Chapter II

Ethnicity in Short Story: An Overview

In light of the previous chapter, ethnicity can be imagined to be a unique cultural experience of a compact community in a particular locale, where each one of these intensely identifies with one another at multiple levels. The genre of short story offers a rich analysis from such a perspective. This genre has found passionate practitioners among the ethnically conscious communities.

Before looking at ethnicity in short story, the fundamental question that asks for a serious scrutiny is what are the defining characteristics of short story, a genre as old as humanity itself, which make it relevant in the twenty-first century. Frank O’Connor, whose path-breaking book, The Lonely Voice (1963), continues to remain a seminal text on the topic, asserts that the form has a special fascination with submerged population groups. O’Connor who was himself a renowned short story writer holds that the genre is one that has never had a hero, and therefore, lends itself to stories of outsiders and societies’ marginalia (O’Connor, 81). Several critics have been arguing that the genre is especially suited to the issues and concerns of the troubled or lesser
represented identities, making it an apt case to be referred to as ‘minor literature’. This quality has made the genre of short story equally popular among all countries and nationalities. That is why, the form is being owned by all across the globe. However, the form has been especially adopted by the subjugated races of the former colonies for expressing the concerns and issues unique to them in the wake of the phenomenon of colonization/postcolonisation and the attendant issues of broken histories and fractured narratives.

“… [T]he short story is admirably suited to the themes of identity, migration, history and myth…” (March-Russel 2009:256). In fact, the genre has proved to be a provocative weapon in the hands of subjugated races, in the postcolonial context, to strive for and redeem their lost links with their roots. The search for the missing links has made many oppressed nations to turn this genre into a revolutionary art for tracing their cultural roots. In the wake of the postcolonial phenomenon, the short story has assumed potentially more dissident proportion than the major genres (March-Russel, 247).

The short story as a modern literary form owes its origin to the ancient art of storytelling which primarily dealt with the perennial search for roots and identity. Storytelling is an ancient tradition, found across cultures and continents. The short story was
preceded by myths and other oral narratives which were human attempts to grope for meaning. However, despite having same origin, myths were thought to be more sacred, while oral narratives were considered just a casual source of entertainment:

Traditional stories which are not sacred myths have received far less attention than myths, but in themselves they are not fundamentally different. Their claim to attention is the simple one of survival; they are told time and time again in many countries of the world.

(Brewer 1988: 2)

The stories began with oral narratives based on mythical imagination of primitive humans, mostly revolving around what are called ‘creations myths’, across cultures. Creation myths are said to occupy an important place in people’s history. They shape the ethnic consciousness of a community and provide them with a world-view:

Creation myths are the cornerstone of a culture’s cosmology, of how it regards itself in relation to the universe. They describe humanity’s perennial concern with origin: the search for identity.

(March-Russel, 4)
Creation myths are found in every culture and religious tradition from Abrahamic faiths to ancient Indian and Chinese traditions and from ancient Egyptian to Greaco-Roman civilizations. The myths also exist in lesser-known cultural entities and tribal communities. For example, Kashmir, despite being a lesser known and less richer locale, has its own indigenous myths about its creation. The two equally popular versions of the creation myth about Kashmir are quoted here:

In the Hindu story of the valley’s origin, the myth tells that the valley was submerged under water and was salvaged after the holy intervention of Kashyap Rishi, a Hindu saint, who exorcised demons from the valley and it became habitable. The Muslim version states that the Prophet Solomon once during his flight passed over this valley which was steeped in water. He landed on the top of a mount which is referred to as Takht-e-Sulaiman (the Throne of Solomon) at Dalgate area in Srinagar city. He ordered one of the jinns under him, Kashu, to drain the water from the valley. Kashu promised to do so if he was granted Miran, a fairy whom he had been courting for a long time. The Prophet Solomon agreed to grant him his wish, so Kashu went to Baramulla town in the extreme north of the Kashmir valley and struck the mountain range, wherefrom all the water drained out and this beautiful valley came into
existence. Based on the two lovers, the valley was called Kashu-Miran, which later evolved into present Kashmir.

(Ahmad, retrieved)

Creation myths abound in almost every culture across the globe. These myths were actually part of the larger phenomenon of the story telling which, subsequently, gave way to histories or narratives of real battles or fictional stories created for didactic purposes and later assumed the shape of fables, stories in which animals were shown teaching moral lessons. Fables were followed by religious parables with explicit didactic lessons justifying the divine scheme of things. The common refrain in all of them was their orality which symbolized a distinct cultural ethos that was more inclusive, communitarian and interactive, and ethnically conscious, compared to the subsequent print-culture that was marked by isolationism and individualism. “It was incident and excitement, anticipation and suspense, and above all, the provision of a satisfying ending that characterized the story as it was embedded in oral culture …” (Hunter, 1).

An important development in the history of the short story was the emergence of the fairy-tale, another cornerstone of an ethnic identity. Forming a part of what later was categorized as
‘art-tale’, the fairy-tale “bridges the gap between the folk-tale and the modern short story” (March-Russel, 10). The same pattern of evolution of the traditional stories is seen across cultures. Be it the ancient Greek and Roman tales in the European continent, like the Satyricon of Petronius in the first century A.D., the Metamorphoses of Apuleius in the second century, the Panchtantra in the Indian sub-continent or the Dastan tradition in the Iran-Central Asian region, tales from the past served as the raw material to spur the imagination of the later story-tellers.

