affiliations which were invariably interlinked with the political. The general scenario presented a hotbed of politics at the micro as well as the macro level, local and also the national plane, with intrigues and counter-intrigues. The tussle for power between the king and the clergy, as the history of Europe tells us, had continued throughout the middle ages and in Dante's time it was no different. The church was a cauldron of vice and corruption while the supporters of the king were divided in their loyalty. The conflict between the pope and the emperor percolated to the masses and split the entire community, affecting social and personal relationships. There was bitter enmity between the Pope's supporters (the Guelfs) and the emperor's supporters (the Ghibellines). Florence was caught up in this conflict. With time the Guelfs split into Black Guelfs and White, i.e., the radicals and the moderates. Florence's fortunes kept changing as power kept shifting between the Guelfs and the Ghibellines. Dante belonged to the White Guelfs while the Pope was said to favour the Black Guelfs.

The city state of Florence occupied a unique position in the times, on the trade route between the Mediterranean and Europe. Because of its location, Florence played a strategic role in contemporary events. Its close proximity to Rome made it a buffer state between Europe and the Vatican in the conflict between monarchy and papacy. Dante was well-immersed in politics; as a moderate, he tried to act as a mediator and bring about a reconciliation between the two warring parties, the King and the Pope. In the year 1301, he accompanied a delegation to Rome for negotiations with the Pope but could never return to Florence, a city that he loved, for in his absence his enemies staged a coup, drove the White Guelfs out of the

city, accused and tried Dante in absentia on fabricated charges of forgery, embezzlement and conspiracy against the Pope, and passed strictures against him that he would be burnt at the stake if he ever returned to Florence. As a result, exiled from his beloved city, Dante spent the remaining two decades of his life on the run, wandering about, hiding from public eye, at the mercy of friends who gave him occasional shelter and moral support. His experience is reflected indirectly in the lament of Cacciaguida's in *Paradiso* (XVII) that "bitter is the taste of another man's bread and . . . heavy the way up and down another man's stair."

The composition of *Divine Comedy* was the outcome of the personal circumstances and beliefs of the author and also of the history of Florence. Records tell us that Dante did not give up attempts to return to Firenze; he kept trying to get back but all his efforts were in vain. All the supplications he sent to the authorities failed and he continued to live in exile. In such conditions, without a permanent abode, without any physical comforts, with no library or other resources at his disposal, he composed the greatest of his works, the *Divine Comedy* that comprises three sections: *Inferno*, *Purgatorio* and *Paradiso*. As Dante said of his own work: "[the *Comedy*] is not simple, but rather it is polysemous, that is, endowed with many meanings." It may be viewed from different perspectives: it is, on the one hand, a by-product of the middle ages; on the other, it is the direct outcome of the local politics of Italy. Another way of looking at it is as a sacred text that serves as the guiding light for lost souls seeking salvation. It is also a personal record of the writer's agony on being exiled from the city he was devoted to. The poetry is thus a mix of the personal, the public and the political, individual belief, local ideology and the larger European thought / philosophy.

The long, narrative poem, epical in structure and theme, divided into one hundred cantos, follows the familiar quest motif in literature. It begins with the poet lost in the deep woods:

"Midway upon the journey of our life
 I found myself within a forest dark,

For the straightforward pathway had been lost.
Ah me! how hard a thing it is to say
What was this forest savage, rough, and stern,
Which in the very thought renews the fear." (*Inferno*, Canto I)

The deep woods signify the Dark Wood of Error, the world of crass materialism; Dante, realizing the need for God, wishes to ascend towards a distant hilltop lit up by sunlight. However, his path is obstructed by a leopard, a she-wolf and a lion (representing the ills of the world, malice, violence and incontinence) and he almost gives way to despair. Just then the "shade of a man" appears and offers to guide him towards the light. This shade is none other than the poet Virgil whom Dante admires, so he willingly accepts him as a guide. The two begin their journey towards light (symbolic of the light of God) but, as Virgil explains, the way up is actually the way down: only when we can recognize evil can we transcend it. So they first have to go through Hell and Purgatory before they can finally enter Paradise.

Virgil belongs to a pre-Christian era, so he cannot accompany Dante beyond Inferno and Purgatorio; thereafter Dante receives directions from Beatrice, his guiding spirit in Paradise. The three sections of the *Divine Comedy* are thus named: *Inferno*, *Purgatorio* and *Paradiso*, each comprising thirty-three cantos, prefaced by the introductory canto which points a cue to the descent into the underworld with the poet getting lost in the woods, beginning his journey with Virgil.

Dante's concept of Hell is based on popular theories prevalent in the middle ages. The topography of *Inferno* borrows freely from theology, astronomy and geography of the times. In the Middle Ages the centre of the universe was the Earth and not the Sun. Seven heavenly spheres were said to revolve around the Earth: the Moon, Mercury, Venus, Sun, Mars, Jupiter, Saturn. Then came the Fixed Stars and the Primum Mobile. This was the astronomical system according to Ptolemy. These planets, in ten concentric circles, were believed to make a complete revolution once in twenty-four hours. The only immobile sphere, the largest, was the Empyrean which embraced all the others and existed in the mind of God.

Medieval theology in the *Comedy* is combined with Christian cosmology. It was believed that when the angel of light, Lucifer, was thrown out of Heaven for revolting against God, he fell headlong towards the Earth which recoiled from him, creating an empty cone, deep and hollow, with concentric circles, its vertex at the centre of the Earth. In this funnel-shaped cone, Lucifer, or Satan, is believed to be permanently imprisoned. The hollow cone itself formed the various circles of Hell (in Dante's cosmology, nine concentric circles) housing the sinners of the world in deep chasms, ravines, icy lakes, rivers of blood and arid burning plains, all the sinners being placed in varying situations in accordance with the gravity of their sins, the minor sins being punished in the upper circles and the major ones in the lower depths. Beyond the ninth circle, via a tunnel-like opening passing through the centre of the Earth, the displaced land mass emerged as the Mount of Purgatory on the other side of the Earth, a mirror image of Hell with its base near Jerusalem. Purgatory is visualized as a penance ground where souls may be purified and prepared for ascent into Paradise.

Dante's system with his classification of sins, though complex and apparently very original, is by no means isolated in its design and conception. The work is inspired by stalwarts on the literary scene, writers and philosophers who shaped and moulded the author's creative imagination. For the classification of sins Dante depends on Aristotle's *Nichomachean Ethics*. Just a few years before he began working on *Comedy*, Thomas Aquinas had brought out a commentary on the *Ethics*. (In Canto XI: 74-80, Dante cites *Ethics*.) Dante also invokes the Roman moral philosophy of Cicero in *De Officiis*, and the juridical principles of the Roman Law in the Corpus Juri. At the same time, Dante is innovative and categorizes the various types of sins as he thinks fit. To the classical / medieval doctrine he makes a Christian addition in his inclusion of the Limbo, the first subdivision of Upper Hell.

Religious beliefs notwithstanding, the contemporary situation and local factors influenced the composition of the *Comedy*. Towards the end of the thirteenth century the use of the vernacular had become popular, displacing classical languages like Latin and Greek. Dante, and his followers, Petrarch and Boccaccio, popularized the use of the Tuscan vernacular, thus bringing about a revolution in literary style. Their influence spread to the rest of Europe. After Dante, for several centuries that followed, Italian remained the language of literature in western Europe. Along with the reinstatement of the Italian language, Dante also helped revive the Italian culture of his times.

The few problems faced by a reader today while tackling *Divine Comedy* relate to its medieval characteristics, the elaborate cosmology created by the author, and also the form/content dichotomy of the poem. Added to these is the strong religious belief that informs the poem. According to one point of view, belief was a pre-requisite for writing a poem of this nature and Dante expected his readers to be sympathetic with his convictions. The journey through hell and purgatory is actually an allegory that charts his spiritual progress from darkness (the woods) to light (the sunlit hilltop, Paradise). But this spiritual autobiography is presented in dramatic terms, combining both, poetry and belief, so that it reaches out beyond the personal domain into the public.

The *Comedy* has been compared with its literary ancestors, for example, St. Augustine's *Confessions* written in the fourth century AD, Augustine's Book Seven speaks of being on a wooded mountain-top, looking beyond at a land of peace and calm; his way is beset by a lion and a dragon:

"For it is one thing, from the mountain's shaggy top to see the land of peace, and to find no way thither; and in vain to essay through ways unpassable, opposed and beset by fugitives and deserters, under their captain the *lion and the dragon:* and another to keep on the way that leads thither, guarded by the host of the heavenly General; where they spoil not who have deserted the heavenly army; for they avoid it, as very torment."

Dante's quest, like that of Augustine, is similar in that it seeks a path towards a cherished goal, away from worldliness to spiritual salvation.

The central metaphor of the Comedy is a familiar one in world literature. Describing the experience of being lost in the

woods, Dante is using a familiar motif – lost and found – that has been used literally as well as figuratively before and since Dante's time. A precursor text is St. Augustine's but many more follow, not necessarily with a spiritual or religious aim. When Robert Frost speaks of being lost in the lovely dark and deep woods he is not influenced by the traumas of the kind Dante had suffered and describes a totally different predicament. When Anne Sexton uses the same trope in her poem, saying

"…the woods were white and my night mind
saw such strange happenings, untold and unreal.
And opening my eyes, I am afraid of course
to look-this inward look that society scorns-
Still, I search these woods and find nothing worse
than myself, caught between the grapes and the thorns."
 (Anne Sexton, "Kind Sir: These Woods")

she is in the confessional mode close to Augustine, referring to the loss of sanity, the breakdown of all reason and logic. The state of exile that prompts Dante's muse is a physical separation from Florence but in another context it may be a mental state – of losing one's mind, for instance, or losing touch with God.

Divine Comedy derives its strength from its strong foundations in literary tradition. Dante was well versed in classical literature and admired writers like Virgil, Homer, Ovid, and others like Aristotle, Cicero and Seneca. It is not surprising that he tried to emulate their epic style. In the fourth canto of *Inferno* he clearly aligns himself with the greats of the classical world:

"That shade is Homer, the consummate poet;
 the other one is Horace, satirist;
 the third is Ovid, and the last is Lucan.

Because each of these spirits shares with me
the name called out before by the lone voice,
they welcome me - and, doing that, do well.

And so I saw that splendid school assembled...
for they invited me to join their ranks –
I was the sixth among such intellects." (*Inferno*, IV)

Homer, Horace, Ovid, and Lucan, like Virgil, are the pre-Christian poets whom he admired and from whom he derives much inspiration for his poetry. Homer's *Odyssey* (Book XII) and Virgil's *Aeneid* (Book VI), both describe a visit to the underworld. In similar fashion, Dante begins his spiritual journey with a visit to the land of the dead. He places himself in the ranks of the great classical poets not simply because his quest is the same but because he has consciously made a decision to aim high and follow the lofty epic tradition.

Grounded in literary history and tradition, Dante was active on the literary scene in Italy and had worked in collaboration with his mentor Brunetto Latini and friend Guido Cavalcanti. To the latter he dedicates his *Vita Nuova* and also commemorates him in Canto X of *Inferno.* As for the former, Dante pays a glowing tribute to his intellectual mentor in Canto VII of *Inferno.* All these examples are evidence of the company with which Dante sought to ally himself. There is little doubt that his efforts have been successful. T.S. Eliot elevates Dante to a position of eminence shared only by one other poet in the modern world, William Shakespeare: "[They] divide the modern world between them. There is no third." In fact, Dante succeeds in creating a memorable world in literary history. Although far different from Shakespeare's England of the Elizabethan age, the Inferno he creates is unforgettable as are the characters he peoples this world with.

The significance of *Divine Comedy* on subsequent literature cannot be under-estimated because it brings together the history, literature and tradition of European literature. Reading the *Comedy* is an experience in itself as it opens up windows to the entire western world. This, according to T.S. Eliot, is the responsibility of a good poet who needs to be familiar with literary tradition in its entirety, not just the immediate past but also the distant past; a writer, says Eliot, must have the "historical sense" and know not just the literature of his own home country but also the whole "mind of Europe":

… "the historical sense compels a man to write not merely with his own generation in his bones, but with a feeling that the whole of the literature of Europe from Homer and within it the whole of the literature of his own country has a simultaneous existence and composes a simultaneous order. This historical

sense, which is a sense of the timeless as well as of the temporal and of the timeless and of the temporal together, is what makes a writer traditional. And it is at the same time what makes a writer most acutely conscious of his place in time, of his own contemporaneity." (Eliot, 1919)

In yet another respect does *Divine Comedy* reach out to a large readership cutting across all religious beliefs. Dante is Everyman in search of spiritual salvation. The journey thus becomes a record of his spiritual enlightenment. The poem describes how the poet transcends all that is evil and arrives at a union with God. It is a lesson to the reader, too, that like Dante, Everyman can reach the desired goal if he chooses to do so and if he has the determination and perseverance. The progress will be slow; there will be many false starts and temptations, but with courage and fortitude one may arrive at the exalted goal, the final destination. This is the lesson the poem drives home. Just as Beatrice stands at a distant point, looking down at Dante, guiding him along the way, so does the *Divine Comedy* take on the role of a spiritual light-house, showing the way towards a higher state of being.

In the final analysis, it is an elaborate allegory that Dante constructs: finding himself in a dark wood (of ignorance, of despair, distanced from God) he escapes from it by moving towards an illuminated mountain-top (the light representing God). Hindered by the three beasts, he is led forth by Virgil who first makes him descend into inferno (as the way down is the way up); only by knowing the worst can one expect the best; only by understanding the true nature of sin can one transcend it. Humility is a pre-requisite if one is to aspire for a higher level. These are lessons meant not only for Dante the pilgrim but for the humanity in general. The purpose of the *Divine Comedy*, in Dante's own words, is "to remove those living in this life from their state of misery and lead them to the state of felicity."[2]

The inspiration behind the work may be primarily religious, Christian to be precise, *Divine Comedy* is also taken as a non-theological text and Dante has been hailed as a secular poet. Erich Auerbach, in his book *Dante: Poet of the Secular World*, argues that it was in the stanzas of his *Divine Comedy* that the secular world of the modern novel ûrst took imaginative form. Auerbach sees the work as an extraordinary synthesis of the sensuous and the conceptual, the particular and the universal, a work that redeûned notions of human character and fate and opened the way into modernity.[3] Virgil, who is Dante's guide through the text, represents human reason, and not religion. It is with the help of reason that Dante's journey is completed; thus, faith as well as reason help the human soul find a way out of the dark woods and the many circles of Inferno and continue its journey onward, down the ages.

NOTE

1.   (Augustine, Bk 7, Chapter 21) http://www.bartleby.com/7/1/7.html

Don Quixote: Of Picaros and Puzzles

It is not simply the content of a narrative that links it with other narratives before and after its composition. As important as its *histoire* is its *discourse*. Keeping this in view, one may now look at Cervantes' *Don Quixote*, another masterpiece of world literature that stands between the medieval and the modern, and attempts to analyze its connections with its counterparts in literatures originating from other cultural / geographical backgrounds, using the *fabula* as a critical yardstick. In particular, this section focuses on two aspects of the selected narrative: its place in the picaresque tradition and its penchant for puzzling games which involve the active participation of the reader. These two techniques look forward to the further development of literary techniques in times to come. At the same time they connect the work with the ongoing tradition of literature. With Cervantes we are dealing with Spanish literature but this, again, is not a watertight category. *Don Quixote* is the meeting ground of diverse literary forms and multiple streams of creativity. At the same time, chronologically we are poised on a watershed between the middle ages and the renaissance, a time when one way of life is gradually being replaced by another, when the old must give way to the new and when the minds of men open up to areas of knowledge previously hidden from their view.

As seen in the previous chapter, the middle ages stand out as a time when the world was governed by religious fervour and the minds of men were preoccupied with thoughts related to an afterlife rather than their present mortal existence. It is not surprising, therefore, that pilgrimage or travel for religious purpose had a significant place in the social fabric of the times. Chaucer, belonging to such a milieu, charted a memorable route between Tabard's Inn and Canterbury with his assorted band of pilgrims. Dante, in his journey through the three worlds, guided by Virgil and later by Beatrice, also finds a place in the medieval category because he is concerned with life beyond the present and because his religious beliefs influence his vision of the world. One could perhaps say that Dante marks the end of the medieval ages; his followers like Petrarch herald the beginning of the Renaissance.

By the middle of the fourteenth century the focus shifts from the other world to this world, from afterlife to this life on earth, and from god to man – man in this world, his human flaws and foibles, his capabilities and failures. Ideas of good and evil undergo a change and so does the concept of sin. Whereas the focus in Dante's *Inferno* is on how to transcend sin and evil, in the times that follow the idea of morality is tempered with humanism and man as the over-reacher becomes an important trope in art and literature; his actions are understood in terms of the context and the *raison d'etre*. The Icarus pattern in literature emerges which, with Marlowe and Shakespeare, reaches its zenith. By the time Miguel de Cervantes (1547-1616) comes on to the literary scene, the Renaissance is a well-established phenomenon in Europe and the central focus of art is man with all his failings, his glory as well as his complexity. Human action is judged in terms of here and now, and not in relation to an uncertain reward or punishment in an afterlife. Life, in all its transient glory, becomes a cause of celebration. This is what Renaissance literature celebrates through memorable characters like Dr Faustus, Hamlet, Gargantua or Don Quixote.

Located in its specific time period, *Don Quixote* stands as a bridge between the old world and the new. The modern world,

according to Carlos Fuentes, begins when Don Quixote of La Mancha, in the year 1605, leaves his village, goes out into the world and discovers that it is nothing like the worlds he has read about. The gap between the appearance and the actual, the idea and the act, between romance and reality, is the subject of *Don Quixote*, a subject that is handled deftly and with far-reaching consequences. The impact of the novel may be judged from Lionel Trilling's statement that all later fiction is a variation on the theme of *Don Quixote*.

When Part One of *Don Quixote* was published in 1605 it became an immediate success with its eccentric but unforgettable characters, Don Quixote and Sancho Panza, on a crusade against the imagined ills of the world. The novel's popularity was so remarkable that a false sequel to the book, most probably written by Cervantes' literary rival, Alonso Avellaneda, appeared soon after and Cervantes, in the year 1615, was compelled to write his own follow-up to the novel which appeared as Part Two. In an age that believed in the purity of genres, *Don Quixote* was initially not taken seriously because of its intermingling of seriousness with satiric levity. However, with time it has been recognized not only as an important work of literature but also as a precursor of the modern novel.

