

OTHER FICTIONS

READING INDIAN SHORT STORIES AS TEXTS IN CREATIVE WRITING CLASSES

By Stephen Alter

One of the most common mantras repeated by creative writing instructors is that “you should only write about what you know.” For the most part this is probably a good idea, since American high school and college students have plenty of stories to tell from their own childhood and adolescence. Unlike more mature writers, they have yet to exhaust the fictional potential of youthful experiences and discoveries. At the same time, however, there is no reason why these students should only read about what they know. In fact, I have discovered that young writers are often inspired by stories that come out of a culture and tradition quite separate from their own. In fiction writing classes for undergraduates, I regularly assign texts by authors from India. This is intended partly to introduce them to an unfamiliar and exciting body of literature, but also to shake their imaginations loose from common preconceptions about the territorial limits of fiction.

Even with the recent wave of multiculturalism there is a deep-rooted provincial bias in most American textbooks. Their tables of contents may include a sprinkling of authors from outside the United States, but stories from other venues tend to get lost in the crowded halls of American fiction. Tucked between the works of Herman Melville, Mark Twain and even Toni Morrison, a tale by R. K. Narayan seems more like an afterthought rather than a complementary piece of fiction. It has been my experience that if students are going to be introduced to writers from other cultures, it is best that they read several stories by the same author, as well as several authors from a particular language or geographical region, in order to fully appreciate both the variety and the similarities in that culture.

A number of anthologies are available in the United States, either in bookstores or in library collections, that offer a reasonable sampling of Indian fiction. Selected examples are included. *Mirrorwork: 50 Years of Indian Writing*, edited by Salman Rushdie and Elizabeth West, contains quite a few excellent stories, though its major failing is that the contents are almost exclusively limited to Indian writers of English. *Of Women, Outcastes, Peasants and Rebels* is an outstanding collection of Bengali stories translated and edited by Kalpana Bardhan. Wimal Dissanayake and I have edited *The Penguin Book of Modern Indian Short Stories*, which contains works translated from ten different languages. This anthology is currently out of print, but a new edition is scheduled to come out in 2001.

I would also recommend *Another India: An Anthology of Contemporary Indian Fiction and Poetry*, edited by Nissim Ezekiel and Meenakshi Mukherjee. In addition to these, there are plenty of individual short story collections by authors such as Anita Desai, Rohinton Mistry, Jhumpa Lahiri, Bharati Mukherjee, R. K. Narayan, and many others.

Instructors who may not have a personal connection with India are often understandably reluctant to assign stories for which they cannot provide an adequate context. But here again the familiar mantra can be paraphrased: it's not always necessary to teach what you know. Anyone who has stood at the head of a classroom realizes that the process of mutual discovery between teachers and students is far more rewarding than simply making informed pronouncements. By reading these stories each member of a creative writing class, including the instructor, explores the craft, the discipline, and the genius of an author. The very fact that the context of a narrative may not be immediately evident to the reader gives greater weight to the methods and strategies of storytelling.

For example, the Bengali writer Premendra Mitra uses the second person point of view to create an intimate but unsettling mood in his classic story, "The Discovery of Telenapota." Addressing the reader directly, Mitra uses this device to draw us into a mysterious and unfamiliar world. "When Saturn and Mars come together, you may also discover Telenapota," he writes in the first lines of the story. "On a leisurely day, after hours of angling without a catch, when someone comes and tempts you, saying that somewhere there is a magic pool filled with the most incredible fish anxiously waiting to swallow any bait, you are already on your way to Telenapota."¹ Of course, it is the reader, rather than the fish, who swallows the bait and is immediately hooked and pulled into the story. For a student writer who is learning the craft of fiction, Mitra's narrative technique offers a vivid example of how to capture a reader's attention and develop suspense. Though some of the names and situations seem to locate this story in rural Bengal, it actually takes place in the imagination of the main character, who is suffering from a malarial fever. In this way the author produces an alternative and unpredictable reality, where questions of context become almost irrelevant. On one level the story is an elaborate riddle in which the identities of the reader, the narrator and the characters are blurred. Mitra's prose has a disturbing, hallucinatory quality that leaves us wondering who and where we are. As with all good fiction he takes us into the unknown and makes it real.