Panchtantra has specially been regarded as the forerunner of the modern art of imaginary tales. It is said about the Panchtantra that Gunadia, a writer in Pashachi language of Kashmir, presented a book of stories divided into eight parts and titled as Brahata Katha to his king Satwahan. However, the king refused to listen to these stories as the language used was not that of the king. The refusal hurt the writer so much that he consigned all the stories to fire. One part somehow survived and was translated into Sanskrit by Som Dev as “Katha Sarit Saghar” which is one of the oldest books of stories (Mohiuddin undated: 22). The Panchatantra has proved a trans-cultural work. It spread across Europe in the Middle Ages through various translations. The same Panchtantra series of stories
has inspired much of the later story writing tradition in the Indian subcontinent. Similarly, the world-famous *The Arabian Nights* stories which were a rage during medieval ages in the Muslim cultures across Africa, Asia, Asia Minor and Central Asia, also had had a formidable impact on the European art of story-telling. Despite having assumed the shape of the world classics, these texts are structurally and textually anchored in the ethnic identities of their origin and retain their cultural ethos at the layer of characters and meaning.

In the medieval Europe, the short prose tales of the Italian writer Giovanni Boccaccio (1313-1375) became very popular. One of his well-known works is the *Decameron* which is a series of one hundred tales narrated by seven ladies and three gentlemen who fled the plague that devastated Florence in 1348. In the same century, Geoffrey Chaucer from England wrote the *Canterbury Tales*, a famous book of stories mostly with religious themes. The Renaissance story-tellers in Italy, England, France, and Spain drew from the Boccaccian tradition. These two texts not only proved to be a landmark development in the evolution of the genre of the short story but also paved the way for the birth of the modern English language.
During the eighteenth century, the fictional narratives in the shape of early short stories and novels became very popular through periodicals. However, the short story, in its contemporary form with its associated distinct technicalities, appeared only in the nineteenth century:

Most historians of this genre agree that the short story did not appear until the nineteenth century, almost a hundred years after the novel began to flourish as a literary form. Then a different kind of short fictional narrative emerged, an original prose work in which every word chosen in the structure of the plot, and every detail of description and characterization, contributes to a unified impression.

(Charters 1990:789)

Though writers across cultures must have been writing in the distinct format but the German writers were the first to consciously initiate this new form that resembled what we now call short stories. (Charters: 789). Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749-1832), Ludwig Tieck (1773-1853), Laurence Sterne (1713-1768), E T A Hoffmann (1776-1822) and Heinrich von Kleist (1777-1811) were some of the German writers who experimented in this genre. Again, the folk and mythical tales from the oral tradition were the biggest source of these fictional stories. Grimm brothers of the
early nineteenth century Germany assembled a collection of *Childhood and Household Tales* from folk material which became an instant hit. Across the Atlantic in America, Washington Irving (1783-1859), inspired by these German authors, wrote *Sketch Book* which was a sort of Americanized version of European folktales. In 1827, Irving’s contemporary, Walter Scott, published his *The Two Drovers*. Nathaniel Hawthorne and Edgar Allan Poe followed with a considerable number of stories written on the same pattern.

Edgar Allan Poe (1809-1849), Nikolai Gogol (1809-1852) and Hawthorne (1804-1864) called their work as ‘tales’. Similarly, the British writers like Thomas Hardy (1840-1928), Rudyard Kipling (1865-1936) and Robert Louis Stevenson (1850-1894) also called their works as tales, while E M Forster (1879-1970) referred to his stories as parables. Joseph Conrad (1857-1924) referred to his fiction, long as well as short, simply as ‘stories’ (Fraser 1996:25). So much divergence *vis-à-vis* the definition of this genre refers to a lot of confusion in the nineteenth century as to the precise nature and the distinct features of this genre. For a long time, the two terms, ‘tale’ and ‘story’ were used quite interchangeably, and no specific distinctions were made except the fact that the periodicals that thrived upon these short stories did regard
short stories to be a plotted narrative as against a tale. Many short-
story writers in fact thought that they were producing modern day
folktales.

Orient always carried a sort of mystique for writers in Europe. Essayists like Addison (1672-1719) and Steele (1672-
1729) and writers like William Beetford (1856- ?) and Samuel
Johnson (1709-1784) wrote oriental tales which were deeply mired
in ethnically different social consciousness. The oriental tales
inspired by the translation of classical folk narratives led to the
emergence of realism in the English novel and the Gothic novel.
Gothic novels, such as Mary Shelley’s Frankenstein (1818) and
Emily Bronte’s Wuthering Heights (1847) drew heavily upon the
oral and folktale traditions.

Thus, we see a close and cohesive connection between the
ancient tradition of story-telling and the modern art of short story.
What is equally noticeable is that short story is an ethnic art as it
heavily draws upon ethnic traditions of orality, folklore and
mythical lore. Further, in each geographical setting, its folk context
shapes and spawns a specific regional literary tradition that
transcends the context while being rooted in its native soil. Such
regional traditions have been in existence even in modern times
and they give tongue to the cultural and literary ideals and aspirations of that particular ethnic community.

**Scottish tradition**

Early nineteenth century saw the rise of the indigenous Scottish tradition with the emergence of the writings, addressing the questions of the Scottish identity and ethnic tradition. The Scottish tradition of story-telling aimed at asserting the distinctiveness from the mainstream British culture as well as tracing its roots to identify its cultural landmarks for envisioning its future in the light of these cultural signposts. It was not simply the revival of their cultural past but revival of their past for the sake of their future.