Don Quixote, as the main protagonist of the novel, is far from the conventional hero. He is by no means the ideal role-model in personal or social behaviour. Nor is he a man of action like the warriors who people the world of the epics. He is an unusual hero, in fact an anti-hero, but in this lineage he is not the first. If we look back at the heroes of oral traditions in literature, we find Don Quixote's literary ancestors present in the trickster tradition. Oral folk lore, handed down the generations by word of mouth, myths, legends, folktales and religion, keep certain characters alive and these stories travel along with the shifting population from one place to another. Despite the different location of stories, certain common features as are found in the trickster tales of diverse cultures – the Greeks and the Romans, for instance, and those of the Africans and the Native Americans, the Chicano and the Hispanic traditions of Europe, New Mexico and Asia. The

trickster originated from folk-tales and fables which generally had a moral lesson to convey. The aim was didactic and the target was invariably some form of social vice. In many cultures, (as in Greek, Norse, or Slavic folktales, along with Native American), the trickster and the culture hero are often combined.

The history of the folktale tells us that the trickster figure evolved with time. The narrative mode changed from the oral tale to the written text and with it changed its characters. The trickster figure morphed into the rogue or the picaro and new forms of story-telling emerged, centered around his footloose adventures. This was the beginning of the picaresque novel. The term picaresque itself is derived from the Spanish word *picaro* meaning rogue or bohemian. The picaresque character is a social prototype of the trickster pariah. In the novel such a character became popular only in the eighteenth century although examples of picaresque novels existed much earlier.

In 1554, *The Life of Lazarillo de Tormes and of His Fortunes and Adversities* appeared in Spain anonymously. It is regarded as the precursor of later novels in the genre including *Don Quixote*, by Cervantes, *Tom Jones* by Henry Fielding and *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* by Mark Twain. It set a precedent, particularly in the Hispanic world, becoming a powerful form of social criticism. The picaro is a rebel, a dissenter, anti-establishment and anti-authority. He is full of reformatory zeal, seeking an ideal space. Although he is unconventional, unorthodox and different, he is not a villain. He is the antihero, found in literary landscapes in different guises: the wanderer, the fool, and the under-dog. In another way, he is comparable to Ulysses, or in fact to any good knight errant, in that the picaro also travels on roads and highways. However, his wanderings, unlike those of Ulysses or the knight errant, serve the transcendental purpose of social criticism. In his avatar as the fool there is a method in his madness. He will appear crazed even as he mouths the wisest of maxims. As the under-dog, he represents the image of a man who wants to rise in life at any cost, someone who is endowed with uncanny insight into the motives and actions of the people around him

but lives in perpetual anxiety and fear. The picaro is an agent, a mediator who negotiates the tenuous world between social reality and its paradoxes. He exposes the contradiction between the professed ideal image of a society, its sham superficialities, and the seamy underbelly of its reality.[1]

The structure of the picaresque novels is loosely woven and episodic. The plot consists of a series of thrilling events connected by a central character, the picaro. Since the story is episodic, it includes a number of digressions, anecdotes, recapitulations and foreshadowing. There is a forward-backward movement as the protagonist moves from one scene to another, from one adventure to the next. He may not have material wealth or power but he has a lot of ingenuity and wit, with the help of which he is able to achieve a moderate degree of success. He is the victim of his social order, yet he is in a position to manipulate, by guile and ingenuity, his milieu. According to Ulrich Wicks, "The picaro is destined to be on an eternal journey of encounters that allow him to be alternatively both victim of that world and its exploiter." (242)

The trickster-picaro tradition continues through the years although it undergoes changes. When Ted Hughes, for instance, creates his central Crow figure, he is working in the trickster tradition, giving it a new dimension, connecting it with ancient folk lore. When G.V. Desani in 1948 wrote his *All About H. Hatterr*, he was again writing in the picaresque tradition. Like Quixote and Sancho Panza, H. Hatterr and his Bengali sidekick Bannerji, in the picaresque quest tradition, go in search for wisdom from Seven Sages. Hatterr, in turn, has been compared with Rudyard Kipling's Kim in his hybridity and his vagabond adventures. (Judith Plotz)

Cervantes's novel is not strictly speaking picaresque but there is no denying that it leads towards the form. A picaresque novel does not use satire like *Don Quixote*. It does not have the same kind of social zeal. Cervantes' hero is neither a trickster nor a picaro but he falls into close kinship with them in his footloose vagrancy, in his reflection of the absurd social mores of his times, and in his reformatory zeal, no matter how misguided it may be. Don Quixote, too, embarks on a series of adventures before wisdom finally dawns on him. His adventures look forward to the picaro tradition and the picaresque novel that came into vogue soon after, the best known examples being *Joseph Andrews* and *Tom Jones*.

Cervantes had a fixed agenda in writing the novel: his is a deliberate attack on the chivalric romances of his times, romances that had come to hegemonize the literary readership and which had degenerated in quality and taste. In the Prologue to *Don Quixote*, an imaginary friend tells the author to keep his aim "fixed on the destruction of that ill-founded edifice of the books of chivalry," and at the end of Part Two he clearly states: "My desire has been no other than to cause mankind to abhor the false and foolish tales of the books of chivalry which … are… doomed to fall forever." Such an opinion against the baneful effects of chivalric romances was by no means new. Looking back at Dante's *Divine Comedy*, we see that in the depths of *Inferno*, the tortured souls of Paolo and Francesca suffer because they have sinned after reading such a romance narrating the exploits of Sir Lancelot. A later novel with a similar underlying idea is Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* where the female protagonist suffers because of her obsession with romances.

The age of Cervantes was an age of prose which produced a record number of titles in chivalric romances and readers of all social strata were hooked on to the genre. *Don Quixote* is a parody of such romances, highlighting the ill-effects of the novel of chivalry on the mind of an innocent reader. The eponymous hero of his novel is obsessed with the heroic exploits of legendary heroes, stories of Orlando Furioso, Amadis de Gaul, and other dazzling figures of chivalric romances. He fails to realize that time has moved on, that the medieval world is now replaced by a modern one, that the knight errant is a figure that has receded into history, and that it is no longer possible to rescue damsels in distress or go about killing dragons. Cervantes, while narrating the story of his deluded hero, juxtaposes the romantic with the realistic, the old with the new. The actual world is pitted against the imaginary world that Quixote believes in.

Attacking the old school of writing through a gentle satire, Cervantes lays bare the immense possibilities of the novel form

and shows the way to later prose writers from Defoe, Fielding, Smollet and Sterne, to the later nineteenth-century novelists including Flaubert and Dostoyevsky. In the Approbation of Part II, using irony and wit, Cervantes mentions that he has tried to mix humour with truth, morality with light-hearted parody. He does not offer any sermons; he does not pontificate; he is non-judgemental and chooses to present his views indirectly through his genial satire. As Lord Byron put it, Cervantes "smiled Spain's chivalry away," not a mean achievement considering how deeply the taste for romance was ingrained in readership of the day.

Carlos Feuntes believes that *Don Quixote* is the first modern novel but it is not a radical break from literary tradition. It bears the marks of all that it leaves behind. It may be taken as the last of the medieval romances which, while sounding the death knell of the genre, is actually celebrating its end. A work of the Renaissance, it exemplifies the carnivalesque spirit and contains Bakhtin's festive humour, breaks barriers between actors and audience. At the same time, it remains a book deeply immersed in the society and history of Spain. The character of Don Quixote, in keeping with the Renaissance spirit, represents the common man and his desire to explore the unknown. He is different from Dante's Everyman who may learn many lessons from the tortuous routes in the depths of Inferno. Cervantes' character is a *hidalgo*, a country squire who, like any recognizable individual of his times (or ours), is a lovable, but fallible human being addicted to a certain kind of reading and must pay a price for it with the loss of his sanity. He tries to be a *caballero* (a knight) and the results are tragi-comic. There is a lesson to be learnt from his obsession and his misadventures.

Don Quixote has much in common with its literary ancestors. It is comparable in its narrative techniques to framed texts of the classical world. Homer's *Odyssey* may be of a different magnitude altogether but it is similar in the sense that it traces the many adventures of its hero through different locations, beginning at a particular point and coming a full circle by the end of the narrative. Indian narratives, too, may be mentioned in this connection, e.g., the episodes of the epical *Ramayana*

deal with the various adventures and exploits of Prince Ram Chandra. The epic is solemn and has an indisputable magnificence, but there are also popular, more down-to-earth stories across the Indian subcontinent, like those of Shaikh Chilli, which are not very different from the crazy feats of Quixote.

There are multiple frames and different levels of narration in *Don Quixote*. The outermost frame comprises the narration of Cervantes telling us the story about writing a story. Then there is Cidi Hamete's chronicle which has three commentators, the second author, the Arabic historian and the Moorish translator. As the story progresses, there are numerous stories within stories, for instance that of Lothario, of the adventures in Sierra Morena, the helmet of Mambrino, and so on. Metafiction combines with meta-theatre. Alonso Quijano dressed up as Don Quixote, masquerades through the countryside; his squire too has an assumed identity. There is a puppet show in Part Two, an illusory world projected on stage, repeatedly interrupted by characters from real life. The eccentric knight watches the performance of the puppeteer called Pedro. Even before the act can come to a formal close, Don Quixote rushes on to the stage with a raised sword, insisting on re-telling the story his own way, his action symbolising a refusal of the narratee to be a passive spectator. Finally Don Quixote hacks the puppets into pieces because he asks for verisimilitude but feels the puppets are far removed from reality. Indirectly Cervantes is attacking the illusory world of the romances.

As a character, Don Quixote is taken for a man of his times. He has been compared with Christopher Columbus who set forth to conquer the world. As a critic says, both are enchanted by the possibilities of the as-yet-undiscovered, the love to explore, give names, challenge humanity, push back the limits of the known into the unknown. For this reason it is often said that Columbus is a variant of Don Quixote and his explorations are in compliance with the chivalric formula.[2] In Cervantes' novel there are several references to the Americas. In fact records indicate that Cervantes wanted to be posted there on a government assignment.

According to Fuentes, *Don Quixote* illustrates the rupture between the old and the new, telling us that being modern is not a question of sacrificing the past in favour of the present but of maintaining and continuing into the present values created in the past, adapting them to the changed times. If *Don Quixote* sounds the death knell of the old romances, it also takes the art of narration closer to its present form. Doing so, it occupies an important position between the old and the new. The traditional novel hitherto was authoritarian but with Cervantes another mode of narration was introduced that evolved into the new novel form. In the Prologue to Part I, Cervantes says that *Don Quixote* is not his child but his step-child and that he has given up all authority over the narrative; he has handed it over to surrogate guardians like the phantom author, editors, translators, even readers. The reader becomes a participant in authoring the text. *Don Quixote*, thus becomes a writerly text.

In chapter 32 of Part I of *Don Quixote*, in the course of a discussion on the novel of chivalry, the landlord of the inn brings down a trunk left behind by a former traveller. It is an assorted mix, full of stories of different genres;[3] the conversation that veers around them further underscores the fact that they have popular appeal. Cervantes, like the landlord and the other speakers, is aware of this fact but he is also aware of the disastrous consequences of being hooked on to such literature. Therefore, in his novel he mixes the stories, retains their essence and presents them as the epitome of folly that may cost a trusting reader his sanity. The chosen style of story-telling is unconventional, he mixes up the genres, bringing together the oral narrative, the epistolary, the romance and the novel of chivalry, but never loses sight of his aim which is to bring down the edifice of the literary form that had reigned supreme and captured the imagination of the reading public of his times.

Through his penchant for puzzling games, Cervantes deliberately tries to involve and confuse the reader. For instance, the reader is left guessing who wrote Part I and then the spurious II. Again, in Part II, Don Quixote meets two characters who recognize him as the hero of the chivalric romance about him.

This self-reflexivity is a technique that transforms a fictional character into a real person concerned about the manner in which he has been represented in a text. The technique surfaces again later in the works of Laurence Sterne who admits having learnt from "the easy pen of my beloved Cervantes" and thereafter the style becomes an integral part of narrative traditions.

Rene Girard has an interesting study of the "Circular Desire in *Don Quixote*" where he says that Amadis de Gaul, who is admired by Don Quixote, becomes the "mediator of desire". Don Quixote wishes to imitate him and describes him as "the pole, the star, the sun for brave and amorous knights." Girard, presenting his ideas diagrammatically, says there is a triangular relationship between Amadis (the desired pole star), the subject (Don Quixote) and the object (the knight he wishes to become). Amadis is the mediator and remains high above, radiating towards subject and object. Don Quixote is the "victim of triangular desire" but his object keeps changing from windmills to barber's basin to Lady Dulcinea, and so on. Amadis is a fictitious character and behind him is another person, his creator. Don Quixote is strongly under the influence of his role model, the star, and wishes to become like him. The mediator, meanwhile, in Girard's opinion, remains inaccessible, enthroned in a high heaven.

It is possible to extend Girard's metaphor from Amadis de Gaul to Cervantes' novel. *Don Quixote* may be considered the pole star showing the light to writers that follow. Thus there is, diagrammatically, one triangle inside another and yet another – another way of representing multiple levels of narration, different perspectives. It becomes a source of inspiration, a guiding light, a model to be emulated. Behind the text is its creator and still beyond are the many influences that may be traced on both, creator and text. Such is the influence of the novel in the history of world literature that the term 'quixotic' has come to stay in common parlance.

NOTES

1. In a letter to Can Grande.
2. Tr. Ralph Manheim, introduction by Michael Dirda. NY: NYRB, 2006.
3. In recent times the under-dog has been used frequently as a metaphor in literature. Vikas Swarup's *Slum Dog Millionaire* (original title *Q & A*) for instance, or Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger* (both 2008).
4. Editor's note, *Don Quixote*, W.W. Norton & Co., 1999 p. x.
5 . "...he brought out an old valise secured with a little chain, on opening which the curate found in it three large books and some manuscripts written in a very good hand. The first that he opened he found to be "Don Cirongilio of Thrace," and the second "Don Felixmarte of Hircania," and the other the "History of the Great Captain Gonzalo Hernandez de Cordova, with the Life of Diego Garcia de Paredes." And then again: The landlord taking them out handed them to him to read, and he perceived they were a work of about eight sheets of manuscript, with, in large letters at the beginning, the title of "Novel of the Ill-advised Curiosity." The curate read three or four lines to himself, and said, "I must say the title of this novel does not seem to me a bad one, and I feel an inclination to read it all." To which the landlord replied, "Then your reverence will do well to read it, for I can tell you that some guests who have read it here have been much pleased with it, and have begged it of me very earnestly; but I would not give it, meaning to return it to the person who forgot the valise, books, and papers here, for maybe he will return here some time or other; and though I know I shall miss the books, faith I mean to return them; for though I am an innkeeper, still I am a Christian."

Huckleberry Finn: The Story Continues

"The end of all our exploring is to come back to the place where we started / and know the place for the first time."   **(T.S. Eliot)**

"Persons attempting to find a motive in it will be prosecuted; persons attempting to find a moral in it will be banished; persons attempting to find a plot in it will be shot," says Mark Twain of his book. At the risk of being prosecuted, banished, or shot, it would still be worthwhile to look at the ideology contained in the narrative of Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn* (1884), a text that has been recognized as an all-time classic despite the fact that it is firmly rooted in the nineteenth-century socio-political world. The idea of civilization and what it means to be "sivilized", as Huck Finn sees it, runs through the novel, winding through different geographical locales as the eponymous hero and his companion, the fugitive slave, make their way down the Mississippi. The text has been called a "world novel" by Lauriat Lane, Jr., who sees in it discernible epical qualities.

Apart from its vagabond duo, *Huckleberry Finn* has several features in common with the all-time classic novel, *Don Quixote.* When Miguel Cervantes wrote his *Don Quixote,* he had a specific aim in mind: he was concerned about the baneful

effects of the novel of adventure on impressionable minds. So he wrote a satirical novel which would sound the death-knell of all romances associated with the knight errant. Although *Don Quixote* is firmly rooted in its time and space, it bears a resemblance to texts from other parts of the world. Woven around the quest theme, it is an example of narratology at different levels. Within the narrative, too, there are wheels within wheels, characters taking on different roles or becoming impromptu narrators of stories about other characters, thus assuming an authorial omniscience, often pausing to critique themselves or the story that is being told, commenting on the plausibility or verisimilitude of the narrative. There is, thus, a heightened self-consciousness that is operative and the reader is not allowed to be a passive spectator. On the contrary, the narratee is forced to take on an active role in the process of story-telling, keenly following the shifts and loops in narration, keeping track of all the various angles from which the story is being unfolded, the different frames of the picture being presented. The main story continues to unravel despite all the twists and turns.

The metafictional technique is used by Mark Twain along with other narrative devices to take the story forward – for example Huck disguised as a girl, returns to Petersburg to find out what events have taken place since his faked death. Appearance and reality, thus, continue to jostle each other as the story progresses. There are other binaries, too. The world of the child is constantly being juxtaposed with the adult's and the stark differences between the two are laid bare. Thus, despite the lack of a formal, rigid structure, it is possible to discern a recognizable pattern in the whole.

The quest motif found in *Don Quixote* and *Huckleberry Finn* is one that recurs in world literature. As Huck and Jim move out of St. Petersburg down the Mississippi River, they encounter one adventure after another, meeting an assortment of people ranging from different social strata, the Grangerfords and the Shepherdsons, the grafters, et. al. *Huckleberry Finn* deals with burning topical issues of the Southern states of America – slavery, racism, and the idea of being 'sivilized'. Huck escaping from the clutches of his greedy father and Jim running away from slavery, both are in search of freedom in the wide world as they make their symbolic journey down the river. The life and locale is specifically American, the characters are local; regional and social differences among them are represented through their dialect and speech. At the same time the local color realism of the novel is a part of a larger frame that may be called a global literary tradition. For this reason, Ralph Ellison sees the novel as an elaborate allegory.