One of the most gratifying responses from students is when they are able to transpose a story from an unfamiliar setting into a world that they know and understand. Realizing that most human experiences are not limited to a specific region or culture gives young writers a broader and more confident sense of their audience. As Barbara Solomon has written in the introduction to her anthology, *Other Voices, Other Vistas: Short Stories from Africa, China, India, Japan and Latin America*, "One interesting question I have posed when reading these non-Western stories is whether or not with a few changes of detail they might well describe an American Experience." She goes on to use the example of Anita Desai's story, "Pigeons at Daybreak," suggesting that it can be "transformed" in this way. Solomon believes that the main characters are universal enough so that, "If one were to situate them on a Florida patio or a New Jersey backyard instead of an Indian balcony, it would be entirely possible to transfer the story to America."² What would be lost, of course, are Desai's felicitous details such as the parakeet that is fed green chilies or the newspaper article about blue bulls—these give the story its unique texture. Nevertheless, Solomon's point underscores the accessibility of stories like "Pigeons at Daybreak," which allow a student writer in America to understand that his or her experiences are not that different from the experiences of people the world over. A variety of writing exercises or assignments can reinforce this idea—for instance, describing an American landscape for readers who may never have been to the United States, or retelling an Indian story in an American context.

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Anita Desai herself expresses this view of the universality of fiction in the preface to a collection of stories by the Urdu writer, Ismat Chughtai. “One could read (Chughtai’s) work as an exposure of Indian traditions, of religious bigotry, of the male hegemony and female illiteracy and dependence—but that would be a limited interpretation—besides her obvious and instinctive iconoclasm—there was also her intimate involvement with that world, her delight in it—the unruly households with too many children, the squabbles and rivalries amongst the women, the displays of affection and indulgence, and the rich and colorful language, spiced with salty proverbs and aphorisms. Instead of contradicting each other, these elements came together to form such an indivisible—and infinitely rich—whole that one can only exclaim, on reading her work, ‘Oh, human nature! Ah, the human race!’”³ Fortunately, for those of us who cannot read Urdu, Ismat Chughtai’s writing is now available to readers of English in a collection, *The Quilt and Other Stories*, translated by Tahira Naqvi and Syeda S. Hameed.

Questions related to language and translation are an essential part of any creative writing class. How do we find the exact word that gives a reader the key to a character’s mind? How do we express those emotions that leave a protagonist speechless? How do we suggest that dialogue is taking place in a different language? Reading stories by Indian authors who often have to maneuver in and out of the sixteen major languages of the subcontinent, students will begin to appreciate the complexities of a multilingual world and learn to reflect it in their own prose. When they read Indian writers of English, they will learn that their American idiom is only one strain of a language that is used in many different countries, a language that is constantly changing and growing more diverse by the moment.

Some of the best known and best selling writers of English today have their roots in South Asia—V. S. Naipaul, Arundhati Roy, Salman Rushdie, Michael Ondaatje. Their novels are found on the shelves of bookstores all across the United States, yet for many readers and aspiring writers, Indian literature remains uncharted territory. As Salman Rushdie has written, “The map of the world, in the standard Mercator projection, is not kind to India, making it look substantially smaller than, say, Greenland. On the map of world literature, too, India has been undersized too long.”⁴ By bringing short stories from the subcontinent into the American classroom and introducing young writers to the craft and artistry of Indian fiction, perhaps a more accurate projection of global literature can be achieved. ■

NOTES

1. Premendra Mitra, “The Discovery of Telenapota,” *The Penguin Book of Modern Indian Short Stories*, ed. Stephen Alter and W. Dissanayake (New Delhi: Penguin, 1989) page 13.
2. Barbara Solomon, introduction, *Other Voices, Other Vistas* (New York: Mentor, 1992) page 19.
3. Anita Desai, preface, *The Quilt and Other Stories*, by Ismat Chughtai (New York: The Sheep Meadow Press, 1994), page viii.
4. Salman Rushdie, introduction, *Mirrorwork: 50 Years of Indian Writing* (New York: Henry Holt, 1997) page xxiii.

STEPHEN ALTER is the author of four novels set in India, where he was born and raised. He is currently a Writer-in-Residence at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.