The Scottish folk stories were compiled to project Scottish ethnic values and cultural symbols. The consequent short fiction produced during that period championed provincial values and traditions. James Hogg (1770-1835), Walter Scott (1771-1832) and Allen Cunningham (1784-1842) were primarily behind this Scottish cultural assertion with liberal use of folktales in their tales and stories. “Scottish writers had the desire and the opportunity to engage with questions of oral history, identity, and nation in a more comprehensive way than other regions of Britain” (Killick 2008: 121).
The Scottish ethnic revival began with the publication of a large number of ballads in book form. Scott’s *Mortality* (1816) and Hogg’s *Jacobite Relics of Scotland* (1819) were among these collections. John Wilson’s *Lights and Shadows of Scottish Life* (1846), Allan Cunningham’s *Traditional Tales of the English Scottish Peasantry* (1822), John Galt’s *The Stream-boat* (1821), Andrew Picken’s *Tales and Sketches of the West of Scotland* (1824), Archibald Crawford’s *Tales of my Grandmother* (1824), James Denniston’s *Legends of Galloway* (1825), Leitch Ritchie’s two story collections, *Head-Pieces and Tail-Pieces* (1826) and *Tales and Confessions* (1821) were some other collections of tales and ballads which were published in the nineteenth century. Walter Scott’s *Chronicles of the Canongate* (1827) was also part of the same series. Hogg’s collections, *Winter Evening Tales* (1821) and *The Shepherd’s Calendar* (1829) also came out during the same period. Some other collections with stories borrowed from Scottish ethnic history included Hogg’s *The Three Perils of Man* (1822) and *The Three Perils of Woman* (1822), Alexander Steward’s *Stories from the History of Scotland* (1829) and Scott’s *Tales of a Grandfather* (1828). The peculiarity of these collections was that they focused on the traditional values and lifestyle of ethnic
Scottish life. It brought into limelight the ethnic values that lent uniqueness to Scottish identity within the larger English identity:

Many of these works place an emphasis on the traditional ways of life and the connection between location and folk history, as the legendary narratives of Scotland’s past negotiated a process of transformation from an oral to a literary form.

(Killick, 123)

Scottish tales are set in a specific region embodying its distinct national tradition which analyses Scotland’s ancient beliefs and practices. The Scottish story collections exhibit how the folklore of a specific community reflects the social and cultural life of a population. “Scottish tales set in specific regions could also serve as exemplars of national history” (Killick, 123). These collections were actually attempts to project their literature to a wider audience for a serious appreciation of their ethnic identity. The issues of ethnic importance gained momentum in the wake of many rebellions in the eighteenth century and the subsequent repressions at the hands of Britishers. With the result, Scotland, according to Katie Trumpener, “had become a nation which had lost its nationhood and was subsequently engaged in a semi-legendary reconstruction of its own past” (Quoted in Killick, 124).
Scotland occupying such an important place for its writers indicates to this fact that in the formulation of an ethnic identity, location is one of the most formative influences on the mind of a writer. Locale maintains an imaginative hold over its inhabitants. Location is not just the geography for a people. It is a site of sacred placement in the scheme of things of its inhabitants. Cairns Craig argues:

What is interesting is not the particular place but the interaction of the place with a mind fitted to experience it in a particular way. For those people who spend their entire lives in one region, specific places and landmarks can attain a powerful, almost religious, significance.

(quoted in Killick, 132)

Scotland as a locale had the same kind of grip on the creative imagination of Walter Scott. In his writings, folk stories assumed such intensity that they almost became national narratives of Scotland. He borrowed his characters from the Scottish legends and placed them within the historical perspective of Scotland making it easier for the Scottish people to strike an ethnic cord with those characters, thereby adding to its appeal and reach.
Hogg’s shorter fiction also explores the ethnic themes of Scotland. The majority of the stories in his works like *Winter Evening Tales* and *The Shepherd’s Calendar* take place in the Ettrick region of Scotland whose geographical isolation added to its intense identity. The stories of *Winter Evening Tales* define the value-system of the Scottish community. *The Shepherd’s Calendar* celebrates the Ettrick region and the legends prevalent among the people of that region. Ettrick region symbolizes the pivot of the Scottish ethnic identity which lends a sort of cohesiveness to those who subscribe to the ethnicity it stands for. Ettrick is for the Scottish what Dublin is for the Irish or Srinagar, popularly known as simply *sheher*, is for Kashmiris, symbolizing their respective identities and ethnic fixtures which hold them together. *The Shepherd's Calendar* remains one of the best collections of traditional and regional tales from Scotland, combining the provincial life with its innocent countryside vision.

Another remarkable Scottish collection was Allan Cunningham’s *Traditional Tales of the English and Scottish Peasantry*. Like his contemporary short fiction writers, Cunningham wrote “in a borderland between literature and tradition” (Killick, 152), and produced the writing that belonged to
a category which, in the words of Richard Dorson “may have been literature but was not folklore” (Dorson 1968: 92).

**Native American Context**

The use of the short story by native American writers is a typical case of the adoption of a modern art to narrate a pre-modern culture. The short story ideally suited to their ordeal as they felt at home in this genre more than the novel. In the United States of America, the cultural mores served as a sort of fixture for ethnically indigenous American writers. Right from the beginning of the encounter between the native-Americans and the settler Americans, one was defined in comparison to the other. “… (T)he voices of Native Americans have provided an essential American “Other” by which white America’s image becomes defined” (Ruppert 2000: 64). The same tendency to look at the native and settler in contrast to each other percolated down in literary expressions also. The Indian Americans were always portrayed as “ignorant savages, cordoned off in reservations and destined to cultural and physical death by assimilation” (Ruppert, 64). Americans always believed that whatever ‘We’ are, Indian was always something ‘Other’. In this backdrop, native American short fiction writers emerged as champions of their cause. Their writings
were not simply artistic pursuits but their struggle to express the anxieties of their community and to fight for a respectable space in the context of their cultural death and ethnic marginalization within the United States.