The narrative comprises, as the title of the novel tells us, a series of adventures – units loosely linked by the main characters. In the beginning of the novel, and at the conclusion, we meet Tom Sawyer who, while giving the adventures their outermost frame, also links the novel with its predecessor, *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*. Thus the story, though linear in its flow along the river Mississippi, completes a full circle, supporting what T.S. Eliot believed: "The end of all our exploring is to come back to the place where we started / and know the place for the first time." Perhaps this is the reason why Eliot was all praise for Mark Twain's river novel. Eliot, in an Introduction to the novel, highlighted the two main elements of the book – the Boy and the River. The River is seen through the eyes of the Boy, but the Boy is also the spirit of the River. Lionel Trilling sees a connection between Huck's river and T.S. Eliot's river in "The Dry Salvages". The notion of the river-god present in Eliot's poem is present in *Huckleberry Finn*, too. "Huck himself is the servant of the river-god," says Trilling. The river seems to be "a power which seems to have a mind and will of its own, and … appears to embody a great moral idea." (Trilling vii) Huck Finn belongs to his times and at the same time, he belongs to all times and all places.

As the story unfolds, it dawns upon the reader that those who are placed in a position of authority or responsibility are not necessarily wise or sagacious; wisdom, in its true, intuitive form, resides in the hearts and minds of the illiterate or the ignorant, e.g., Tom, Huck and Jim. They are the ones who exhibit commonsense and compassion, the bedrock on which the narrative rests. The climax of the novel occurs when Jim is finally set free.

The popularity of the novel rests on the American taste for adventure and travel. In the nineteenth-century the American Adam was still exploring the continent and encountering new experiences. The frontier was still being pushed back and horizons of knowledge were continuously expanding. *Huckleberry Finn* catered to the aspirations of the American mind: Huck symbolizes man's spirit of adventure, his curiosity, his desire to learn and discover. The novel presents social problems, no doubt, but it also offers ethical solutions to these problems. It is a real world that Huck traverses and this world is peopled by real flesh and blood people, the good, the bad and the ugly. As Bernard de Voto says, "Huck never encounters a symbol but always some actual human being working out an actual destiny." (Inge 166) There are allegorical readings into the text but there is no escape from reality.

Huckleberry Finn is comparable to *Don Quixote* in more ways than one: like the earlier novel, it is picaresque in its design as it traces the fortunes of its adolescent anti-hero from one episode to another. Huck is essentially a good soul who, as the story unravels, gradually discovers that the world is populated by evil people. He is like the man from La Mancha, on a lone crusade against the ills that plague the society. The novel also has a counterpart of Don Quixote's companion, Sancho Panza, in the slave Jim who remains faithfully by Huck's side through almost all the episodes. As Huck travels down the river, he is symbolically going through the journey of life, getting exposed to reality in its raw, unadorned, unembellished form. Hitherto he has led a more or less provincial existence and in the process of the unraveling of the story he is initiated into the ways of the world, be they good or bad. In this sense the novel may be taken as a *bildungsroman* describing the rites of a passage, the protagonist moving from boyhood to adulthood, which makes this book very much like its precursor, *Tom Sawyer,* as it follows the evolutionary graph of a young adult, taking him from innocence to experience. The story is narrated in the first person, through the colloquial, unself-conscious ease of Huck Finn's diction. Not surprisingly, it has often been read as a spiritual autobiography, the pilgrimage of the soul that awakens to a realization of the dignity of all human beings.

Huckleberry Finn is well and truly entrenched in the soil that nurtured it: the American way of life with the peculiar conditions that prevailed in the early nineteenth century. Slavery and abolition were burning topics at that point. Transformations in the social fabric, in the southern states in particular, are depicted in a realistic manner, the ambivalence towards the abolitionist movement, and the general reluctance to awaken into the realization that the "nigger" too is a human being.

As far as the narrative structure of the novel is concerned, critics are divided in their opinion. While some appreciate the episodic unraveling of the story, there are others who feel that it is an unplanned, unstructured, even unpremeditated text. And yet, Twain's genius is evident in its "local impulse and lack of planning". However, Frank Baldanza sees a different kind of unity in the various episodes comprising the novel: a unity that comes from a repetition of certain images and patterns. (Inge 165-173) This is a repetition that does not become monotonous because every time it occurs with a variation, imparting to the text a rhythmic pattern and a cadence. Events and characters duplicate themselves with a difference in a manner that each becomes a comment on the other. At every turn of the novel we see Huck facing some kind of a conflict. These conflicts come up again and again although the nature of the encounter keeps changing. Symbolically, we are being presented a fight between good and evil forces. Huck, caught between the two, is not always sure which side he should be on.

Running away, or escaping, is a motif that occurs repeatedly through the novel. Whether it is Huck running away from his father, or from the fear of being 'sivilized', or from thugs and rogues, or whether it is Jim trying to run away from bondage, or conmen trying to dupe innocent people and make a run for it, the motif surfaces intermittently, binding the various sections of the novel and giving it its unique character. The river itself, symbolizing the flow of life, is a link that holds all the diverse threads of the novel. Lionel Trilling calls it a "moving road" that runs through the book. If we use Bakhtinian terminology, it is the chronotope of the novel which takes the text to a higher

plane, making it transcend boundaries of time and space. Although the book has been criticized for its loose structure, the flexibility with which Huck's story is narrated is actually in tune with life itself. There are no rigid rules in the book of life. It flows freely, like the great river of the novel.

Symbolizing the linear development of the story, the Mississippi has a linear flow, despite its windings. Yet the story that is narrated has a circularity about it. It begins with the idea of civilization and ends with it, too. The locale in the early chapters is the village of St. Petersburg, Missouri, from where the narrative moves away, down the river with Huck. In the course of their adventures on the river, along its banks, through Arkansas and Illinois, the action moves in and out of different social strata, including the wealthy aristocratic society represented by the Grangerfords and the Shepherdsons. There is a repeated escape to the river each time a conflict takes place. Finally, all is well and at the conclusion of the novel Jim is a free man and so is Huck. Jim's master has died, giving him his freedom as a last generous gesture; and Huck's oppressive father too is dead, so he can stop running and turn back to life once more. He had in a way 'died' out of society, running away from it, faking his own death. But now he is free to return to it. Still Huck dithers; as he says in the concluding lines, "There ain't nothing more to write about, and I am rotten glad of it, because if I'd a knowed what a trouble it was to make a book I wouldn't a tackled it, and ain't a-going to no more. But I reckon I got to light out for the Territory ahead of the rest, because Aunt Sally she's going to adopt me and sivilize me, and I can't stand it. I been there before." Thus ends the novel. Light out, or escape the 'sivilizing' process of Aunt Sally that had begun with Widow Douglas. That is how the novel had begun. The conclusion returns us to the same theme.

As Huck grows into manhood he has to face several moral dilemmas, particularly in connection with the question of slavery. In the first place, conditioned by a society that justifies slave labour, he has never thought of a slave as a human being. In this Huck represents the general awareness (or lack of it) of his times. He himself is white though poor. Nothing in his upbringing has prepared him for the realization that a dark-skinned slave may have something in common with a white man. Tom and Huck have been brought up to "believe niggers and people are two different things." Inevitably, Huck is faced with another dilemma: should he or should he not sympathize with Jim and help him escape? If he does so would he not indirectly be robbing Jim's owner, Miss Watson? And if he does not, then something in him tells him he would be doing injustice to another human being. "It hadn't ever come home to me before, what this thing was that I was doing. But now it did; and it stayed with me, and scorched me," he says. What finally helps him decide in favor of helping Jim is the adverse picture of the aristocracy that he sees through the Grangerfords and the Shepherdsons, and the murder of Bogg by Sherburn. Finally, it is an individual morality that he asserts in the face of social convention. "When I start to steal a nigger, I ain't no ways particular how it's done, so it's done. What I want is my nigger … and I don't give a dead rat what authorities think about it nuther." He comes to realize that by an accident of birth he is part of an unjust society. "It was enough to make a body ashamed of the human race," he admits at one point.

Jack Solomon makes a comparison between *Huckleberry Finn* and the *Odyssey*. He talks about Odysseus's homecoming and the tradition of disguises and sees parallels in the two journeys. Huck's imprisonment in the hut, destruction of the raft, faking his own death, hiding gold in a coffin – all these episodes symbolize a kind of descent into the underworld. (Solomon 11-13) Clarence Brown sees the novel as a pastoral, "albeit one in which a nightmare world of human injustice and brutality constantly impinges." (Brown 10-15) It is a serious novel with comic overtones: the beginning (the gang of boys) and the foolery at the ending. *Huckleberry Finn*, thus, is a novel that may be looked at from different perspectives, each entry point laying bare a different aspect of the work. Some of these may overlap or contradict each other, but such are the characteristics of a novel of substance. To quote Walt Whitman: "Do I contradict myself? / Very well then I contradict myself. (I am large. I contain multitudes.)" It is this richness of the novel

that connects it to other literary texts and helps it retain its place in world literature.

Taking at random another text, we may note the same principle in operation, the text reflecting this world here as well as the larger one out there. Herman Melville's *Moby Dick*, for example, was inspired by two events that Melville had witnessed: the sinking of the whaling ship, *Essex*, in 1820 when it was attacked by an eighty-ton sperm whale, and an actual sperm whale called Mocha-Dick killed in the 1830s. Along with these topical events, the book detailed a vivid account of the whaling business of the times, and life on board a whaling ship in the mid-nineteenth century. *Moby Dick*, thus, is a record of the age as Melville saw it. At the same time, it transcends chronotopic limits and has a wider validity. Like Twain's novel, it may be taken as an elaborate allegory dealing with the battle between good and evil, Ahab's struggle against the whale symbolizing man's struggle against fate. The journey motif predominates as the crew hunt for the whale and are eventually destroyed by it, the Pequod sinking without a trace in the depths of the ocean. The ending is different from Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea* to which it bears a striking comparison. In a totally different vein it may be compared to Lewis Carroll's *The Hunting of the Snark*, where the crew

> "… sought it with thimbles, they sought it with care;
> They pursued it with forks and hope;
> They threatened its life with a railway-share;
> They charmed it with smiles and soap."

At this point one may also refer to William Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury* (1929) and *As I Lay Dying* (1930). The first novel is experimental in the sense that Faulkner has the tendency to focus on the same episode from different points of view. The novel has been taken as a microcosm of the South in the Post-Civil War times. Faulkner seems concerned about restoring and preserving the lost tradition and values of the old South, a concern that is presented through the Compson family, in particular the four main characters from whose perspective the narrative is presented. The novel, even as it is grounded in the present that Faulkner lived in, follows the stream of consciousness mode, looks back at earlier ventures of the kind – *Tristram Shandy*, for instance – and also connects with James Joyce and Virginia Woolf. It has much in common with *As I Lay Dying*, published almost at its heels, where the death of Addie Bundren is presented in fifty-nine chapters through as many as fifteen different narrators. At the same time, it connects with classics of the past. Just as *The Sound and the Fury* is a quote from Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, the second novel is inspired by Greek classics, the title taken from Book XI of Homer's *Odyssey*, where Agamemnon tells Odysseus: "As I lay dying the woman with the dog's eyes would not close my eyes as I descended into Hades." Implicit in these connections and cross-connections is the point that although these texts are rooted in specific locales and comprise independent worlds, they are part of the larger world, too. Intertextuality plays an important role in world literature.

Part II

(i) Stories of Our Times

Through an Other Gaze: J.M. Coetzee

In Part I of this study the focus was on texts from different geographical locales (India, the Middle East, Italy, Spain and America) that shared common features and cut across all barriers. From this point one may turn to a contemporary novelist from South Africa, now re-located in Australia. J.M. (John Maxwell) Coetzee, one of the leading writers of today, may be placed in the tradition of world literature, to which he has made a lasting contribution with the stark honesty of his narratives, this ruthless uncompromising vision, and his re-working of tales from older masters. In order to gauge the difference between Coetzee and other writers, here is an anecdote:

In 1997, Princeton University invited Coetzee to deliver the Tanner Lectures on Human Values. Instead of giving a formal address he read a novella about another novelist being invited to lecture. This other novelist, Elizabeth Costello, instead of speaking about literature, surprises her audience by delivering a lecture on animal rights and ethical vegetarianism. This is how Coetzee, using the metafictional device, presented his ideas on human values at Princeton. The Tanner lectures were subsequently published as *The Lives of Animals* in 1999. Four years later, Coetzee resurrected its protagonist in his book,

Elizabeth Costello, published immediately after the announcement of his Nobel Prize for Literature. Mrs Costello, a frail, ageing Australian, travels from place to place, delivers lectures, is uncompromising in her views, remains forever locked in debates on ethical and moral issues, has difficult relationships with people, and does not mince her words while arguing a point. In more ways than one she resembles her creator, J.M. Coetzee.

Coetzee, with two Bookers and several other prizes in hand, has been on the literary scene for the last two decades and more. While first-time readers who begin with his *Disgrace* are overwhelmed by the quiet force of the narrative, those who choose *Elizabeth Costello* as an entry point to his oeuvre are left somewhat surprised at his choice of a female protagonist. For *Elizabeth Costello*, at first glance, seems to be a novel about a quixotic female character. Yet it is different from the traditional novel. There are frequent comparisons between Mrs Costello's world and Kafka's. Equally strong is a parallel with the universe of Godot. As in Beckett's masterpiece, in *Elizabeth Costello*, too, one gets the impression that nothing happens, nobody comes, nobody goes. Characters appear, say their bit and then retreat. The action remains at the intellectual, cerebral level, confined to the deep recesses of the mind. The overall impression is an all-pervading silence, a stillness before and after insignificant ripples caused by the protagonist's interaction with other human beings, a protagonist forever engaged in private ethical dilemmas.

To be more specific, the book comprises eight chapters or "Lessons" and a postcript. Several of these chapters are reproduced from earlier publications: two, for example, were earlier published as *The Lives of Animals*. Four others have appeared in different journals over the last few years. What they have in common is the protagonist, Elizabeth Costello, and her philosophical explorations on what makes human existence meaningful. What is life, after all? Does it comprise the well-demarcated certitudes of a black and white existence? Or does it exist somewhere in the interstices, in the in-between spaces,

seen intermittently through the light and shade, in fleeting moments of revelation?

There is little doubt that Elizabeth Costello is a mask for her creator, a camouflage, an alter-ego, a surrogate voice for his deepest beliefs. Judging from his earlier *Boyhood* and *Youth*, we know that Coetzee is capable of writing a searingly honest autobiography in the third person. Here he uses the same technique, distancing himself from the reader, hiding behind a persona who speaks for him on subjects ranging from animal rights to literary realism, from good and evil to truth and beauty, from the human to the sublime, the physical to the spiritual. The persona is female but gender does not seem to be of much consequence. Mrs Costello is the author in a woman's guise. Coetzee is about the same age as his protagonist; he too lives in Australia now, travels the world giving lectures, and has similar views. Like Mrs Costello, J.M. Coetzee avoids publicity and hates attending public functions, even to receive coveted awards. Like Coetzee, Mrs Costello "shakes [the reader]…." She is by no means a comforting writer. One may also wonder if Mrs Costello is modelled on John Coetzee's mother for she, too, has a son called John. But, in all probability, if the writer were asked, he would not give a straightforward answer. Instead, he would come up with another story, another fictional character in yet another book, creating another story within a story, leaving us with a hundred other unanswered questions.

This is not the first time Coetzee has used a female protagonist. In an earlier novel, *Foe* (1986), the main character was a woman in a revisionist take on a story borrowed from Daniel Defoe. *Foe* revives the early eighteenth-century story of a sea-farer, placing it in the twentieth century, bringing in issues that did not seem to matter in the original tale. As the story goes, it was in the year 1703, that a young adventurer called Alexander Selkirk ran away to the sea and joined the expedition of the explorer and buccaneer, William Dampier. On board, he quarreled with the captain and insisted on being put ashore on the uninhabited island of Juan Fernandez where he survived alone for more than five years until rescued by a passing ship. Returning to England, he met the writer, Sir Richard Steele who

later published an account of Selkirk's unusual experiences in his periodical, *The Englishman.*

The adventures of Selkirk, a saga of survival through determination and grit, fired the imagination of his contemporaries, among them Daniel Defoe, who blended reality with fantasy and immortalized the story in his book *Robinson Crusoe* (1719). Often hailed as the first English novel, Robinson Crusoe's success was astounding. It was translated into diverse languages and followed by many imitations which came to be called "Robinsonnades". Among the imitations are *The Adventures of Philip Quarll* (1727) which narrates the 50-year-long lonely existence of a certain Quarll on a South Sea island. Other inspired works are *The Life and Adventures of Peter Wilkins, A Cornishman* (1751) – a fantastic tale of a shipwrecked mariner in the Antarctic region, and *The Swiss Family Robinson* (1812-13) which has travelled across the world in its various translations and adaptations, literary as well as cinematic. Other Robinsonnades followed, for instance *Coral Island*, *Treasure Island* and the celebrated twentieth-century novella, *Lord of the Flies*. Defoe himself, aware of the great interest generated in his protagonist, followed his novel with a sequel entitled *The Farther Adventures of Robinson Crusoe* in which his hero, much after his rescue, re-visits his island, is attacked at sea and loses his Man Friday.

The story of Robinson Crusoe is kept alive even today. This is not surprising as we know that some classics remain evergreen and continue to perplex readers with countless unanswered questions: what happened next? Did their troubles cease? Did they live happily ever after? And so on. Some writers, taking up these nagging questions, have revived immortal tales and tried to write beyond the ending. A popular example would be *Scarlet* which came as a sequel to *Gone With the Wind* many decades after the latter made its appearance, and continued the story of the vivacious Scarlet beyond the ending of the first novel.

Sometimes the sequel is presented from a radically different point of view, giving a reverse picture of the original story, as for instance Naguib Mahfouz's *Arabian Nights and Days* which continues the story of *1001 Arabian Nights* but from the point

of view of the queen who is unhappy even though her life has been spared and she has survived the wrath of her eccentric husband. Jean Rhys, in *Wide Sargasso Sea*, is inspired by *Jane Eyre* and tells us the story of the wronged Mrs Rochester in the attic. Other examples may be cited: Emma Tennant continues to rewrite the stories of Jane Austen; Tom Stoppard, in *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*, resurrects Shakespeare's characters from *Hamlet* but they are placed in situations very different from the original play.

Every narration of a story may be taken as a fresh interpretation: new concerns are foregrounded while older issues are relegated to the background, depending on the narrator's/reader's standpoint. So even though the story may be familiar, it changes with the times as it is adapted to contemporary situations. Daniel Defoe's story, the influence of which lingers *mutatis mutandis* through the present times in literary/academic circles and also in the popular sphere, is similarly subjected to changes. Through the written text and also through popular film adaptations of the castaway motif, it continues to captivate the imagination of the masses. Among other works, we find remnants of the theme in William Golding's *Pincher Martin*. Most of the adaptations simply rework the shipwreck story, focusing on the marooned character's struggle for survival in a hostile landscape. The survivor is generally a larger-than-life hero with the ability to emerge triumphant above all adversity.

A totally different perspective, however, is presented by J.M. Coetzee in his novella *Foe*, where the centre-stage is occupied not by the castaway hero but by another character inserted into Robinson Crusoe's life in order to view the well-known story and its eponymous hero from a totally different perspective. This is a woman called Sue Barton who is brought into Crusoe's exclusive world in such a way as to give his story a relevance to the times we live in – times when the critical reader prefers to view a text not from the conventional centre but from the point of view of the Other. So the approach to a familiar story changes and presents a different version of the narrative: as seen by a woman placed in an all-male scenario, a woman

representing the minority, the marginalized, or the silenced other.

Coetzee's novel, *Foe*, is thus a take-off from *Robinson Crusoe* but with a difference. One may choose to read it either as a sequel or as an independent story. Apparently Coetzee wants the reader to see a continuity with the 18-century novel and hence employs names that echo the original. The author Daniel Defoe figures in person as Daniel Foe (giving the novel its title). He is approached by this lady called Sue Barton who has a strange story to tell: as a castaway on a desert island inhabited by Robinson Cruso [sic] she was rescued by him and later became his companion and lover. Cruso is now dead, she and the Man Friday have been "rescued" by a passing ship and are now condemned to roam the streets of London, looking for refuge. Will Mr Foe tell the world her story?

Telling a story, or the art of narration, is what Coetzee's *Foe* is all about. It takes us deep into metafiction as we hear a story about a story that has been told in the past, that is being told in the present, and that will continue to be told even after we put the book down. So we have several tales within a tale, different from the "connected" stories that one is familiar with in serialised narratives. Beginning as a straightforward realistic narration in the linear manner, epistolary in form, the story evolves and becomes a metaphor for the act of storytelling itself. The central action may be singular (the return to England and the rehabilitation) but there are different levels of narration being presented simultaneously. In the first place, the narrator of the original story is brought into the novel as Mr Foe who is supposed to tell Mrs Barton's story. Ironically, even though Sue Barton approaches him for assistance, she does the story-telling herself, penning all her experiences on paper in an epistolary form, whereas Mr Foe remains conspicuous by his absence through much of the book. It is Sue Barton whose account we read, who retrospectively tells us how she intruded into the secluded space of Cruso and his Man Friday, how they spent their time on the island, how her relationship with Cruso developed, how he died while being removed from his island kingdom.

Of the four principal characters – Mrs Barton, Cruso, Friday and Foe – Mrs Barton is placed at the centre. Foe who should have been the actual narrator, is not allowed to be the story-teller in Coetzee's version. Similarly, Cruso is given a marginalised role. As for Friday, he is dumb and so incapable of speech. How did he lose his tongue? Did the barbarians, from whose clutches Cruso rescued him, pull out his tongue in some bizarre ritual? Or – and this could be a horrifying possibility – was it Cruso himself who cut off Friday's tongue in order to subjugate him? Silence him forever so that there would be no witness to testify against whatever wrong he, Cruso, had done? These are questions that are raised through Sue Barton's narrative – questions that make us deliberate the role of the oppressor and the oppressed, the coloniser and the colonised, and the ongoing power politics between them.

Foe is a feminist text in its decentering of the male protagonist of the original story. It focuses on a female protagonist who is a victim of circumstances over which she has little control, who follows an uncertain destiny through hostile terrain. She becomes the dominant figure in the story, first taking on Cruso as her lover and then, symbolically, even the writer, Daniel Foe. Coetzee allows her to reconstruct the history of Robinson Crusoe. The pace of the narrative may flag at times and it may not always be as gripping and powerful a story as John Coetzee's other novels, but *Foe* is an interesting experiment that deals with issues which matter today, reviving an old adventurer's tale, narrating it from a fresh perspective, making it relevant to the contemporary situation.

While discussing the literary output of J.M. Coetzee and its relevance across boundaries of time and space, it would be fitting to speak of *Disgrace*, his prize-winning offering to the literary world. This is a disturbing book – which is another way of saying that it jolts the reader out of all complacencies, sends a chill down the spine and keeps coming back to haunt the mind even when the book is put away. It places scenes before the reader that one would rather turn one's eyes away from. It also unwraps matters that would generally be swept under the carpet in polite society.

The story centres around David Lurie, a professor of English at the University of Cape Town, who teaches a subject called Communications 101. Closer to his heart, he also teaches romantic poetry, a subject he is so absorbed in that it invades his life, making him a dreamer, a lost soul unable to see the dividing line between imagination and reality. At the same time, he is engaged in composing a soap opera on Byron in Italy which is going to be meditation on love between the sexes. There is something Faustian about Lurie, something Byronic, something eternally naive and romantic. His problem, however, is loneliness — the loneliness of a man who needs the company of women. That is what brings about his downfall, his disgrace. The pattern of shame and disgrace suffered by David Lurie is repeated with Lurie's daughter as the sufferer. It is almost as though she were paying back for the sins of her father. She bears it all in silence, refusing to complain, taking it as the price that she, being white, must pay for living in a black country. Personal relationships thus get enmeshed with local and national politics and with racial history. It is no longer the story of individuals but of two races split by a colour divide.

Disgrace is heavy with symbolism, drawing constant parallels between the human and the bestial (Bev Shaw and her dog clinic), making the reader wonder which of the two species is more humane. It is a novel that focuses attention on the sorrows of being human in a world that is essentially inhuman, a world that is unable to understand and reach out to individuals caught up in an existential web of loneliness and pride.

As he narrates the story of the main protagonist, the writer, John Coetzee, interweaves it with the story of a nation coming into its own, throwing off age-old shackles of the apartheid curse. This, in different hands, would probably be an optimistic theme, welcoming the dawn of a new era. But Coetzee is aware of the Savage God that takes birth, replacing one chaos with another. *Disgrace*, which begins as the story of a professor of English driven by Eros, ultimately turns out to be the tale of the white man in South Africa. What happens when the reigning majority is reduced to a minority, a hounded, unwanted minority? What price does it have to pay then for the sins of the past?

To put it differently, what happens to the master when he is overthrown? What is the retribution? How do the erstwhile slaves take revenge? The history of the country thus becomes metaphorically entwined with that of individual characters. Racial hatred is laid bare and the harsh, ugly realities of post-apartheid South Africa, horrifying and frightening, are foregrounded. The novel is about the aftermath of decolonization as much as it is about the aftermath of Desire (with the capital D). In electing an anti-hero as the main protagonist, Coetzee draws our attention to what human beings really are. Like Lurie, they go wrong and fall from their pedestals - simply because they are human, fallible, flawed creatures: "...how are the mighty fallen!" says a character in *Disgrace*. But, through sacrifice, love and compassion there is the hope of redemption, at least partial. This is the underlying Christian theme, the saving grace that lifts ordinary mortals to a higher plane, enabling them to have intimations of immortality in a world that is undeniably mortal.

Narrated in a bare minimalist style, spare and precise almost to a fault, the narrative does not falter or linger over superfluous words or emotions. There is no moralizing, no sentimentality or gimmickry. The author believes in understatement: his symbols are loaded; the power of suggestion is strong and unignorable. Coetzee, while narrating a story that brings together the personal the social and the political, is dealing with issues that cannot be pinned to any single geographical locale. They have a relevance to the postcolonial condition, whether they be in Africa or elsewhere. The issues he speaks of are complex ones; they make us feel uncomfortable and keep niggling at our conscience.

Relating this novel with the earlier *Foe* and the more recent *Costello* or *Slow Man*, one finds that they comprise stories that are built around specific people and incidents but at the same time relate to moral and ethical issues that concern one and all. *Elizabeth Costello* revolves around ideas, not action; it holds our interest as the ideas are presented through changing

dramatic situations. Coetzee's novels are not the usual kind of fare for one seeking to while away a few idle hours; serious reading, they gives us an insight into the mind of the Nobel laureate, telling us in an allegorical mode what ethical and moral issues move him most, issues that he feels strongly enough to weave into his writing. He has the power to make us think, ponder and re-assess our relationship with the world. His work takes the dirt out from under the carpet and asks us to look at it again, analyze it and decide whether it is indeed to be swept away or whether there is some good in it to be preserved. At the same time, through a narrative like *Costello*, the author – like many others before him and after – is playing a game with the reader, presenting a puzzle of sorts in which he throws a number of clues that the reader must piece together into a coherent whole to decode the message being conveyed through this story-within-a-story-within-a-story.

What is disturbing about the later novels of the author is the feeling that Coetzee seems to be growing more and more ruthless in his search for a perfect world. No doubt, Browning once said that man's reach should exceed his grasp — or what's a Heaven for? But an uncompromising search for perfection can bring its own sorrows. The reader wonders if Coetzee, then, is too much of an idealist. Is he seeking a utopia that is nowhere to be found in reality? Is he heading the Tolstoy way that can only lead to greater depths of gloom and self-destruction? An idealist in search of a perfect world, anguishing over its unattainability – that is how the work of Coetzee strikes the reader.

Somewhere in *Costello* he says:

"I am a writer…. It is not my profession to believe, just to write. Not my business. I do imitations, as Aristotle would have said…."

and

"I am a writer, a trader in fictions…. and what I write is what I hear. I am a secretary of the invisible, one of many secretaries over the ages. That is my calling: dictation secretary. It is not for me to interrogate, to judge what is given me. I merely write down the words and then test them, test their soundness, to make sure I have heard right."

Who, one may ask, is the speaker here? In his novel it is a frail, drab Australian woman called Elizabeth Costello but in reality she sounds a lot like a frail, gaunt novelist from Australia called J.M. Coetzee who narrates stories that go round the world, carrying his messages alike to the believers and the non-believers. "What Mr. Coetzee's novels imply is that every colonial society is caught between a past so seemingly changeless that it may be conceived as beyond time and history, and a present moment entirely given over to power, empire, history and the systems that further those interests," says Denis Donoghue in *New York Times*. It is for these reasons that the writer is read and understood by readers cutting across all divisive factors.

History, Truth and Story: Shashi Tharoor

"What is the responsibility of the creative artist, the writer, in a developing country in our globalizing world? In my own writing I have pointed to one responsibility – to contribute towards, and to help articulate and give expression to, the cultural identity (shifting, variegated, and multiple, in the Indian case) of the post-colonial society, caught up in the throes of globalization....The task of the writer is to find new ways (and revive old ones) of expressing his culture, just as his society strives, in the midst of globalization, to find new ways of being and becoming."

> - Tharoor at the Berlin Literature Festival, 2003: http://www. literaturfestival.com/intern/reden/tharoor-engl

In the later half of the twentieth century, poststructuralists like Derrida have denied the very possibility of objective knowledge and Truth. Bringing philosophy, literature, and criticism under the single all-encompassing term "writing," and then building their argument on the premise of the inherent instability of language, deconstructionists attack the notion of the fixity of meaning, meaning being the literary equivalent in literature of Truth in philosophy. As both meaning and Truth being linguistic constructs depended on human beings, the unceasing play of signifiers produced an unceasing stream of varying and equally valid meanings. Evaluation in a world of *jouissance* is thrown overboard; anything and everything is equally acceptable.[1]

In an epigraph to *Riot: A Novel* (2003) taken from Cervantes, Shashi Tharoor tells us: "History is a kind of sacred writing because truth is essential to it, and where truth is there god himself is...." In a single sweep, thus, the writer brings together history, truth and divinity. The tale that follows is a complex multi-narrative that operates on several levels simultaneously. As it unfolds, it questions the basic premises of history: What is history? Whose history is authentic? What is truth and how is it embodied in history? The impetus to the novel may be pinpointed with precision: two actual events in contemporary history (a communal riot in India and the death of an American social worker in another part of the world) inspired the novel, the first being a collective event and the second on an individual level. Although it has its origins in actual instances, certain elements in the narrative raise the story above immediate temporal specificities and bring it into the realm of shared human experience. The author is ostensibly concerned with the narration of a story that is built around a physical intimacy between a foreign visitor and a local administrator set against a volatile backdrop of communal tension.

In *Riot*, the story is not 'told' to us: it is 'shown' through several pieces of a collage. The reader's job is to decode the truth from various scraps of evidence and from the accounts of various characters. These fragments may then be pieced together to complete the jigsaw puzzle called truth or history. In the present context, the attempt is to look at what the novel purports to accomplish, what the writer seems to aim at, and to figure out if there are connections with other texts in other times and locales. At the same time, it is essential to remain focused on how the novel challenges the notions of objectivity and truth in the depiction of history. In *Riot* we have "several people writing together" as Roland Barthes would put it, different viewpoints being presented simultaneously, multiple stories being narrated together by multiple narrators, not all of them human. The omniscient author is present in his absence.

The novel is firmly rooted in time and place. Zalilgarh is a fictitious world, set in Uttar Pradesh. Paradoxically, Tharoor writes about it from his apartment in Manhattan's Upper East Side. Perhaps it is this distance that enables him to be see a pattern in the disjunctive pieces of the collage he places before us. The time, too, is specified. The simmering Hindu-Muslim discontent of the 1980s, culminating in the Babri Masjid violence at Ayodhya, forms the historical backdrop. In particular, Tharoor has in mind the description of a riot that actually broke out in 1989 in Khargone, Madhya Pradesh. Almost simultaneously, the press reported the death of an American woman in a different part of the world: in South Africa, a social worker, who had gone there to help the cause of the Blacks, was ironically killed by a Black youth. The pathos of the episode, combined with the communal tensions in India, coalesced to become grist for the author's mill, merging into a larger network of ideas with other related issues later worked into the narrative of *Riot*. When asked to describe the book in one sentence, he said: "It's about love, hate, cultural coalition, the ownership of history and the impossibility of knowing the truth." Note how this description brings together the personal and the public, the social, cultural, political and ethical.

The narratology used by Tharoor in the novel is different from the conventional. If we are looking for a novel in the conventional sense, we will not find it in *Riot* – there is no formal beginning or end, no linearity or plot or formal constructions of the genre. Even if we are prepared for the stream-of consciousness technique, or the experimental, postmodernist, or metafictional, we are in for a surprise – for the 'novel' (for lack of a more appropriate nomenclature) is more of a collage that brings together many different fragments. Or one may say that the author places a jigsaw puzzle before the reader, a number of pieces that have to be put together to form a coherent whole. The pieces comprise an astonishing variety – there are diary entries, letters, memoirs, excerpts from scrapbooks and journals, transcripts of interviews, conversations overheard, entries in notebooks, journalistic reports, a handful of poems, even a birthday card and a cable.

Conspicuous by its absence is the conventional "once upon a time" story, the "dear reader…" approach, or the omniscient narrator. In fact the writer is almost completely absent in the novel. "Down with the omniscient narrator. It's time for the omniscient reader," says a character in the novel. The reader of *Riot* is faced with the task of groping through the evidence and unravelling the story. At times one has the uneasy feeling of being a voyeur, a Peeping Tom taking a peek into a private chamber, or reading another's personal diaries or letters, or eavesdropping, or nosing into somebody else's very special, very intimate encounters. But the embarrassment is not allowed to linger as, almost immediately, there is a swing towards the impersonal, an interview conducted by an objective reporter, or the official voice of police personnel in charge, or simply a shift of perspective. All this is part of the narratorial strategy.

Tharoor is telling a story but he does not tell it in a linear manner. He experiments and juggles with his material, shuffling the many ingredients of the tale, its characters and episodes, creating a veritable collage of apparently disparate pieces. The various pieces of the collage are different takes on a central event – the death of Priscilla Hart, an American engaged in social work in a small town called Zalilgarh. How did she die and what were the circumstances? The story is not 'told' to us. It is 'shown' through bits and pieces. The reader's job is to decode the story from various fragments, dialogues, memoirs and scraps of information. At the same time, what *Riot* seeks to present is not simply a whodunit tale, or a murder mystery, or the story of the poignant death of a visiting American. It goes beyond mere statistics, beyond the factual details of the tragedy, to reconstruct the emotional life of the woman. What was it like to be an outsider in a small, conservative township? What were her personal moments like? The record of her emotional history is sketched vividly in a scrapbook that she maintains. The idealism that brought her to a remote spot in the middle of nowhere, the passion for her job, the love interest in her life, the secret rendezvous, the passionate involvement, the hopes and fears, the uncertainty and the agony, and so on: all these go into the making of the novel.

The novel comprises seventy-eight sections of varying length. Each section is different from the other and the perspective keeps on changing, presenting the reader with another and yet another dimension of Priscilla Hart's story, her life, work and emotional states. Simultaneously, even as the fragments of the text are presented before us, the story is being unfolded, leading towards the central event of the novel, i.e., Priscilla's death. Information is gathered from a variety of sources: Priscilla's interaction with Lakshman is reported; Priscilla's scrapbook and letters to her friend, Cindy Valeriani, also provide crucial information; her mother Katherine Hart maintains a diary; her father, Rudyard Hart has a conversation with Randy Diggs; Randy Diggs reports her death in *The New York Journal*; there are random remarks by Shankar Das, project director of HELP-US, Zalilgarh; Randy Diggs interviews the District Magistrate, V. Lakshman; there are entries in Lakshman's journal; conversations between Mrs. Hart and Mr. Das: all these are sources of information.

While Priscilla records her emotional history in her diary, her paramour, a local Indian administrator who is married but finds himself helplessly involved in a relationship with the American, is also a writer of sorts and keeps his own journal. So we get two perspectives on a single relationship. The clash of cultures, the divergent viewpoints, the inability to understand the working of the other's mind, the imminent end of a foredoomed relationship – all this comes across through the personal journals of the main characters. There is passion, even love, in this inter-cultural affair. But social pressures are far too strong for a lasting relationship. So East remains East and West remains West. Or rather, they would have remained so had communal violence not erupted, causing Priscilla's death and putting an abrupt end to the remote possibility of a happy ending to their love story.