The work of native writers is grounded in the real life experiences of native Americans. The stories emerge from the native soil, depicting the writer’s strong emotional connection to his landscape. Early twentieth century native-American writers such as Gertrude Bonnin (1876-1938) and D’ Arcy Mc-Nickle (1904-1977), began the process of hitting out at stereotypical images of Indians. Even contemporary writers like N Scott Momaday (1934- ), Leslie Silko (1948- ), Gerald Vizennor (1934- ), Simon Ortiz (1941- ), Sherman Alexie (1966- ), Thomas King (1943- ) etc write stories inspired by their distinct oral tradition, which is the bedrock of the native communities they come from and forms their unique ethnic vision. All these factors form a unique pattern in which everything is intricately connected to each other. James Ruppert sums this up well:

The search for community amid growing impersonal society, the belief in the importance of the land as the country urbanized, and an idealization of the uniqueness of American life formed the ground of many popular literary assumptions.
Some of the popular interest manifested itself in the movements towards preservation of wilderness. At the same time, many early modernists were exploring the connection between the primitive and the modern. Together these trends created an audience for Native American short stories.

(Ruppert, 65)

In the late nineteenth century, one of the most popular Native American writers was Charles Eastman who published two books of short stories, *Red Hunters and the Animal People* and *Old Indian Days* and one book of fictionalized folktales set in Sioux, *Wigwam Evening*. Eastman tried to represent native Indian people in a positive light. Similarly, E Pauline Johnson, in her short stories, such as “Red Girl’s Reasoning” and “As it was in the Beginning,” portrayed the issues of the native woman placed within her distinct cultural experience.

The subject of American Indian woman was further explored by Gertrude Bonnin, who wrote under the pen name Zitkala Sa (Red Bird). She was a member of the Society for American Indians whose writings pleaded for a respectable place for the Native American identity. In her short fiction, including *American Indian stories*, she drew positive portraits of native women.
Another native writer, John M Oskison’s short fiction “typifies the regionalist’s assumption that cultures respond to the region’s spirit (Ruppert, 66). Some of his notable stories are “Walla-Tenaka-Creek” and “The Singing Bird”. In his stories, he emphasizes the character’s relationship to the land, the most important feature of the ethnic community as seen about in the context of the Scottish identity too.

John Joseph Mathews’ adventure sketches “juxtapose learned philosophical ruminations about man, nature and the outdoors with Indian dialect and the exhilaration of the hunt” (Ruppert, 66). D’Arcy McNicle’s stories draw the tension between the land and the community. He also details the cross-cultural tensions and the ambivalent relationship between literatures and tribal communities. Mathews and McNickle were important short storywriters in the sense that they tried to bridge the historical gulf that had been existing since the displacement of the natives from their native landscape by the white settlers. Without compromising on the Native Americans’ aesthetic vision, they blended it with what was perceived to be alien:

With their greater concern for the ties between literature and tribal communities, their increasing abilities to blend Native
and non-Native epistemologies, and their penetrating historical analysis, the works of both Mathews and McNickle form a bridge that leads to 1968 and the Native American Renaissance.

(Ruppert, 67)

The native American literature has been getting bolder with each passing decade. It has been penetrating deeper into the vision of the Native American community and its ethnic consciousness. Today, Native writers, more than ever before, feel inspired to write about their unique ethno-cultural experience. They are expressing their Native voice boldly and articulating their worldview in a more relevant way. At a larger level, while native American short fiction will continue emphasizing its cultural heritage, “traditional narratives and mythic perception will remain the unyielding foundations for future stories…” (Ruppert, 70).

Frontier Stories

Frontier stories were based on the delineation of the local colour. The vast geographical expanse of the United States, housing diverse local landscapes posed the problem of identification for people from distinct geographical units, forcing them to write for themselves in tune with their local realities. Such a literary genre was referred to as the local-colour fiction which is known for its
delineation of landscape and characters unique to that geographical unit. It is also characterized by the use of the idiom and the variants of the mainstream English, quite unique to that area. Obviously, this fiction and short fiction was almost wholly written by the local writers who were natives to that area. The literary realities described in this literature are authentic in their own way. This genre also shows the fault-lines present in the apparently single mainstream American literature. It holds that local landscape in a vast country may give rise, at times, to a local experience and sense of a distinct communitarianism that would hold it apart from others.

With the virtual elimination of the native tribes and their ethos, following the American Civil War, white writers romanticised the so-called Frontier. “This is when local-colour stories, set in particular regions (for example, New England, the Midwest, the South), emerged…” (Charters, 791). These locations gave a fresh fillip to writers to introduce realism in their stories which readers found more appealing and more in tune with their daily life. In the stories like ‘The Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras County’, Mark Twain captured an authentic American idiom. Similarly, Bret pioneered the cowboy story in tales such as
‘The Luck of Roaring Camp’. Hamlin Garland drew the characters that were far behind in the economic advancement of the people living in the so-called land of the promise, as the United States of America was referred to. One of his characters, having miserably failed in life to come up, remarks about life in general which echoes almost a universal human predicament: “I’ve come to the conclusion that life’s a failure for ninety-nine percent of us. You can’t help me now. It’s too late” (Garland, 1956: 85). Kate Chopin, in stories such as ‘Desiree’s Baby’ and ‘The Storm’, further explored the issues of lesser-represented people, as envisaged in *The Lonely Voice* by Frank O’Connor.

The sense of the closure of the Frontier forced the American writers to look within. The writers turned towards the regions within the United States. This gave birth to a sort of regional awareness which was especially important for the American South, still plagued by the remnants of the Civil War and the slavery.

Harriet Beecher Stowe in her tales collected in *Oldtown Fireside Stories* portrays life in New England using powerful language. The stories have legendary elements and they flashback to the New England of colonial era. Another writer of New England local-color short fiction was Rose Terry Cooke whose
short fiction represents farm and village life in Connecticut, her native state. Sarah Jewett, a native of the Maine village of South Berwick, near Portsmouth, in her stories sketches the life in a little Maine town. One of the passages in her first book, *Deephaven*, amply makes clear what she values in her native town:

> It is wonderful, the romance and tragedy and adventure one may find in a quiet old-fashioned country town, though to heartily enjoy the every-day life one must care to study life and character and must find pleasure in thought and observation of simple things, and have an instinctive, delicious interest in what to other eyes is unflavored dullness.

(quoted in Voss 1973: 91)

Another author who contributed to the large output of New England local color stories was Mary E Wilkins Freeman, who during her long writing career produced some 230 short stories. She wrote the stories of rural life in Massachusetts, a region she was very familiar with. Freeman's characters are highly perceptive. One such character is the old woman in “The Bar Lighthouse” who has lost her religious faith for pragmatic reasons. Here is how she reasons it out: “An' thar's been things I've wanted different, but I ain't never had 'em – things that I've cried an' groaned an' prayed to
the Lord for - big things an' little things-but I've never got one” (quoted in Voss, 95).

The Tennessee mountains also provided the settings for the short stories of Mary Noailles Murfree, whose pen-name was Charles Egbert Craddock. Her first collection was *In the Tennessee Mountains*. In a number of Joel Chandler Harris’ stories, slaves and former slaves are the central characters. Harris wanted to give the reader an idea about the social classes of middle Georgia people.

New England, the South and the Middle West inspired relatively little local-color fiction. Only a few writers portrayed its village life. They included Edward Eggleston with *The Hoosier Schoolmaster*, Edgar W Howe with his novel, *The Story of a Country Town* and Hamlin Garland with the short stories in *Main-Travelled Roads*. The peculiarity of frontier tales and local colour fiction is their deep involvement with the issues unique to the ethnic and lesser represented subaltern realities that characterised their social vision. Be it their cultural experiences, sense of uniqueness or the consciousness of living a socio-cultural vision, everything made them have a sense of distinctness in the larger paradigm of the American nationhood.
Though the local colour writing as it existed in nineteenth century has waned but the regionalist writing continues in contemporary American literary tradition. It deals with themes as diverse as dislocation, revisitation of the mythic American landscape, nostalgia, ecology etc (March-Russell, 142). Another feature prominently visible in almost all local-colour short fiction is the depiction of a sympathetic account of characters shaped by the locale which had a formidable impact on their psyche and personality. The imagining of the place had a strong grip on their mind and imagination which makes them relate to their roots, geographical or otherwise, in a way in which no outsider can.

**Russian Experience**

Russian writers, in general, have had serious engagement with their society, so much so that Russian literature has been described as the country’s second government. Szirtes calls the Russian literary tradition “the bog soul” (retrieved). The great Russian literary tradition consists not just of novels but of peerless short stories as well. “The great Russian short stories are an ideal introduction to Russian literature and culture and a valuable source of insight into the Russian psyche” (Bartlett, retrieved).
“The Queen of Spades” by Alexander Pushkin is a story about the social realities of the Russian life as seen by the writer. Pushkin is called in his homeland as the “Russian Shakespeare”. Pushkin changed the Russian language of the 18th century into the modern literary language. The story emulates the “society tale” popular in the 1830s. Similarly, Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk district by Nikolai Leskov is a celebrated story. It is set in the heartland of provincial Russia, which Leskov knew very well. The story focuses on the provincial Russian merchants who were, then, a separate social class. They were conservative and kept their wives behind closed doors. Leskov uses folk element to add intensity to his stories. This kind of story-telling, which we call “skaz”, was first introduced to Russian literature in Gogol’s short stories, and is linked to oral traditions. The word “skaz” comes from the verb “skazat”, which means “to tell”, and the Russian word for short story is “rasskaz” (Bartlett, retrieved).

With Leo Tolstoy (1862-1910), the focus shifts to the peasantry as imagined by an aristocrat who went rather further than Turgenev in trying to atone for his guilt before Russia’s oppressed underclass. “What Men Live By” was his first conscious attempt at
expressing his new faith. Based on a fable, the main characters in “What Men Live By” are peasants.

What unites and defines Russian short-story writers is a creative genius which led them to forge their own tradition. When Russian writers started writing novels they refused to adhere to the traditional European format, and that is true for short stories as well (Bartlett).

**Postcolonial Context**

Postcolonialism and postmodernism, the two streams of writing, run parallel to each other. Besides coinciding during a particular epoch in history, they overlap a lot in terms of thematic engagements and technical innovations. The short story was adopted in both of these streams, in former colonies as well as in the countries of the colonizers. The colonies chose this medium to decolonize themselves at a literary level while the writers from the colonizing nations adopted this genre for many reasons. One of the reasons was to have riddance from the malaise of the postmodern condition with all its affiliated anxieties like loneliness, crisis of values and the loss of the cultural continuity. It also helped them connect to the tradition of orality as found in the pre-modern culture. For them, the oral tradition was a privileged condition:
… (O)rality continues to perform a vital role in immigrant and indigenous cultures…. (O)ral narrative remains a means for displaced peoples to reconnect with their submerged histories, and to comment upon their experience of emigration and exile.