> ... "without a multiplicity of cultures, we cannot realize how peoples of other races, religions or languages share the same dreams, the same hopes. Without a heterogeneous human imagination, we cannot understand the myriad manifestations of the human condition, nor fully appreciate the universality of human aims and aspirations." Tharoor, http://www.literaturfestival.com/intern/reden/tharoor-engl

Simultaneously, there is an unfolding of the historical situation, the Babri Masjid episode and the simmering communal tensions. All through the novel, even as the focus remains on the Priscilla-Lakshman story, other voices are heard presenting heterogeneous views on the diverse aspects of the Ram Janmabhoomi - Babri Masjid dispute. Each voice commands attention: each standpoint is valid and none may be ignored as frivolous. In this multi-perspective presentation all sides have been given space. Tharoor throws multiple lights on his selected back-drop:

> "I think the best crystal ball is the rear-view mirror. ... It is part of the writer's job to recapture moments of history. My novel stands as a portrait of time, of tendencies that were brought to the fore, the genie that was let out of the bottle and could not be put back. I felt we should take that genie by looking it squarely in the eye." (Interview with Ganguli)

The novel, *Riot*, through its various focalizations and multiple characters who take on the role of narrators, may be looked at through the Bakhtinian lens as an example of polyglossia with different voices addressing the reader simultaneously. It may also be called a dialogic text in the manner in which it invites the reader to arrive at his own conclusions. Shashi Tharoor is presenting a tragic love affair, no doubt, but this is not all that he is interested in doing. More importantly, he is concerned with history as it was lived in a particular chronotopic context. And history is nothing but the truth. In his epigraph, when Tharoor brings together history, truth and god, he is actually raising a valid question: are they synonymous or is there simply a close kinship between the trinity? The novel lays bare a very personal concept of truth/history/god, presumably based on the author's private belief – that human life being an amalgam of paradoxes, human relationships are no less complex, and there are no certitudes, no finalities, no absolutes, no fixed beliefs, nothing good, nothing bad. It is all a matter of perspectives.

Take, for instance, truth. The novel, says Tharoor, is about the "knowability of truth" (Interview with Ganguli). If truth is the subject of Tharoor's story, what exactly is it and where is it

to be found? Whose truth is it? Who perceives it? In this connection one of the finest passages in the novel recounts a story which deserves to be quoted:

> "... there's an old Hindu story about Truth. It seems a brash young warrior sought the hand of a beautiful princess. Her father, the king … decreed that the warrior could only marry the princess after he had found Truth. So the warrior set out into the world on a quest for Truth. He went to temples and monasteries, to mountain tops where sages meditated, to remote forests where ascetics scourged themselves, but nowhere could he find Truth. Despairing one day and seeking shelter from a thunderstorm, he took refuge in a musty cave. There was an old crone there, a hag with matted hair and warts on her face, the skin hanging loose from her bony limbs, her teeth yellow and rotting, her breath malodorous. But as he spoke to her, with each question she answered, he realized he had come to the end of his journey: she was Truth. They spoke all night, and when the storm cleared, the warrior told her he had fulfilled his quest. 'Now that I have found Truth,' he said, 'what shall I tell them at the palace about you?' The wizened old creature smiled. 'Tell them I am young and beautiful.'" (137)

This story, like the story of *Riot,* is a writerly text, open to several interpretation; we may read in it whatever meaning we choose. Such is the nature of truth and of history. Tharoor's novel is about the ownership of truth and history. It presents about a dozen versions of a given situation, no single one being privileged over the other. Truth is like Wallace Stevens' blackbird and we may look at it from thirteen or more angles. If the story is told (or presented) from Lakshman's and Priscilla's points of view, it is also presented from the varying points of view of the other characters: the staunch Hindutva supporter, the Muslim activist, the police official, the grieving parents of the riot victim, the wronged wife, *et. al.* Their separate stories comprise the various pieces of the jigsaw puzzle called truth or history.

"History has many cunning passages, contrived corridors," said T.S. Eliot once. Tharoor in *Riot* seems to be in agreement with this idea. History, he says, is not a web woven by innocent hands. The different pieces of the collage in *Riot* are often divergent, often contradictory accounts of the same event. Yet each has its validity, its own truth. Like the old crone of the story just mentioned, each is beautiful.

The conclusion of the novel is open-ended, providing the reader only with multiple perspectives, denying any final truth on who killed Priscilla or on the Ram Janmabhoomi-Babri Masjid dispute. Through these two intertwined cases, Tharoor is interrogating the nature of truth, "'Satyameva Jayate.' 'Truth alone triumphs'… but sometimes I am tempted to ask, whose truth? There's not always an easy answer" (236). In the novel, Lakshman seems to speak for his creator when he says: "The singular thing about truth… is that you can only speak of it in the plural. Doesn't your understanding of truth depend on how you approach it? On how much you know? … Truth is elusive, subtle, many-sided" (137).

In his interview with *First City* Tharoor emphasizes "the multiplicity of perspectives" to bring to light the dispute over the ownership of history, and attempts "to uncover the truth behind a certain event." He justifies the use of this particular narrative structure saying that it enabled each character to have his/her own voice, whatever their biases, prejudices and levels of incomprehension. In the an Afterword, he quotes Octavio Paz who said that we live between oblivion and memory: "Memory and oblivion: how one leads to the other, and back again…. History, the old saying goes, is not a web woven with innocent hands." (269) Tharoor implies that history is not created by some sort of inscrutable force; it is created by human beings. It is relative, it is subjective because human beings are capable of selection and omission: "History emerges as a result of people willfully using memory to drive others into oblivion or allowing the experience of recent oblivion to create new antagonistic memories." (Interview to *Intelligence,* Vol. 24:3, Fall 2002)

There is no denying that the novel, in many ways, represents contemporary India struggling with the forces of communalism and violence. Simultaneously, it is about the changes that have taken place in the world, as life becomes more and more globalized. The novel shows rather than tells a story, and that too, through different scenes and situations presented without comment and without being judgemental. Says Tharoor, it is "about today's people in our increasingly globalizing world, where collision and confluence seamlessly cross national and

ethnic boundaries."[2] Whereas it was published as *Riot: a Novel*, in India, in the western world it appeared under the title *Riot: a Love Story* thus attempting to bring together love and violence, the individual and the communal. A national narrative with cross-cultural overtones is juxtaposed with personal love and loss. Major issues like religious intolerance, communal peace and harmony are raised, using the lives of ordinary people. Communal violence and human passions: this is what takes the novel out of its local confines as it narrates the stories of individual lives in a recognizable social setting that cannot escape the influence of the world outside. Based on private human emotions like desire, love and betrayal, at the same time it questions larger issues like the elusive nature of history and truth.

NOTES

1.   For this observation I am indebted to my colleague, Prof Anil Raina, who has worked extensively on twentieth-century critical theory.

2 .   http://tharoor.in/press/love-in-the-time-of-riots/

Different Takes: Rashomon

When on the subject like this, exploring the relationship between truth and its representations in a text, it is inevitable that the 'Rashomon effect' should find its way into the discussion, especially in connection with a novel like Tharoor's *Riot*). The narratology adopted by Shashi Tharoor in *Riot* is comparable to the technique used by Akira Kurosawa in his celebrated film *Rashomon*. These two texts hail from different cultural backgrounds and belong to separate genres – one is a printed text and the other visual / cinematic – but both attempt to present the complexity and subjectivity of truth which remains elusive. While Tharoor experiments with narratology in his novel, *Rashomon* experiments with cinematography; both the texts present different points of view on a single central event. If, in the novel we have "several people writing together" (Barthes), the film presents the simultaneity of several people viewing an incident together. The omniscient author, in both cases, is distanced – if not 'dead' in Barthesian terminology.

The Oscar-winning 1950 film by Akira Kurosawa is accepted as a classic and is oft-quoted for its novelty and innovations, the impact of which is felt even today. Before going any further on the significant contribution of Kurosawa, it is essential to give an overview of this landmark film and the sources it

emerged from. *Rashomon*, the film, is based on two short stories by Ryunosuke Akutagawa, translated into English as "Rashomon" (1915) and "In a Grove" (1922).

Take a close look at the sources: the first story, "Rashomon," takes place at the southern entrance of the city, Kyoto, where the gate is called Rashomon. It is a lonely, dilapidated spot where people are afraid to go because unclaimed dead bodies are sometimes dumped here. On this particular day, on a dark, rainy night, an encounter takes place at this spot between an old woman and a lowly man. The lowly, serving-class man is waiting for the rain to stop. In any case, he has nothing to do because he has recently been fired from his job and is now in a dilemma – should he let himself starve or should he – for the sake of survival – turn into a thief? The old woman is a poverty-stricken scavenger who ekes out a miserable living by stealing the hair of unclaimed dead bodies, making wigs and selling them for petty gains, just enough to keep herself from starving.

As she is busily engaged in pulling the hair off an abandoned corpse, she is accosted by the servant. Frightened, the woman justifies her action saying that she was stealing only to keep from starving. Moreover, the dead body that she mutilates belonged to a woman who was engaged in unethical practises: she used to cheat her customers, passing off snake meat as fish and selling it in the market for a profit, totally unconcerned with the immorality of her act. On these two counts – self-preservation and punishment of the unethical – the woman feels it is neither wrong nor immoral to steal from the dead body. The servant turns the logic of the woman against her, saying that if this were so then there would be nothing wrong in stealing the clothes she wore. Forcibly he tears off her clothes (which presumably he will sell in the market to buy himself some food), and disappears into the night, leaving her alone, naked and helpless at Rashomon Gate.

This story, with the backdrop of the city gate, is used by Kurosawa as the framework of his film. Within this framework, he places the second story, "In a Grove".

"In a Grove" is an unusual story in the manner of its narration.[1] The story comprises the statements of seven witnesses to a murder testifying before a Police Commissioner. The actual deed, i.e., the murder of a samurai called Takehiko, has already taken place in the *ante rem*, on the previous day. His body has been found, the suspected criminal has been apprehended, and witnesses have been called to testify. From the evidence gathered, a thief called Tajumaro had overpowered the samurai and raped his wife. Then the samurai was found murdered. The main focus of the story is not the act of murder which has taken place but the question – who has murdered the man?

The first witness is a woodcutter who says he had found the body that morning. A priest says he had seen the samurai armed with a sword, a bow and arrows, accompanied by his wife on horseback, the previous noon. A policeman next testifies that the arrested man is a notorious brigand who was found in possession of a horse that fitted the description of the one on which the samurai's wife was seen riding. Next, an old woman, who was the mother of the samurai's wife, identifies the corpse; she is worried about her daughter's fate now that the man has died. The main characters in the story are the thief, Tajomaru, and the woman, Masago, the samurai's wife. They too make their statements before the Commissioner. The thief, Tajomaru says he killed the man. The wife says she killed her husband and then she tried to kill herself. There seems to be no solution to the mystery.

Finally, the story concludes with the statement of the last witness: the spirit of the murdered man is called up via a medium and he reconstructs the event. He narrates how he had actually stabbed himself, thus giving a new twist to the story. The death is not a murder but a suicide.

At this point the story ends. These seven testimonies are presented by Akutagawa without a comment. The event is single – the death of a man – but the perspectives on the event are different. In other words, the truth is subjective and each version of truth may be taken as valid.

With this background, one may now turn to the film: the two stories above are put together in the Kurosawa film which has been hailed as ground-breaking. The opening scene presents the Rashomon Gate, borrowed from the Akutagawa story. There is torrential rain and three people, a priest, a woodcutter and a

commoner, taking shelter under the gate get into a conversation. The gate itself is an imposing structure and stands more as a symbol than an actual landmark. It is not only the gate to the city but also an entrance to another time zone, another level of storytelling, moving from the immediate present to a recent past.

Beginning at this point, the story then merges with Akutagawa's other story ("In the Grove") which is presented in flashback. The three men talking at the gate discuss the murder of the samurai. The woodcutter recalls the time when he had seen the samurai alive, walking through the forest with his wife on horseback. It is later revealed that he has also been a witness to the woman's rape. The priest, too, had seen the samurai and his wife alive. As the conversation proceeds, the action that has already taken place in the past, is unfolded through flashbacks within flashbacks, like many mirrors reflecting other mirrors. Following the Akutagawa style, there are different testimonies giving varying accounts of the central incident. If one has to strip down the story to its basics, one would say that the focal point of the film is actually a very simple event, i.e., a homicide. Yet, this simple act of murder acquires complex dimensions because the narration is from diverse viewpoints and each viewpoint differs from the others. The same story is presented in different ways so the truth of the matter remains elusive. There are five main characters in the story, the samurai, his wife, the bandit, the woodcutter and the priest. Four people are witness to the murder, one of them being dead. There are several clues and red herrings which point to the identification of the murderer. Even so, despite the evidence given by the woman, the woodcutter, the priest and the bandit himself, it is not possible to determine who has killed the samurai. What is true and what is not? Each version has its own validity, but what is authentic is hard to determine. Hence some other means must be adopted to arrive at the truth. The murdered man's spirit is called up via a medium, as in the source story, and what we have is a sting-in-the-tail ending.

There are, thus, different levels of narration. But, one may well ask, how reliable are the narrators? Each of the characters in the film is immediately connected with the incident, being either a participant or a witness. Each of them makes a statement that does not contradict the 'given' of the story – the samurai's murder. But despite the consistencies, there are several variable details, differing information that serves as false clues and confuses the sequence of the events. So, when one statement is being recounted it seems genuine, but then follows another that appears equally convincing. Finally it is through a *deux ex machina* that all the pieces of the story fall into place.

This is not the ending of the film, however, and the scene shifts back to the present, to the three men taking shelter under the Rashomon Gate, one of whom is the woodcutter who had witnessed the rape and murder. It is now revealed that he had in fact stolen an expensive dagger from the site of the murder, the dagger being an important clue to the solution of the whodunit. If this witness is an opportunist with no compunction against stealing on such an occasion, then the question that crops up is – how reliable is his testimony? The nature and the relativity of truth, thus, becomes the main thrust of the story. Despite all the grim and sombre overtones, despite the murder, rape and violence, the film ends on an optimistic note, with the cry of a new born baby and the emergence of sunshine through the rain clouds. Thus in spite of the violent incidents at the heart of the film, the conclusion is, paradoxically, an attempt to assert the basic goodness of humanity.

Kurosawa once commented that the action takes place in the forest where the human heart is most likely to go astray. Being lost in the woods, a metaphor that brings to mind the opening of Dante's *Inferno*, where the poet admits that he has lost his way and needs a guiding light. Or again, the confessions of Augustine who regrets that he had travelled too far away from the guiding light of God. Dense forests, dark woods, foliage, lack of light, undergrowth, and the inability to find a way – all these tropes symbolizing forces of evil which place temptations in the path of the human soul. It is therefore predictable that the notorious thief, Tajomaru, should be lurking in the midst of the dense forest and that the samurai and his wife should be from a world lit up by the sun. The play of light and shadows, appearance and reality, truth and its opposite, is in constant evidence

throughout the film. Critics invariably focus on the many faces of truth as presented in the film (and in the source story).

Although the film has been hailed as a landmark, as ground-breaking and innovative, on closer scrutiny its relationship with older traditions may be discerned. This is not simply a reference to the twelfth-century setting of the story but also to the manner in which the narrative is unfolded. In many ways *Rashomon* is a variant of the classical whodunit. We have here a crime that has taken place and in the course of the narration the criminal has to be identified. Again, as Tzvetan Todorov would see it, there are two stories being unfolded simultaneously – the story of the murder that has taken place and the story of the investigation – the testimonies of the witnesses presented before the police commissioner. By the time we reach the *telos*, or the conclusion, the two stories (of the murder and the investigation) merge into one and the truth is finally revealed.

The film has won numerous awards in the 1950s, including the Italian Film Critics Award, the Golden Lion, the NBR Award for the best Director and best foreign film, the Director's Guild and the Academy awards in the US. It continues to influence later films. In 1964, *The Outrage*, a western film starring Paul Newman, directed by Martin Ritt, is an English version of *Rashomon*. Other films like *Courage Under Fire* (1996), *Hero* (2002) and *Hoodwinked* (2005) borrow the "Rashomon concept". The original story is set in twelfth-century Kyoto, Japan, but it still continues to reverberate through time and space, reaching down to us in the twenty-first century.

NOTE

1 . The version cited here is translated by Takashi Kojima.

Once Upon A Time in India: *Lagaan*

The stories that we narrate have their roots in reality, in the history of a people, and in the multifarious experiences of the human race. The ones that endure are those that we can relate to; they speak of emotions that can be felt on the pulse, of sentiments that have governed our actions and shaped our lives. With the twentieth century, however, the act of story-telling undergoes a change, keeping pace with the progress in technical know-how. Once films begin to dominate the scene, the cinema begins to compete with the printed book. Both narrate stories but the difference is that within the covers of a printed book the story is *told* whereas the film version *shows* it to us.

While dealing with narratives and narratology across borders, it is essential to talk about this changed medium of story-telling. For this reason, the previous section of this study focused on the comparison of a common technique in print and in film, both the texts seeking a truth that may be accepted as authentic. The present section continues the discussion on how a film presents a story continues but the focus shifts from the simultaneity of perception to history as it is documented in the chronicles of a nation. The text under consideration is *Lagaan: Once Upon a Time in India*, a film that zooms in on a slice of life that comes to represent a larger chapter of Indian history. It focuses on a small

story from the heart of India that would never find its way into history books. Using a popular approach, it highlights the contribution of the nameless, faceless common masses towards the nationalist struggle in India.