(March-Russell, 29)

The short story despite having been described as a ‘minor literature’ has turned out to be the most dissident of all literary genres in the postcolonial context. Traditionally also having got identified with the marginalized sections and communities, the genre of the short story has been flourishing more in communities with ruptured histories and subjugated pasts. From former colonies in Asia, Africa and elsewhere to the countries like Canada which are overshadowed by bigger neighbours or the communities with different colour or ethnic origins, the short story is being picked up and adopted at a quicker pace for artistic expressions of their anxieties and ideals. Although, having been dubbed as ‘minor literature’, the short story does not restrict itself to minor themes or issues. It deals with themes of those who had been relegated to the margins of power -- political or otherwise. As a minor art with a lot of scope for portraying issues of immense political connotations with brevity, it has relatively been more popular with communities
which are fighting for their rights and a respectable place in the comity of nations and communities. This way, this minor art of sorts has played a revolutionary role in championing the cause of the downtrodden. It has also infused a new confidence among them to stand up against all kinds of subjugation.

As a favourite with ‘submerged population groups’ has helped this genre develop in an unprecedented way, expanding its canvas and scope. Its being minor turned into an advantage as it superseded other genres in contemporary era at a quicker pace. “In the short story’s fascination with ‘submerged population groups’, O’Connor sees the reflection of a society that has no signposts, a society that offers no goals and no answers.” (quoted in Hunter, 3). Its defiance to be neatly defined in any strict sense also helped this genre in a positive way. It offers no ‘sense of an ending’, thereby, leaving a lot of scope for the spirit of questioning, which is more in tune with the temper and tempo of our times. The implication is that “the … story’s … failure literally to express, to extend itself to definition, determination or disclosure, becomes, under the rubric of a theory of ‘minor’ literature, a positive aversion to the entailment of ‘power and law’ that defines the ‘major’ literature” (Hunter, 140).
Short story writers across the world, in separate postcolonial contexts, have used this minor art form in their own way without feeling its confines of being a minority art form. Here, some cases from different contexts are discussed to give an idea as to how this form has met the need of writers from various backgrounds to write for themselves and their communities.

**Canadian experience**

Like the USA, Canada has no ancient past. It had to create stories from its immediate surroundings, which were not much rich from any standards. That is why, the Canadian literature began on a dull note. Immigrants of ethnic minorities from overseas added colour and flavor to the Canadian life and literature. The subsequent social tensions forced the creative minds to pick up pen and start writing.

The Canadian literature emerged as distinct and different from that of the United States only in the early twentieth century, when Canada made a successful transition from a frontier nation to a modern industrialization society (Domínguez 2012:270). Writers, especially the fiction writers, mostly depicted the local colour of the communities. Initially, Canadian literature was characterized by regionalism with a focus on the Prairies --
mostly home to the immigrants. The Eurasian sisters, Edith and Winnifred Eaten, through their writings, depicted the lives of some of the ethnic groups in Canada. Edith, through her volume of short stories entitled *Mrs Spring Fragrance and Other Stories*, under her Chinese pen-name Sui Sin Far and Winnifred, through her fictionalized autobiography *Me: A Book of Remembrance*, under the Japanese pen-name Onoto Watanna, brought into focus the life in Montreal.

The fiction written during this period, including the novels like *Such is My Beloved* (1934) by Morley Callaghan, *As For Me and My House* (1941) by Sinclair Ross, *Earth and High Heaven* (1944) by Gwethalyn Graham and *Two solitudes* (1945) by Hugh MacLennan dealt with the themes of a general national relevance besides probing the tension among the various ethnic groups within Canada. After the Second World War, the Canadian literature became more prominent, rising in stature. The Canadian literature has emerged as a distinct literary landscape, handling the issues in its own way. It has now assumed an identity of its own, finally coming out of the overarching shadow of its imposing neighbour, the United States.
The genre of the short story also has come up well in the Canadian literature. Mavis Gallant published her collection, *The Other Pains*, in 1956, “often deploying international settings and subject matter or dwelling on the comparison between North America and European values and lifestyles” (Dominguez, 274).

Alice Munro has won an international acclaim for her outstanding and innovative short stories. Her work is marked by the assertion of an independent Canadian identity. The myth-making appeal of the narrative of Munro places her ahead of other contemporary writers who are known for their reworking “upon the remains of pre-modern literature” (March-Russell, 28). She creates interrogative short stories to explore Canada’s colonial and postcolonial past.

Munro in her stories such as ‘The Stone in the Field’ (from *The Moons of Jupiter*, 1982), ‘The tide story’ from *Friend of My Youth* (1990) and ‘A Wilderness Station’ from *Open Secrets*, (1994), explored Canada’s colonial history. Margarate Atwood, while assessing her art has this to say:

Munro’s fictional world is peopled with secondary characters who despise art and artifice, and any kind of pretentiousness or showing off. It’s against these attitudes and the self-mistrust they inspire that her central characters must struggle in order to
free themselves enough to create anything at all…. At the same times, her writer protagonists share this scorn of the artificial side of art, and the distrust of it. What should be written about? How should one write? How much of art is genuine, how much just a bag of cheap trick – imitating people, manipulating their emotions, making faces? How can one affirm anything about another person – even a made-up person – without presumption? Above all, how should a story end? Munro often provides one ending, then questions or revises it. Or else she simply distrusts it.

(retrieved)

Munro presents multiple points of view in a single narrative, thereby, showing the complex web that the life in general weaves us all into. Canada’s colonial past with its associated nostalgia or the scorn for it, and the social tensions, usually among the people of diverse ethnic origins are intricately narrated together in such a way that a beautiful social tapestry based on the texture of the storytelling embellishly comes out.