The story narrated in the film has a popular appeal, which implies that it does not claim to be elitist or academic; it is a story which may be easily comprehended by the masses, it does not need a battery of academic notes and annotations to be understood. Here is a text that cuts across all barriers of class and status, carrying its message to the high and the low, the stuff-shirt academic and also to the unpretentious man in the street, to the powers that once colonized half the world, and also to the denizens of the hapless third-world who had to suffer the yoke of domination. *Lagaan* is vintage "Bollywood": it has all the expected paraphernalia of the Bombay silver screen – the song and dance, the stereotypes, the myths, the love story, the struggle and the final resolution. It is a 'masala' film made on a predictable formula. Yet, somewhere, it manages to cross the boundaries of the ordinary and step into a very select category that competes with outstanding films in the international arena. After *Mother India* and *Salaam Bombay* it was the third Indian film to be nominated for the Oscars – which goes to show that even though it is deeply rooted in the Indian soil, it has an appeal which goes around the globe, cutting across international frontiers, including among its admirers the ordinary movie-goer and also the select connoisseur of the international film world. Ultimately the Oscar awards eluded the film but despite this it managed to set new standards of success for Indian films overseas. Breaking into the Top 10 chart in the UK, and grossing over two million dollars in the UK and the US, it has won appreciation at an international level.

Lagaan came at a time when the Bombay cinema was dominated by romance and *rishta* themes, portraying the life-styles of the rich and influential section of society revelling in the consumerist dream, ignoring the poor and the down-trodden. It was a time when rural India or Bharat was simmering – protests erupted periodically as in the struggle of the tribals against the Narmada Dam or of the Konkan villagers fighting

Enron. In such a scenario the unequal battle of humble villagers against giant corporations seemed intrinsically heroic, a David versus Goliath scenario. (Bhatkal 17) Similarly, in the film, a handful of barefoot villagers is pitted against the Queen's army in an unusual situation, the colonial struggle symbolized by the cricket match. Yet Ashutosh Gowariker's film managed to take the world by storm. What was the reason for its appeal? The attempt here is to show how the film is comparable to a Shakespearean play in that it has a little something for everyone. If on the one hand it champions age-old, time-tested virtues, on the other it dabbles in contemporary buzz-words of the intellectual elite. It upholds the cause of the victim, targeting the oppressor, showing the ultimate triumph of the meek over the mighty. Yet it conveys its message in a palatable form, causing offence to none, combining the two favourite pastimes of the Indian populace – movies and cricket. All this contributes to its massive appeal. It is, as has been described, a "pure dal-chawal production … a home-grown specialty with liberal doses of masala and kitsch." (Rituparna Som and Tinaz Nooshian)

Take a look at the subtitle of the film, *Lagaan: Once Upon a Time in India*. With the traditional once-upon-a-time beginning in the first place it announces loud and clear its fairy-tale connections. Secondly, it clarifies that this is a period film, far removed from the contemporary context. Third, the chronotopic details of the tale are specified. The time is uncertain – "once upon a time" is an unspecified moment which, as we are later told, got lost somewhere in the annals of history. The topos, on the other hand, is fixed – this is a tale that could have taken place only in India. To be more precise, only in India under the colonial rule, not in free India, but it has relevance across national borders, too.

There are two separate yet complementary forces operating in simultaneity throughout the film. The first is a zooming centripetal motion, a force that keeps the story fixed in time and space, giving it a specific location. The second, a panning one, works in the opposite direction and helps it transcend all local fixations, move across spatio-temporal barriers, reaching out to the wide world beyond. When we take a look at the elements

which 'localize' the film, our attention is first of all drawn to the specificities of locale. Ashutosh Gowariker chooses to tell his story against a rural backdrop instead of an urban one. Champaner is a fictitious village in central India where the action takes place. The task before the producers of the film is to give this very Indian village a character that will be recognized and understood in the international arena. This they accomplish through the "Once upon a time" beginning, ending predictably with "…and they lived happily ever after." It is a narration that follows a familiar pattern and is immediately comprehensible to heterogeneous groups of audience scattered across the globe. Champaner thus takes its place in a make-believe world of the kind that may relate to the tales of Hans Christian Anderson or the Brothers Grimm or even to the stories of Bocaccio or Chaucer, where the inhabitants sing and dance and come together in revelry, join hands in the face of common calamity, and show exemplary courage in hard times.

If the action is fixed within the confines of a specific location, so are the characters. Today we, in India, do not come across bejewelled Maharajas on elephant-backs, nor are we familiar with their pomp and show, their luxurious palaces and courts. The language that the characters use in the film is even more exclusive: Champaner's inhabitants communicate in Bhojpuri or Braj-bhasha which is the local dialect used in wide-spread areas of the North Indian plains. How then do these characters, so firmly rooted in a particular time and space, communicate with the world? The task facing the makers of the film, in the first place, was to make the conversation intelligible to the domestic audience, so there was a free use of Hindi, the popular language of Hindi cinema, punctuated with a sprinkling of the local dialect to give it an authentic touch. Satyajit Bhatkal tells us that a balance had to be struck "between the conflicting pulls of authenticity and comprehensibility by using a watered down version of a north Indian dialect, which can communicate to an all-India audience even while preserving a rustic and period flavour." (Bhatkal 50) Further, to extend the appeal, there is a liberal use of non-verbal communication in the form of dance and music. So, when words are inadequate, the body language takes over, reaching out to the world beyond the limits of Champaner through its graceful motions and rhythmic gyrations. There are communal dances when the entire village joins in – for a worship of the Gods, for instance, to celebrate the anticipated arrival of the monsoon – and there are also duets or individual performances that convey the mood of the characters to the audience. The language of music thus, sensuous and earthy, helps to carry the dialogue beyond the confines of the small village which is the focal point of the action.

Incidentally, language also posed a communication problem between the actors of the story who were drawn from separate socio-linguistic zones. The film boasts of an international cast of characters, with a dozen or more English actors unfamiliar with life in third-world conditions and, for this reason, best suited to their roles. In real life, as on the screen, they were familiar with only a few elementary words sufficient for survival in an alien country. The problem, then, was: how would they communicate on the screen, how would Elizabeth, an Englishwoman, convey her love for the rustic Bhuvan when neither could understand the language of the other? "I think I'm in love with you," says the former, but the import of the words is lost on the latter who just smiles uncomprehendingly, shrugs and turns away, wondering what she meant. The same emotion is communicated to the audience through a song the love-lorn Elizabeth sings when she fantasizes about Bhuvan on the ramparts of the fortress which houses the colonial masters. This song is an interesting example of East-meets-West, sung half in Hindi (as a duet between Bhuvan and his country sweetheart, Gauri) and half in English. The music is appropriately rustic when the village couple chant the song but it acquires a very English character, high cadences and a choir-like pitch when sung by the mem-sahib, Elizabeth.

If language was a hurdle, so was the fixity in time. Time-wise *Lagaan* takes us back a hundred years, to a moment in history when India was being ruled by British masters. However, it is not history but fantasy played off against a historical backdrop. As a period film it faced a predictable hazard: how to keep today's cine-goer interested in the story, how to cater to the

contemporary audience? The period film required a special cast of characters: "The Maharaja with his pomp and pageantry, the tyrannical capricious British officer and most important, the protagonists, humble farmers in rural India." (Bhatkal 18) All this may seem part of a fairy-tale today. But fairy-tale and fantasy are made to blend with history to transform a period piece into a timeless *object d'art*. So we view the film from multiple perspectives: from the historical perspective it recounts the on-going struggle of the Indians against their British masters towards the end of the nineteenth century.

On a symbolic level *Lagaan* follows the archetypal pattern that upholds the victory of the heroic against the heartless oppressor. From the romance angle it presents a triangular relationship where one of the three main contenders for affection has to give up her claim in the face of unrequited love and withdraw into a life of celibacy. Taking the film in the light of contemporary critical understanding, what we have is one of the 'little narratives' that goes into the making of the grand narrative of the Indian Nationalist Movement, a little narrative that had its own significance in the making of the nation but soon was forgotten in the long march of history. It replicates on a smaller scale the imperialist designs of the colonizers on the occupied country, showing the unequal distribution of power between the stronger body and the weaker one. It is thus a de-centering of history, telling the story again not from the accepted center but from the margins. With the angle of vision being reversed, the former power-holders become the Other, the irrational but stronger intruders into what would otherwise have been a utopic world. The cricket match itself becomes an allegory for the nationalist struggle. In other words, the national movement is defamiliarized and presented as a familiar sport.

This utopic, pastoral world of the film is undoubtedly a limited one in which the focus of struggle is a very local issue, i.e., the imposition of tax – double tax, triple tax – that the poor farmers can ill-afford to pay. The problem is worsened by the failure of the monsoon. If there is no rain there will be no crops, no harvest, no returns, nothing to eat and, above all, no money for the taxes. There is no mention of national or world affairs. "*Lagaan* strikes out as the odd ball here, while being set within and drawing from a historical framework, it makes absolutely no references to any major event in the vast landscape of the history of Indian Independence." (Rituparna Som and Tinaz Nooshian) Elsewhere outside this little world, history tells us that the national movement was taking place, the spirit of patriotism was flickering continually, flare-ups would break out occasionally. But on the yellow-gold screen of *Lagaan* these larger events do not figure and the camera remains focused on the immediate day-do-day issues that cause turbulence in the lives of these celluloid characters. So the story-line is basically very simple, with the residents of a modest rural settlement fighting against the weather, coping with drought, facing the additional calamity of increased taxation, meeting this challenge headlong, and finally overcoming the hurdle but only after many ups and downs. It is a tale made credible by the use of recognizable stereotypes – characters are painted in broad strokes with few individual features – the benevolent but helpless maharaja, the gutsy youthful village lad, the graceful belle, the archetypal mother figure, the local baddie, and so on. On the side of the Other are the powerful Captain Russell and his troops. The struggle, it is evident from the start, is an unequal one. So what is needed is a *deux ex machina* which appears in the form of Elizabeth, Capt Russell's sister who, raging against the unfairness of the match, takes on the role of the good fairy and helps the villagers learn the game so that they may put up a decent fight. The Gods will ultimately be kind, so it has been augured right in the initial stages, when the villagers start playing and hit the temple gong in the very first stroke. The rural space of *Lagaan* thus becomes a site where conflicting issues are resolved against a pastoral backdrop.

The simple tale is given an elevated, almost mock-heroic treatment. The cricket match becomes a full-fledged war. There are unmistakable parallels between the game of cricket and a battle on epical lines. The cricket field is like a battleground, a panoramic stretch dotted with spectators who wave flags and raise warlike cries from time to time. There are bugles, conches, trumpets, and a lot of war imagery. As before the

commencement of a battle, there is an invocation to the gods who can make or mar human destiny. All this is reminiscent of a scene from the *Mahabharata*, the extremely popular tele-serial of the decades preceding the film. But the massive turnout, the enthusiasm, and the large spread of supporters over the sprawling countryside is where the grandeur ends for the poor villagers. Their team is a raggedy one, that includes a cripple, a deaf-mute, a demoralized untouchable, a hirsute and bare-chested tantrik, and so on – all of them bare-footed and ill-clad, with insufficient knowledge of the complex rules of the game, hardly the potential for a sporting competition. On the other hand is the immaculately dressed English Eleven who have cricket in their blood, so to speak; they have been brought up playing the game and have practiced hard for this particular match. The struggle, no doubt, is unequal but this is what contributes to the suspense of the film. Despite the inequality, the villagers have to win, only then will poetic justice prevail. Only then will the levy of tax be exempted. Only then will the starving villagers survive another year of drought.

The selection of the native team is not without a design. It follows a democratic process, with the inclusion of representatives from different castes and creeds. Along with the majority of Hindu players there is a Muslim, a Sikh, a holy priest, and even an untouchable. The process of recruitment is similar to that used by another contemporary film, namely, *Ocean's Eleven*.[1] Here, too, each of the characters is handpicked on account of his individual skill (in *Ocean's Eleven* the skills relate to a break-in job, in *Lagaan* they relate to sporty accomplishments like batting, bowling, fielding, or the like). However, in the Hindi film, each of the characters also has a social role to perform – he is representative of his social and political position and a comment on the social strata that contains him. Ultimately all social differences are merged in the common cause against the oppressor. The cricket team thus becomes a microcosm for the nation, showing how, in the face of the enemy, the differences between the fragments of society are dissolved and the various factions unite as a single body to face a common adversary.[2]

Cricket would not conventionally be one's idea of revolutionary activity or of a political weapon, and yet history tells us that this game has indeed been used as a weapon by the British to colonize India and other Commonwealth countries. Ashish Nandy, in *The Tao of Cricket*, tells us that in the nineteenth century the emerging culture of cricket came in handy for colonizers who wished to hierarchize the cultures, faiths and societies which were, one by one, coming under colonial domination. Just as the language of the colonizer is a tool for subjugation, so is cricket. Bringing a foreign game into the colonized country, teaching the rules of the game to the locals, allowing them to play with their colonial masters, has been a strategy adopted by the colonizing power.[3] For such reasons was a foreign game introduced in India and it became the most popular pastime (almost an obsession) of the nation. It managed to replace the simpler, *desi* (meaning indigenous) games like the *gulli-danda*. In the film *Lagaan*, a comparison is made between the *desi* sport and the imported game. The basic strategy of the two are similar but the equipment differs: *gulli-danda* uses a small, peg-like primitively fashioned piece of wood and a baton; cricket, on the other hand, is a more sophisticated "gentleman's game," using a bat and a ball, gloves, wickets, and the works.[4] In the replacement of the old pastime by the master's sport we see the colonial takeover of the reins of power and in the fantasy world of Bombay cinema the game becomes a political weapon involving colonial issues and class differences.[5] The balance of power being tilted in favour of the British, to straighten the balance and in order to revert to things as they were, the master would have to be defeated in his own game, and by his own rules.[6]

Cricket has been called a schizophrenic game. (Nandy 7) The real purpose behind introducing the sport in colonized countries, as any discerning mind can see, was to subjugate and rule. At the same time it is a game that purports to uphold the English sense of justice and fair play. These two contradictory tendencies are vividly brought out in the course of the film. On the one hand is the Englishmen's desire to win the game simply to heap greater oppression on the colonized. On the other hand are the several

fair-minded colonizers for whom fair-play on the cricket ground is more important that political mastery, even if it ends in their defeat. This sense of justice helps the weaker team to ultimately strike a win.

Not just cricket, the film uses other traits of the English empire, only to turn them against the upholders. A critic points out that it is probably the first time in the history of Indian cinema that the British rulers have been portrayed in a favorable light. The film abandons the usual stereotype of the outsider as wicked and actually shows us a 'good' Englishwoman, and also some good English officers (barring Capt Russell). The Englishwoman makes a noble sacrifice and helps the native Indians win their battle against her evil brother and the colonial forces. As K. Hariharan points out, "it has taken more than 50 years of independent Indian cinema to finally accept that the white-skinned people are not all 'villains'! Thus far, the white 'Englishman' on the Indian screen had to be a smuggler, a spy or a narcotics dealer, while the white woman gyrated on the cabaret floor entrapping the poor brown native male…. Indian scholars have always seen this 'cinematic' racial/ ethnic prejudice as a typical post-colonial reaction by a nation subjugated to the dictates of the British Empire for three centuries." (Hariharan) This portrayal of the colonizer in a kindly light is a recent development and has not yet taken on completely. Even now, Bombay cinema is in the habit of painting the British rulers all black, with no redeeming shades. Witness, for example, the way they are depicted as cruel, uncouth, sadistic ruffians in "The Legend of Bhagat Singh" which appeared about the same time as *Lagaan.*

Lagaan uses all the tricks of cinematographic technology to tell a story, to create 'entertainment' rather than present a genuine challenge to the colonial power. It does not probe the psychological depths of its characters, but plays upon their superficies. In this way it is a pastoral that offends no one and yet satisfies the urges of the powerless to get at the powerful. The happy ending, the festive spirit, the camaraderie, together they underscore the carnivalesque (in the Bakhtinian sense) spirit of the film. In *Lagaan*, the popular blends with the elitist; there is a levelling of all hierarchies, the high and the low, caste and class distinctions are abandoned amongst the natives as they unite for a common cause.

To sum up, in the film we have a popular story that is narrated in such a manner that although it is well-grounded in India of a particular era, it can reach out to an audience distanced in space and time. Moreover, the ideology it presents is that which may be understood across borders. The idea of freedom and liberty, of independence and self-rule cannot be pegged on to any specific culture or peoples. Narratology and ideology thus interfuse in such a manner that what the film ultimately presents is a story that has a popular as well as serious, academic interest, appealing to the masses as well as the elite, grounded in the reality of late-nineteenth-century India, yet reaching out to the world in the twenty-first century with the message of justice and fairplay, love and compassion.

NOTES

1. It has also been pointed out that *Lagaan* has its predecessors in films like "Escape to Victory" and Zoltan Fabri's "Two and a Half Times in Hell"
2. Here there is a reference to the social history of cricket in India which initially restricted the game to the aristocracy and the upper castes. It was only later that players from lower castes, like Baloo (an 'untouchable' Pune cobbler) in the year 1911, supported by B.R. Ambedkar, the champion of the Dalits, were allowed to join the team.
3. In recent times the same policy was adopted by the Americans in Afghanistan where the youth was taught to play baseball by the Yankee troops.
4. Terms such as sportsmanship, dash, courage and temperament were important to cricket's Victorian ethos. Cricket, as Nandy points out, was through and through a "gentleman's" game, and all others were excluded by their inability to demonstrate an understanding of cricket's image of the ideal Englishman.
5. Cricket, a non-violent arena of assertion, is thus transformed into a tool to subvert colonial rule, says Boria Majumdar.
6. In 1893 it was not possible to defeat the British in armed combat, so some other means had to be adopted.

Part III

Entering the Twenty-First Century

Entering the Twenty-First Century

"For last year's words belong to last year's language and next year's words await another voice." **– T.S. Eliot ("Little Gidding")**

IN AN INFO-TECH WORLD

When fairy tales travel through time to the twentieth century, they are re-worked and re-presented in a different form. Looking at the theme of metamorphosis discussed earlier, we see that when Gregor Samsa turns into an insect in Franz Kafka's "Metamorphosis," the focus is on the changing reactions of the family members: the tragedy and then coming to terms with it – the shame, the sorrow, the guilt, the entire gamut of emotions evoked in the aftermath of the transformation. It is, as Harold Skulsky puts it, a state of "alienation without grace" (Skulsky 171-194). There is no explanation for the central event of the story, which takes place in the *ante rem*: Gregor Samsa has already metamorphosed into an insect when the story begins. There is no reprieve either. As in the fairy tale, there is neither logic nor rationale, no attempt to explain the transformation. What holds us in thrall, as a critic puts it, is the "imprisonment of a human consciousness within the body of an insect [which]

is a metaphor for much of our experience as human beings" (Clifford 33).