Writing stories is not simply the vocation of the protagonists in Munro’s stories, but through their attempts to narrate stories, the marginal characters including that of women are portrayed to have an alternative understanding of life deeply informed by a grievous
sense of injustice and silence. In one of the stories, the narrator is forced to question the vocation of the story-telling itself:

Now I no longer believe that people’s secrets are defined and communicable, or their feelings full-blown and easy to recognize. I don’t believe so. Now, I can only say, my father’s sisters scrubbed the floor with lye, they stooked the oats and milked the cows by hand. They must have taken a quilt from the barn for the hermit to die on, they must have let water dribble from a tin cup into his afflicted mouth ... However, they behaved they are all dead.

(Quoted in Hunter, 170)

Munro’s texts largely deal with the legacy of Canada’s settler history. For example, in ‘Friend of My Youth’ and ‘A Wilderness Station’, Munro endeavours to recover some of the facets of the cultural personality of Canada which were more vulnerable to historical obliteration for reasons of modernity. According to Munro, Presbyterianism in Canada as a religious discourse “both structures an understanding of the past and, by extension, arrests the development of postcolonial self-identification and interpretation” (Hunter, 171).
African Tradition

The African Continent looked like an alien land, lacking human element, to its colonizers. Its inhabitants looked beastly, who needed to be humanized, necessitating colonial intervention and consequently, depriving the continent of its rich cultural heritage. Africa’s dark-skinned people were confused with the dark ages of the West. Dark-skinned people needed to be civilized in the same way the Dark Ages were to be shed off. The internal conflict of the medieval Western civilization was externalized through Africa’s dark-skinned people, not knowing it was just Africa’s interior which was dark while it was the West’s mind, in the medieval ages, which was dark and therefore, dangerous.

With colonization, Africa was shorn off its rich historical and cultural legacy. With the decolonization, the present had to be built somehow, even if on the ruins of the past. That is how the postcolonial writers picked up to construct on the debris of that past which was lost to them. Through their writings, these writers attempted to reestablish their connection with their lost past and find meaning out of the reality on their own terms as it existed before the colonial disruption. But the connection had to be established gradually in various phases. The first phase was to
retain the colonial medium of the English language while discussing their own issues. African reality and the colonial language was, in itself, a serious debate that caught the attention of many writers from Africa and beyond. Chinua Achebe (1930-2013) was one of them.

Achebe was one of the most significant voices in African cultural and literary history. He was convinced of the vital role of language and writing in the empowerment and self-realization of colonized countries. In an essay entitled ‘The Role of the Writer in the New Nation’, published in 1964, shortly after Nigeria gained its independence, he argued for a form of cultural nationalism. Here is an excerpt from the essay which amply shows how convinced Achebe was of independent and rich cultural and literary legacy of the erstwhile colonies of the imperial powers which through their imperialist interventions disrupted the tradition of continuity in their cultural development:

… African peoples did not hear of culture for the first time from Europeans; that their societies were not mindless but frequently had a philosophy of great depth and beauty, that they had poetry and, above all, they had dignity. It is this dignity that many African peoples all but lost in the colonial period, and it is this dignity that they must now regain ... The writer's
duty is to help them regain it by showing them in human terms what happened to them, what they lost?

(Quoted in Hunter, 160)

He opined that an important link connecting the native languages and the cultural and political authority was lost due to colonial disruption. Achebe adopted English to accommodate African experience, believing that this language was able to carry the weight of the African experience. His adoption of the English language to write about his unique cultural experiences was not out of any complex but out of the need to indigenize the English language and to shear it from its baggage of colonial façade. He successfully tried to alter this language so as to be able to accommodate experiences of diverse cultural and linguistic contexts. One of the ways in which Achebe's writing effects that transformation is by its inclusion of forms of non-standard pidgin English and Igbo idiom. His focus is always on the characters belonging to the margins. His collection of short stories *Girls at War* largely studies such characters exclusively:

Whereas the novels have told the stories of those who aspired to be central to their communities or their nation, these stories dwell on the perspectives and situations of those who have
never seen themselves as holders of power - for the most part they are concerned with physical and psychological survival.

(Innes 1990:123)

Hunter adds to Achebe’s observations like this:

And it is not only power as wielded by the colonizer that concerns Achebe, but authority in all its forms. He repeatedly stages scenarios in which the relationship between the centre and the periphery is disturbed, even if only temporarily, and in which the value structures that sustain authority and produce meaning are brought into question.

(Hunter, 164)

His stories challenge the colonialist assumption of cultural superiority of the colonizer in comparison with the ‘primitive’, the less sophisticated culture that it has colonized. In the story “Chike’s School Days”, for example, Achebe uses the word *osu* to refer to the title character and his family. In Igbo culture, the *osu* are the lowest class, socially beneath the level of *ohu* (slaves) and *amadi* (the free-born). The term was generally meant to refer to the early converts to Christianity. In this story, Achebe follows the early years of a young boy, Chike, whose parents convert to Christianity and are consequentially regarded as *osu*. The story concludes with the young boy attempting to learn expressions from
his English textbook, the *New Method Reader*. ‘Chike’s School Days’ is a politically informed analysis of colonial authority and its investment in the language of its colonies, an enterprise which is still thriving in the developed world in the form of the specialized studies/area studies.