In a 1986 film version of another metamorphosis story – again a man turning into an insect – David Cronenberg uses George Langelaan's story, "The Fly" not simply to re-tell the familiar story but to re-work the theme in such a way as to make it credible in scientific terms to a contemporary, sophisticated audience (Cronenberg 1986). In this film the change that takes place in the central character of the story is explained scientifically: a computer-scientist given to experimentation with his machines, invents a complex system by which a living being may be "teleported" – placed in one machine and disintegrated, then transported to another machine and reassembled in the original form. He tries out his experiment successfully on a monkey, but when he tries it on himself, a fly accidentally finds its way into the machine and two living creatures get "teleported" together. As a result, the computer gets confused and the two bodies are combined in a single form that initially has a human appearance but soon starts metamorphosing into a gigantic fly. The process is irreversible and horrifying – in the body of an insect is housed a human brain which remains alert right to the end, making the film a hair-raising experience. The old theme of metamorphosis, thus, combines with science fiction and is made relevant to the audience in the age of computers. Much the same happens in the John Travolta / Nicolas Cage starrer "Face/Off" where the heads of two men (who stand for good and evil and are bent on destroying each other) are transposed with the help of advance science and medical technology: a twentieth-century re-working of "The Transposed Heads".

Perhaps there is a moral lesson behind the story of Gregor Samsa reworked as the story of the Fly: a distopic vision, a lesson against the disastrous consequences of machines controlling our lives. One may take the Cronenberg film as a warning against the evils of the age of science and how one may be dehumanized or turned into a brute at the slightest slip-up. "The Fly, " or even "Face/Off," thus become allegories located in the contemporary situation, but relevant to all times, people and places. The theme of transformation, whether it is a case of switched identities, of a man who is transformed into an animal, or of an animal who turns into a man, continues to fascinate, horrify, and repel, no matter how it is presented: through an elitist or a popular form.

Stories in Cyber Space

"The old order changeth, yielding place to new…." Along with the old order, changes take place in education, curriculum and pedagogy. Those who dabble in humanities, language or literature departments are faced with a crisis – how do we keep alive the interest of our younger generations in the books we read, the stories we believe in, and the knowledge we wish to disseminate? In other words, how do we keep alive the tradition of story-telling in the contemporary age of information sciences when young minds have moved far from the printed book and when attentions spans are limited to the virtual and the visual?

While heading towards a conclusion, what the present study tries to postulate is that (a) change in narratives and narratology is inevitable, keeping in view the giant strides taken by science and technology; (b) the story-teller, the *kathakaar* of old, and the printed book, on which we depended so far, are now almost rendered obsolete; (c) new modes of dissemination of information, of telling stories, are now available and have been adopted; and, finally, (d) we live in a multi-tasking age when we need to get real, give up the traditional approach, and hone our skills at the computer, the internet, and other means of communication now available.

Stories are now told via cyberspace, using the Blog, Facebook, Twitter, and countless other modes constantly being born in the fast-changing cyber world. Not only are these effective means of communication / dissemination of information, they are also powerful tools for generating and sustaining an interest in the study of narratology. In addition, one may speak of the role played by selected sites like Google, Amazon, Asia Writes and Editor Bob, the radio and the television. The internet has, no doubt, encouraged isolated 'virtual' lives to some extent, but it can also play an invaluable role in the dissemination of stories and in brining far-flung people together.

Ever since the birth of the internet, in the 1970s, there has been a lurking fear that stories in the printed book would disappear one day. Although this has not happened – we still read books, buy them, borrow, or exchange them – there are other ways in which stories are now told, through e-books, Kindle, and several internet sites. Although the romance of the book continues, digital literature emerges on the scene which seems to be the solution in times when sources of information, such as dictionaries, encyclopedias and news websites, need to be consistently updated. No doubt, with the plethora of online literature comes the problem of maintaining and updating information and also of checking and re-checking its reliability (e.g. Wikipedia).

Looking back at earlier modes of transmission including the oral tale, the wandering story-teller, song, dance, epics, we wonder, where are they now? They have not disappeared but simply changed their form with the passage of time. There was a time when printed books replaced the oral form of story-telling but then these too were overshadowed by other forms of communication: the cinema, the TV and the internet, all of which continue to provide entertainment as well as information. In an age when one is fighting global warming and striving to go green, the idea of a paperless library need not be underestimated.

The Blog came into existence at the last *fin de siècle*, around 1998, the word 'blog' a portmanteau that brings together the

words 'web' and 'log'. Beginning as a 'log book' or an online diary, the form soon captured the attention of internet users and became popular. Weblogs were first listed on Cameron Barrett's list on Camworld (camworld.org). People who maintained online logs sent their URLs to Barrett list which provided access to all the sites. In 1997 John Barger called this form of information 'weblog' which was pronounced as wee-blog by Peter Merholz in 1999 and later simply shortened to 'blog'.[1] Blogging became a popular pastime with people who wished to write and share their thoughts but had little or no access to publications. In July 1999 Pitas launched the first toolkit for building one's own blog. Almost immediately hundreds of blogs sprang up. Those who blogged came to be known as 'bloggers'. In most cases blogging is a habit that caters to the individual's need for expression, for reaching out to others, for telling their own stories. It is a cheap and easy way of publishing and sharing one's work online. It is a mode of empowerment and a blogger gradually builds up his/ her self-confidence with each blog entry. The subjects are generally free-wheeling, however, there are theme-based blogs, too, which have a specific aim, whether it is to share ideas on a particular topic or to root for a special cause. In comparison with elaborate websites for which one needs to buy domain space and hire technical experts, blogs are easy to create, fun to design, need little expertise for maintenance, and serve their purpose well enough. A lot of stories today are circulated via the blog.

Google Groups[2] bring together any number of people and are another easy way of sharing stories. This, one may say, is the contemporary equivalent of the village court where rustics would gather around the village story teller, when story-telling was a communal activity. Threaded conversations and discussions are stored at the discretion of the group manager and available for reference when needed. No doubt, it empowers the manager of the group to exercise authority on the other members (and this is akin to the power wielded by the traditional story-teller) but they are free to unsubscribe from the list if they so wish. Google documents help store information that is retrievable at a later stage when required.

All this facilitates the sharing of information for mutual benefit. Earlier search engines include Hotbot, Usenet and Deja News. All of them have since been overshadowed by Google (it acquired Deja in 2001) which remains a dynamic site, reinventing itself from time to time, the latest being Google Chrome in which newer features including tab-browsing have been added. Other search engines like www.bing.com are also used and vie for popularity vis-à-vis Google.

Stories are also exchanged through social networking sites, the most popular in recent years being undoubtedly the Facebook with 900 million members (as in May 2012) and still increasing by the day. The recent film, "Social Network"[3] gives a graphic account of the beginnings of the program, starting in Harvard with a brilliant but off-beat student, Mark Zuckerberg, getting drunk over a jilted romance, venting his anger by putting together a community page that viciously rated the beauty of all the girls on the campus. No doubt chauvinist in its approach, Facemash, as it was known initially, in 2003, evolved and expanded, bringing in its train all the power politics of a successful business entrepreneurship. It is today the most used social networking service, followed by MySpace. Allowing its members to share their whereabouts, interests and stories through 'status' messages, connected links and photo albums, it has added a new dimension to the idea of friendship. Simultaneously it has added new terminology to our vocabulary, with words like 'unfriend' and 'unlike' as opposites of 'friend' and 'like' respectively (all verbs). No doubt, it has encountered adverse criticism, too, with several countries (like China or the Islamic countries) banning Facebook and Google either on religious grounds[4] or to prevent their employees from wasting their time. There have been legal suits and issues of intellectual property and privacy rights. However, its popularity, outreach, and effectiveness remain undisputed. Facebook's self-proclaimed mission remains "to give people the power to share and make the world more open and connected."[5]

For downloading and accessing literature www. webquest. com has proved to be a useful site as is www.amazon.com[6] which has been serving the academic (and lay) reader for the

last two decades, a very useful mode of sharing literature and getting books online. There are other bookstores which have gone online, following the resounding success of Amazon. At this point of time, almost all big bookstores have online transactions with their clients. As teachers and students of literature we no longer need to put ourselves to any inconvenience, brave the weather or the traffic to hunt for bookstores when we can easily do all this with the click of the mouse.

At this point, it may be rewarding to briefly look at two dissimilar websites which are forums for sharing stories. The first AsiaWrites (www.asiawrites.org) which shares information, also encourages individual creativity and accepts submissions online, thus leading to the creation of new stories. It is a site updated twice daily and its mission is "to provide writers with legitimate and the most suitable opportunities to develop their craft and publicize their works; and keep them abreast with literary events in the region and elsewhere."[7] It circulates opportunities (residencies, scholarships, fellowships, and grants), calls for submissions, writing competitions, publication and media jobs, and employment opportunities in reputable universities. Originating as a Blog, it acquired a domain in August 2010. This is a freely accessible site. As of February 2011, the project has 7,800 followers and averages 1,500 hits per day.

The other site may be more familiar to those who use the internet to send greetings online: www.123greetings.com and Editor Bob's Newsletter. The website tells us that "Meeting the basic human need for connectedness, Editor Bob publishes a weekly newsletter that details interesting stories about Editor Bob's life and chronicles his misadventures with friends and family. He focuses on human interaction and emotions, and tries to inspire others to appreciate the little things in life."[8] Apart from e-cards, 123 Greeting's Editor Bob also circulates short stories and anecdotes in a blog.[9] Again, it is all about bringing people together, sharing information and stories, courtesy the internet. However, one needs to keep in mind that for the dissemination of literature through advanced information technology one needs a good internet connection and secondly, a computer-savvy community. The World Wide Web of the internet has thus led to the formation of a World Wide Web of information dissemination which literature enthusiasts are using more than ever now for knowledge sharing and online discussions.

However, in this process, the "exchange" value has gone up and the "knowledge" value is no longer a priority. Story-telling in the age of information sciences has a capitalist flavor and heralds a new economic regime. One needs to buy an interface to read a text on, eg, a Kindle or ipad, which will only allow its own applications to run and will lock out other formats and literature provided by other content providers. So the simple act of reading a book becomes complex. Besides, there are issues of copyright. Online, everything is dynamic, and copyright is flexible, sometimes accessing information might be inadvertently illegal (e.g., the time Amazon pulled off access to George Orwell books off its users' Kindles because it did not have the license to distribute).

With the help of computer-aided techniques it is not only possible to share stories but it is also possible to see the world as a flat playground and bring people of similar interests together as one big family: which takes us back to *Vasudhaiva Kuttumbakkam* according to our ancient Indian philosophy. Old stories may bear fruit again when they are retold through new technology. The whole exercise can also turn into a community activity. The virtual may spill over to the real and vice versa. Cyber communication and personal contact may be fruitfully combined and result in a holistic experience in a shared adventure, the pursuit of the elusive story, and the love of literature.

NOTES

1. http://www.rebeccablood.net/essays/weblog_history.html "Weblogs: a History and Perspective"
2. "Google Groups is a service from Google Inc. that supports discussion groups, including many Usenet

newsgroups, based on common interests. The service was started in 1995 as Deja News, and was transitioned to Google Groups after a February 2001 buyout."

3.   The film is based on the American author, Ben Mezrich's 2009 book titled *The Accidental Billionaires: The Founding of Facebook, A Tale of Sex, Money, Genius, and Betrayal.*

4.   In response to the "Everybody Draw Mohammed Day" controversy and the ban of the website in Pakistan, an Islamic version of the website was created, called MillatFacebook.

5.   http://www.facebook.com/facebook?sk=info

6.   http://www.amazon.com/Careers-University-Recruiting/b?ie=UTF8&node=203348011
   "At Amazon, we strive to be Earth's most customer-centric company where people can find and discover anything they want to buy online. Amazon's evolution from Web site to e-commerce partner to development platform is driven by the spirit of innovation that is part of our DNA. We hire the world's brightest minds, offering them an environment in which they can relentlessly improve the experience for customers. We do this every day by solving complex technical and business problems with ingenuity and simplicity. We're making history and the good news is that we've only just begun."

7.   http://www.asiawrites.org/p/asia-writes-project.html

8.   http://nl.123greetings.com/

9.   http://nl.123greetings.com/blog/editor-bob/

Story-Telling in Transnational Time

Today, more than ever before, we need to be aware of the inter-connections between stories that emerge from different parts of the globe. We now live in transnational times when literature cannot be placed in water-tight compartments. With the cross-flow of ideas and people, there is a free-flow and intermingling of different traditions so that it is no longer possible to claim exclusivity. A study of narratives across cultures also highlights the need to look at new tools for story-telling and for critical analysis. Globalization is a reality which cannot be ignored today; it questions all beliefs that have reigned supreme in the last century. Over the last few decades certain buzz-words have been invented and are used repeatedly in literary studies; older ideas which may no longer be valid have been abandoned.

Take the issue of hybridity, for instance, or diaspora: how relevant are they in today's age? The whole notion of hybridity, as Neil Lazarus stated in 2004, has undergone a change because of the mingling of different racial categories and the resultant pluralism in all social structures. Hybridity has now become a "progressive term" with new connotations. (Lazarus 255) The movement of large chunks of population – by choice or under compulsion – and the questioning of identity, or the state of being marginalized in an alien culture are, no doubt, valid issues that critics have focused on but the point that needs to be stressed now is that we need to move on. Back in 1999, Gayatri Spivak had revised her notions on diaspora and exile, realizing that "diaspora becomes a kind of alibi" and not a genuine concern with those at the receiving end of global capitalism." (361) Earlier, in 1996, Arjun Appadurai realized that the world is changing and in this rapidly transforming world we need new parameters: "the new global cultural economy has to be seen as a complex, overlapping, disjunctive order that cannot any longer be understood in terms of existing centre-periphery models." (Appadurai 32). How then should we look at narratives today? Looking for an answer, perhaps we could refer to John Berger's essay entitled "Against the Great Defeat of the World" where he talks about the world being broken up into jagged pieces of glass – pieces that do not fit into a single coherent whole, pieces that will never fit together to make any sense. In such a fragmented scenario Berger is of the opinion that "it is necessary to build a new world, a world capable of combining all worlds." (Berger xv) in other words, join the pieces together to form a new whole.

Ania Loomba in 2005 agreed that what matters today is "transnational networks, regional and international flows and the dissolution of geographical and cultural borders, paradigms which are familiar to postcolonial critics but which are now invoked to suggest a radical break with the narratives of colonization and anti-colonialism." (Loomba 213) Similarly, Frank Schulze-Engler tells us that "On the one hand, postcolonialism has branched out into so many disciplines that many postcolonial debates today seem increasingly irrelevant to literary studies; on the other, some of the chief tenets of postcolonial theory developed in the last two decades now seem hard to reconcile with the literary and cultural dynamic of a rapidly globalizing world." (Eckstein 20)

These diverse voices seem to point in a single direction – that the world has changed and we need to change accordingly. We need to have a different approach to the stories that give us the literature of our times. So what is the solution?

About two hundred years ago, Johann Wolfgang Goethe put forward his concept of *Weltliteratur*: "Nowadays, national literature doesn't mean much: the age of world literature is beginning, and everybody should contribute to hasten its advent." This was Goethe way back in 1827. A little later, in 1849, Karl Marx and Engels could look ahead and prophesy: "The intellectual creations of individual nations become common property. National one-sidedness and narrow-mindedness become more and more impossible and from the numerous national and local literatures there arises a world literature."

The suggested shift of focus to global parameters does not necessarily mean that one should ignore configurations of power across the globe and focus solely on connections and cross-connections in the cross-flow of population and ideas across international borders. In literary studies the change of focus would entail the analysis of a text against a wider backdrop, regardless of chronotopic borders, relating it to cultures distanced in time and space, whether they are precolonial, colonial, or postcolonial, master or slave, in bondage or liberated. Thomas L. Friedman, in his celebrated book *The World is Flat: A Brief History of the Twenty-first Century,* recounts how Nandan Nilekani told him some years ago that "the global economic playing field is being leveled" – a statement that influenced him so much that it triggered off thoughts on the changes brought about by the new global economy, making him realize that globalization has "leveled competitive playing fields between industrial and emerging market countries." Among the ten "flatteners" he lists the internet, the web, uploading, outsourcing, insourcing, etc, all factors which have produced the "dotcom boom" and the "wired world". In such a tightly connected world what is important is not simply the distribution of political power between the colonizer and the colonized but the collective struggle for economic and technological progress in which nations across the world are engaged. The site of struggle, thus undergoes a change and it seems passé to talk about the stories of a people being the outcome of the impact of colonization or decolonization, or of diasporas, margins and centres. This is a time when the dotcom impact is the most important phenomenon governing contemporary life, a time when the diasporic writer has no legitimate reason for indulging his angst as he is in constant touch, through the clicking of his mouse, with homelands, imagined and real. Globalization, as Friedman tells us, has "accidentally made Beijing, Bangalore and Bethesda next-door neighbors." In such a scenario it is not possible to confine narratives to ivory towers created by ethnicity or nationality. So, from narratives of colonialism we now may move to narratives of globalization. This is the need of the hour.

In their anthology entitled *The Postcolonial and the Global,* Revathy Krishnaswamy and John C. Hawley bring together leading postcolonial critics (including Arjun Appadurai, Timothy Brennan, Pheng Cheah, Inderpal Grewal, Walter Mignolo, R. Radhakrishnan, and Saskia Sassen) who argue that we can no longer ignore global issues. Inderpal Grewal, for instance, suggests a possible revival of "cosmopolitanism" which, incidentally, is close to the Indian philosophy of "Vasudhaiva kuttumbakam", i.e., the world is my home or the whole world is one single family. It is also akin to the Aftican notion of 'ubuntu' which, as explained by Nelson Mandela, refers to an open society (as against a small, enclosed one) and relates to the essence of being human and working for the benefit of a larger community. Literature in this transformed world reflects this broader concern. The postcolonial novel that we know today has changed: from being simply a "national allegory" (Fredric Jameson) it has cut across boundaries and gone global. "Does the contemporary postcolonial novel inform a new cosmopolitanism?" asks a recent issue of *Culture-History-Globalization* (5:2009)

At this point one may cite a few examples from contemporary India to endorse the view that it is no longer possible to study literature in isolation from the world outside its national boundaries. In most of our contemporary novels there is a deliberate attempt to forge a connection between diverse communities, peoples and races, and link different geographical and cultural locales. The novel has thus gone

hybrid and – very much like the characters it portrays – cannot be confined to its birthplace or the birthplace of its creator. Salman Rushdie's *Shalimar, the Clown* may be a story that has its roots in Kashmir but it moves out of the Valley, cuts across time and space, relocating itself in the USA, changes the tenor of its characters, their lifestyle and traditions, completes a full circle before it returns to its starting point in Srinagar. The tale that is narrated is as much at home in Srinagar as in California. Shashi Tharoor in *The Elephant, The Tiger And The Cellphone: Reflections on India in the Twenty-first Century* tells us how he visualizes India morphing from a somnolent elephant into an aggressive tiger despite the pockets of poverty and neglect that still continue to dot the scene. India is forging ahead as a world power and it is time we stopped viewing it as merely the survivor of a prolonged colonial encounter. In other words, our perspective needs to shift from the postcolonial to the global. (Note how many of the 'Indian' novels today have been written outside India – Salman Rushdie, Shashi Tharoor, Rohinton Mistry, Bharati Mukherjee, et.al.)

While on the subject of tigers, it is hard to overlook Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger* which narrates the story of the upwardly mobile Balram Halwai who begins from a socially underprivileged section of society but rises from the seamy underbelly of India to carve a niche for himself in a rapidly changing economy. In this rags-to-riches story the protagonist, based for the most part in Bangalore, narrates his story in the epistolary technique through letters written to none other than Wen Jiabao, the premier of China. Bangalore and Beijing are thus brought on the same platform – or rather, to use Thomas Friedman's favorite metaphor, on the same playing field.

We may also take a look at the Indian contribution to the world of cinema and see how a transnational effort goes into each successful film. Take *Slumdog Millionaire*, for instance. Its initial appearance as Vikas Sarup's novel, *Q & A*, is very Indian, focusing on those below the poverty line, the underprivileged in the slums of Mumbai. The squalor and filth presented in the book is just what the western world loves to associate with India. But, at the same time, the story has other

than local dimensions in that it cuts across time and space and can be related to the numerous rags-to-riches stories one reads about in almost all cultures, Indian or western. Moreover, the ladder used for climbing up, "Kaun Banega Crorepati", is a rip-off from its western counterpart, the UK reality game show, "Who Wants to be a Millionaire." This borrowing is what connects two different worlds, on the one hand the underprivileged with the privileged, and on the other the postcolonial with the erstwhile colonizing power, the *desi* with the *videshi*. When adapted on-screen, the *desi* or the postcolonial story further undergoes a transformation, becoming a very western film in the hands of Danny Boyle. Marketing it in the right package is extremely important and Danny Boyle knows the ropes, so he gives the western audience something that meets its expectations: "Here are the slums of India," the film seems to declare, "Look here, you privileged first world denizens, here is the third world with its horrifying poverty and dirt!" The film fits the bill and is an instant hit at the Oscars and we, in India congratulate ourselves that we have the best slums in the world and go overboard singing 'Jai Ho!'

And now to pose a question – Is the film a national film or a global film? Is it national or transnational? The point is that the borderline between the national and the global is not as defined as we were made to believe two decades ago. In a world of rapidly disappearing borders roots give way to shoots and roads are replaced by crossroads. A tale written in India, adopted by an Englishman, lauded by critics of world cinema is a good example of transnationalism and transculturalism. Other such examples may be cited. Deepa Mehta, for instance, who is of Indian origin, lives in Canada, makes films on Indian themes as well as Indo-Canadian encounters. Or one may look at Meera Nair and Gurinder Chadha whose cinematic attempts again juxtapose the western scenario with the Indian. Deepti Naval, Manoj Night Shyamalan and Shekhar Kapoor are again film directors who have made cross-over films that blur the difference between the national and the transnational. (These examples are deliberately chosen from India.) Whereas a postcolonial approach actually retains binaries by defining

them clearly with its rhetoric of 'otherness', a transnational, global approach is more in tune with reality and sees art and literature as fluid, merging, blending, dismantling binaries, intermingling, across national borders and other man-made barriers. Harish Trivedi, in his essay "From Bollywood to Hollywood," speaks of the globalization of Hindi Cinema and highlights its hybrid aspects. (Goldberg 2002) With its liberal borrowing from Hollywood, its Hinglish and its musical scores (many of them plagiarized) that are much appreciated across the globe, Bollywood has passed from the local into the global, just like Indian writing in English has finally found a niche in world literature. Often, we hear the term "glocal" used as a portmanteau to describe the synthesis between the two spheres.

Among the forces that erase differences, one would place MTV at the top of the list but Friedman sees the Big Mac as a great binder, symbolic of strong economic ties between countries of the world. In his 1999 book *The Lexus and the Olive Tree*, he says: "No two countries that both had McDonald's had fought a war against each other since each got its McDonald's". This may seem an exaggeration but it is close to a thought expressed by O. V. Vijayan who, in 1997, commemorating the fiftieth anniversary of India's independence, talked about the cultural invasion from the west radically re-shaping the quality of our lives. He spoke of war-heads being replaced by MacDonalds as effective tools in cultural wars:

"Look out and what do we see? A loud-mouthed cretin comes to the silos where nuclear warheads are kept in semi-slumber. The cretin calls out to them, 'I have come to wake you. Do you know who I am?'

The warheads waddle out of their sleep. They say, 'Our master.'

'What else?'

'You are the Big Mac.'"

The Big Mac, like the internet, like cable TV, is one big binding factor.

The thrust of the argument so far is that we are now in a transnational, post-dotcom stage, on a globalized platform where global, transcultural issues are more important than issues restricted to limited spheres; where, on a flat world, under the glow of cyber-powered neon lights we play a ball game with none but ourselves as referees. One wrong move and we are edged off the court and the game will still go on with other players. In order to remain on the playing field we need to get real, change our critical apparatus and upgrade our tools. We need new stories for these times, "For last year's words belong to last year's language and next year's words await another voice."

Conclusion:
Philosophy, Ideology and the Story

"All great storytellers have in common the freedom with which they move up and down the rungs of their experience as on a ladder. A ladder extending downward to the interior of the earth and disappearing into the clouds is the image for a collective experience to which even the deepest shock of every individual experience, death, constitutes no impediment or barrier." - **Walter Benjamin**

In lieu of a conclusion, it would be rewarding to look at a text that announces its subject in a staccato fashion:

If on a winter's night a traveller
Outside the town of Malbork
Leaning from the steep slope
Without fear of wind or vertigo
Looks down in the gathering shadow
In a network of lines that enlace
In a network of lines that intersect
On the carpet of leaves illuminated by the moon
Around the empty grave –
What story down there awaits its end?

These ten lines, taken from Italo Calvino's *If On A Winter's Night A Traveller* (1979/tr.1981), are titles of ten chapters of the book, the story of a Male Reader who begins to read a novel entitled *If*

On A Winter's Night A Traveller by Italo Calvino. After thirty pages he discovers that the book comprises nothing but the first section over and over. So he returns to the bookshop, discovers that the book is not by Calvino but by a Polish writer, makes friends with an Other Reader, Ludmilla, who has had the same problem with her copy of Calvino. They both buy the book by the Pole which turns out to be another story altogether and this too has a binding mistake. So they return to the shop… and so it goes on and on, each narrative breaking off at a point of crisis. The novel alternates between scenes from the characters' lives and the fiction that they read. The chapters they read are not from the same work but from ten different books – ten interrupted chapters or 'incipits', novels at an incipient stage. Their captions (quoted above) are worth looking at: if you take the titles alone, they stand together as an independent narrative – the open-ended nature of the text defined by the interrogation at the end. However, although they form a complete unit in themselves, these lines are simply titles of digressions, stories which move tangentially away but are linked together by the framing narrative of the Male Reader and Ludmilla. Calvino is a fabulator experimenting with metafiction in this novel. The experiment begs a question – what is Calvino trying to tell us through this novella? What is his philosophy?

In a 1982 interview with William Weaver, Calvino is reported to have said: "The conflict between the chaos of the world and man's obsession with making some sense of it is a recurrent pattern in what I've written."[1] *If on a Winter's Night a Traveler* attempts to do something of this sort – it presents the chaos of the world and challenges the reader to see a pattern in it. The ten incipits are like random pieces of a jigsaw puzzle. Scattered haphazard, they seem to make no sense but if they are sorted out the connection between them emerges, they fall into place and present a complete picture. In similar fashion, Calvino's *The Castle of Crossed Destinies* (1973), is built around the imagery of medieval Tarot cards. Each card is independent and yet all the cards come together to make a complete picture. This is Calvino's modus operandi. Again, one may ask, what is the philosophy underlying his work? One may possibly venture a

guess – that he is doing what T.S. Eliot did in *The Waste Land*: creating a collage of variegated bits and pieces, fragments gathered from different sources to create vast scrap-heap to represent the world: "these fragments have I shored against my ruins" – the world that another poet had described as a huge garbage bin:

> "a mound of refuse or the sweepings of a street,
> Old kettles, old bottles, and a broken can,
> Old iron, old bones, old rags, that raving slut
> Who keeps the till. …
> the foul rag and bone shop…." (W.B. Yeats).

Despite all the chaos, through those broken shards, those disjointed incipits and stories left hanging mid-air, the writer tries to tell us that all is not lost – there is still hope for the garbage heap to be shot through with a ray of bright light, still the possibility of some sense emerging from the apparent anarchy.

Returning to Calvino's *The Castle of Crossed Destinies,* one would possibly like to read more than just the literal meaning in the text. It connotes not simply a castle where travellers stop for a temporary sojourn, it may be taken as a metaphor for the philosophy contained within the text. There is a plurality of entrances into this work and the one chosen by reader X may not necessarily coincide with that chosen by Y. Yet the structure remains, it cannot be wished away. The castle of crossed destinies represents the text with multiple entry points, comprising criss-crossing philosophies into which readers may enter from various doorways. Like *If on a Winter's Night,* it as an open-ended text, the meaning of which is created by the reader or viewer. Roland Barthes' differentiation between the Doxa and Paradoxa would here be useful.

The present study of narratives across cultures should rightly conclude with three different yet related aspects of a narrative – philosophy, ideology and the story. The present study has treated story-telling as the narration of an event (or a string of events) that is passed on from teller to recipient, possibly designed for the entertainment of the latter, and invariably involving the transfer of some knowledge from the one to the other. The philosophy of a text may be taken as that which includes the ideology, the meaning and the thoughts conveyed from one party (whether individual or collective) to another. It is worth recalling the etymology of 'philosophy': philosophy is derived from the Ancient Greek word meaning 'love of wisdom' and it is wisdom of one kind or another that is communicated through the stories that we narrate, the stories we are told and the tales we love to hear over and over again. Every story-teller has some ideas to communicate to the listeners and these ideas travel down with time. Ideology, in the present context it has taken in its basic form – as that which embodies ideas.

In an attempt to unearth the philosophy informing a story, we try to locate its overt and also covert meanings. Moving away from the "grand tradition of humanistic scholarship" (Abrams) we juggle the various components, turn them inside out, move them back and forth, shuffle the images, dismantle the hierarchy, compare and contrast it with convention and orthodoxy. In other words, we play with it as we look for possible meanings. As we dig further, as we venture deeper into the castle, we discover hidden chambers, secret tunnels, lofts, alcoves, attics and garrets tucked away, winding passages and corridors leading into one another, all of this inside the text which is like Calvino's castle of crossed destinies. Caught up in this game, we start enjoying the adventure, the feeling of incredulity, of being offered so much and the possibility of even more. Roland Barthes calls it the "moment of extreme bliss" (*The Pleasure of the Text*), Hillis Miller calls it the "uncanny moment" (Hillis Miller's essay, "The Critic as Host") and M.H. Abrams refers to it as the "moment of impasse" ("The Deconstructive Angel") when the text overpowers the reader, when the recipient loses himself in the story, when the abyss is suddenly revealed to expose the fathomless uncertainties that a text may hold within itself. Looking for the meaning, ideology, or philosophy in a text is such an adventure and one is left as though in a empty chamber with many meanings, many philosophies flying around in the darkened air – like a million bats, whistling, swishing and whooshing past us. Each reader of Calvino's book reads the same novel and yet the experience is different in each case. The meaning is never fixed.

Much of the meaning of a text depends on the voices that are heard, voices that Bakhtin speaks of in his concepts like

dialogism, heteroglossia and polyglossia. Take as an example, a poem like "Goblin Market" by Christina Rossetti. [2] Written in the 19th Century, it was allowed to see the light of the day without any controversy as it was taken to be an innocent fairy tale, a children's story of sibling love, just the kind that the Victorian society would allow a woman to pen. At the same time, the didactic element was noted and it was recognised as an allegory of good and evil, of temptation and its pitfalls. The religious-minded saw it as a Christian fable portraying the temptations of Christ, or a post-lapsarian parable modelled on the Fall of man. The poem satisfied those with a puritan bent of mind in its depiction of the travails of the fallen woman and the importance of sexual chastity. In the twentieth century, however, feminist readings have discovered new philosophies underlying the text. The protagonist Laura has an inquiring mind; her sister Lizzie is strong and resourceful. Together they defeat the goblins who represent harsh patriarchal society. Perhaps this was the idea Christina Rossetti wanted to convey but, living in an age where expression of such ideas was taboo, all she could do was to "tell it slant" (as Emily Dickinson would put it – "tell the truth but tell it slant!"). Tell it slant in a story if you have to, but tell the truth you must or else there will be no record of it, it will die with you – you and your truth, your philosophy, will perish together, going down, down, down gently into that inevitable goodnight of Dylan Thomas's poem.

Talking about death, what is story-telling but "time pass" as we call it, whiling away the time allotted to us until we hear the knock on the door? "Death is the sanction of everything that the storyteller can tell. He has borrowed his authority from death," says Walter Benjamin. (49) In this respect, it is safe to assume that all writers are essentially fighting against mortality, trying to seek a permanent place for themselves in a world that must inevitably decay. Death invariably forms the warp and woof of the stories we hear and the stories we tell. Quoting Calvino again,

"In ancient times a story could end only in two ways: having passed all the tests, the hero and the heroine married, or else they died. The ultimate meaning to which all stories refer has two faces: the continuity of life, the inevitability of death." (Calvino, *IOWN* 259).

A story-teller narrates stories in order to stay alive. Princess Scherezade, struggling to keep death away, narrates a thousand and one stories to Prince Sharyar, prolonging her life with each story, one night at a time, until she finally wins his reprieve. She keeps the Prince hanging on to the tale, waiting with baited breath for the next episode, the next event, the next twist in the story, even as she dreads the moment when the narrative would finally cease to flow, for that moment would bring her certain death. In a work inspired by *1001 Arabian Nights*, Vikram Chandra talks about a type-writing monkey who spins out his tales endlessly to escape Yama, the God of Death: tales that open up surrealistic worlds, part real and part unreal. *Red Earth and Pouring Rain*, through the unusual image of the monkey at the typewriter reflects, obliquely, the situation of the writer who must compulsively write in order to escape from the oblivion of anonymity. The only way to avoid Yama's shadow, to ensure one's permanence in an impermanent world, is to leave a written legacy behind – which the writer tries to do. Story-telling thus becomes an assertion of life in the face of death, an attempt at fighting extinction. In a similar vein, Salman Rushdie, in *Haroun and the Sea of Stories*, narrates how traumatic it is for one who is silenced by oppressive forces. Rashid (note the play on Rushdie) is a story-teller who loses his power to tell stories. Assisted by his son, Haroun, he has to struggle to regain his story-telling powers. The loss of speech here is related to Rushdie's personal circumstances, his exile following the fatwa against him. The ability to tell stories is thus synonymous with the act of living.

In conclusion, one more question needs to be answered: what is the final meaning of a text? What is its underlying philosophy, its ultimate truth? Academics and critics, conditioned by diverse critical viewpoints, would perhaps come up with several divergent answers: that meaning is (a) that which resides in the omniscient author's mind, it is his philosophy that informs the work; (b) that which is contained within the body of the text – deconstruct it and you will discover it; (c) that which is determined by the text, whether it is readerly or writerly in Barthes' sense; (d) that which is created by the reader which may be a far cry from the writer's intended

meaning; (e) there is a plurality of meaning, perhaps thirteen or more ways of looking at a text. Instead of a single, monolithic wisdom (or philosophy) a story presents us many wisdoms, many philosophies, many ideologies. Which of these is right? Groping for an answer, one may quote Auden and say: "They [are] right, my dear, all those voices [are] right."

> "They were right, my dear, all those voices were right
> And still are; [a given text is not as simple as] it looks,
> Nor its peace the historical calm of a site
> Where something was settled once and for all:
> …It … calls into question
> All the Great Powers assume; it disturbs our rights.
> ….Dear, I know nothing
> … but …[when you tell me a story] what I hear is the murmur
> Of underground streams…."   **(W.H. Auden)**

A text looks back at the past even as it reaches out into the future, challenging the reader with its multifarious meanings, like a thousand streams and rivulets, tributaries and torrents and brooks, fountains and waterfalls, tumbling down together, gushing forth as a mighty force, like the cataract of Lodore that Robert Southey sang of, which goes

> "gleaming and streaming and steaming and beaming,
> And rushing and flushing and brushing and gushing,
> And flapping and rapping and clapping and slapping,
> And curling and whirling and purling and twirling,
> And thumping and plumping and bumping and jumping,
> And dashing and flashing and splashing and clashing;

And so never ending…." ("The Cataract of Lodore," Robert Southey)

NOTES

1.   Albert Sbragia, "Italo Calvino's Ordering of Chaos,"MFS Modern Fiction Studies - Volume 39, Number 2, 1993, pp. 283-306 http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/mfs/summary/v039/39.2.sbragia.html
2.   http://content.loudlit.org/audio/goblin/pages/01_01_goblin.htm