Once Chike goes to school, he realizes that much of what is taught is so anglocentric as to be meaningless to the children in the African context. He loses his ethnic fixture by having to learn alien English words. He is absorbed in learning the pronunciation of words like ‘periwinkle’, constellation etc. Chike’s is a typical colonial case where the learning far from educating the child actually gives birth to a sort of retrogressive mindset, throwing the pupil to the darkness of meaninglessness.

Similarly, ‘The Sacrificial Egg’ challenges the colonizer’s assumptions of having brought good to its colonies. The story shows the offices of a European palm oil trading company which overlook the Nkwo market place on the bank of the Niger. A sort of cultural juxtaposition is established between two different markets -- that of the trading company ‘which bought palm-kernels at its own price and sold cloth and metalware, also at its own price’, and the traditional Igbo market place. These two markets
represent two different value systems and world-views for the central character, Julius.

All his stories are actually scenarios where there is clash between the centre and the margin, disturbing the equation between the two. These stories are also inspiration in defiance insofar as they challenge the power structure in whatever shape it exists. All types of value structures that feed and legitimize authority are severely brought into question. In ‘The Madman’, a man of authority is stripped bare of his clothes, thereby symbolizing his disempowerment and removal from the place of the authority. Similarly, ‘Vengeful Creditor’ shows a wealthy and powerful middle-class couple denying education to the young babysitter, working for them. The denial has far-reaching consequences but the couple never recognizes their own culpability in all the bad that happens to them.

All the stories of Achebe reflect his fundamental belief in the creative and independent potential of each individual and culture, and that each one of them has the intrinsic right to speak on matters concerning them without any fear of getting rejected.
New Zealand

New Zealand has not produced many short story writers but the few it has produced have written qualitatively good short stories. Of these few short story writers, Frank Sargeson (1903-1982) has superseded others in terms of quantity and quality. Sargeson wrote about questions of national identity in New Zealand. His short stories were published in three volumes: *Conversation with My Uncle, and Other Sketches, A Man and His Wife* and *That Summer, and Other Stories*. He began publishing in the literary magazine *Tomorrow*, contributing sketches about the labourers of the depression era. His art of writing is characterized by a distinctly regional diction:

It was early summer, shearing time. Tom and me went into the country and we got a job picking up fleeces in a big shed. After we'd pulled the bellies off the fleeces we had to roll them up and put them in the press. It was a good job. We liked it. We had to work hard and we got covered in sheep grease, but I'll tell you a thing about sheep grease. It comes off best in cold water. And that saves a lot of bother.

I could tell you a lot of things about that shed. You know a lot of lambs are beggars for not sitting still when you're shearing them. There was a shearer who used to go maggoty if a lamb wouldn't sit still. He'd heave it back into the pen. But it's
not about the shed I want to tell you. I want to tell you about how I lost my pal Tom.

(Quoted in Hunter, 145)

Sargeson writes his stories in a manner which solidly puts them in their native context and reveals their connectedness to that distinctively New Zealand voice. By his narrative art, he establishes the validity of that voice as a means of literary self-expression. The literary and cultural context in which Sargeson wrote was mired in colonial facade. In the beginning of his literary career, he wrote his stories primarily for a British audience rather than his co-natives, the indigenous New Zealanders. By the early 1930s, as the nationalist movement in New Zealand gained momentum, the New Zealand authors felt the need and urge to look within their own cultural and literary tradition to address questions of their distinct identity. They picked up topics of immediate context. They started writing about characters with whom they and their readers would easily identify. It was a break from their colonial hang over and a creative transition to a phase where they believed in the richness of their own historical legacy and adopting and nurturing their own past for shaping a better future for themselves. By writing about the local, these authors proclaimed it to be both valid and valuable. With their writings, they successfully
established a literature of their own which spoke of New Zealanders as the New Zealanders knew it. Writing about New Zealand, however, did not mean celebrating it in totality. Some of these writers were equally critical of what was wrong with their society. Sargeson, for example, was a fierce critic of the shortcomings of New Zealand society. He tried to develop a regionally distinctive writing that was not constrained by any limiting patriotic agenda.

**Conclusion**

To conclude we can say that despite having its roots embedded in ancient past, the art of the short story, while changing its shape, size and thematic engagements has survived the vagaries of time and age. The genre in its modern phase, with its accomplished technical requirements has been found to be ideally suitable to convey the contemporary predicament, especially that of those who have been thrown to the margins for various socio-cultural and economic reasons. This art form was also liberally adopted by the former imperial colonies as it conveniently told the truth as perceived by them. It also helped them redeem and reclaim their past in their postcolonial phase to restore their sense of historical connectivity that had been their hallmark earlier. While
traditionally, the thematic and technical aspects of the short story were identical like orality, folk and mythical content and didacticism, it has assumed distinctly modern technical requirements for itself, including narration, construction, character portrayal etc, differentiating it from its traditional roots.

Identity, in all its dimensions, has always remained at the centre of this genre. In fact, the short story is known for being relatively very sympathetic to such individuals and communities which have always been on the margins of the history or the society. That is why, it has been referred to as a ‘minor literature’.

Marginalized or oppressed communities or the communities riddled with conflict of various types have mostly taken recourse to the art of the short story to give artistic expressions to their predicaments. As seen above, compact ethnic identities, mountain-locked locales, suppressed and politically less-privileged communities have found this genre most suited for the narration of their ordeals and predicaments. Vertically, the genre is as old as human civilization itself and horizontally, the genre is spread across the whole world.

In the following two chapters, an attempt will be made to study the Irish and Kashmiri ethnicities which have exponentially
taken to the medium of the short story for the reasons of multi-layered conflicts of huge magnitudes, to express fissures, ruptures and varieties of tensions in their societies.