CHAPTER - I

INTRODUCTION

“Vasudhaiva Kutumbakom” (The whole earth is one family) is an ancient Indian dictum. As a result of the rapid growth of information technology today’s world is heading towards an age of uniformity. A contemporary Indian writer may think and write more or less like any writer in any part of the world. We cannot fully appreciate the individuality of a writer, his place in a tradition and modification of that tradition without comparing his work with that of another similar writer. Mathew Arhold told that “everywhere there is connection, every where there is illustration: no single event, no single literature is adequately comprehended except in relation to other events, to other literatures”

Comparative Literature emerged as discipline for the first time in Europe during the second half of 19th century. It developed and flourished in India only from the second half of 20th century. Comparative Literature is a branch of literary criticism. It implies a study of literature which uses comparison as its main instrument. It is the study of national literatures in relation to each other. Comparative analysis helps to bring out the literary, social and cultural developments of different countries in general.
Today the comparatists deal with not only the similarities and distinction among different national literatures, but also the similarities among the literatures of a single multilingual national literature. For example, Comparative Indian Literature. Now Comparative Literature also deals with the mutual relationships between literature and other arts like music, dance, painting etc.

Comparative study attempts to go beyond external and occasional similarities and to deal with historically conditioned artistic general cultural contacts and analogies. Aldridge defined 'anology' or 'affinity' as resemblances in style, structure, mood or idea between works which have no other connection. V.M. Zhermumky, the Russian comparatist also has investigated several literary analogies or parallels in which there has been no contact between the authors. An analogy or parallel study of two writers of two different literatures widely separated by time and space, when systematically done, may become a study of two cultures of which the writers compared turn out to be meaningful products. Comparative Literature is really concerned with the appreciation of cultures, other than that of the individual author.

We can compare or contrast two authors who took up the same subjects, deal with same problems, wrote under similar conditions. Common principles and tendencies do exist in the works of different authors and they
have an important role to play in the literary process in all the various forms which they may assume.

This thesis is an attempt to analyse one of the major aspects of Comparative Literature studies: Similar themes and ideas arising in countries independently of each other. For this study we have chosen selected short stories of Russian writer A.P. Chekhov (1860 – 1904) and English Indian writer R.K. Narayan (1906 – 2001).

Among the different literary genres that we read today, it is the short story that has the power to impress and attract more people towards it. The short story is a well-known form and is widespread in world literature. It has developed along its own lines in each country. The history of the Russian short story is related with the social-political and literary movement in Russia. Even though Russian short story came into being in the 18th century, it did not immediately take shape as a special and independent genre. There was no distinction for a long time between the novella and the short story in Russian literature.

The term “Short Story” did not come into use until the late 1820’s. Only at the end of the 1840’s did the short story finally acquire status as a genre although, as before, the dividing line between it and the novella was indeterminate and fluid. The typical feature of the short story are its brevity, a comprehensive story line, telling artistic detail, a special inner rhythm and
profound implications conveying the complexity of the phenomenon or characters portrayed.

At the end of the eighteenth century the short story came into being in the Russian literature with Nikolai Karamzin's novella "Poor Liza". It had all the characteristics of the short story. The short story came into life in the 20's and early 30's of the nineteenth century, when romanticism was becoming the predominant trend in literature. A. Marlinsky, Antony Pogorelsky, Nikolai Pavlov and Vladimir Odoyevsky and others created many romantic short stories and novellas. The Russian romantics did not follow the western romantic literature. The Russian romantics gave special attention to portraying the spiritually liberated man.

The early 1830's, along with the romantics appeared the realistic stories of Alexander Pushkin published as *The Tales of the Late Ivan Petrovich Belkin*. Through these stories Pushkin showed the varied sides of Russian life.

Short story began to be noticed and widely accepted as a literary genre in the nineteenth century. The credit for giving a form and shape to the short story goes to three American writers Washington Irving, Nathaniel Hawthorne and Edgar Allan Poe. A change in the strong base followed by these writers is seen with the appearance of Maupassant from France and
Anton Chekhov from Russia. It was these writers who brought short stories closer to human life.

Russian short story showed signs of development in the beginning of the nineteenth century. It was Gogol (1809-1882) who picturised the life of the common man for the first time in a short story through his ‘Zhinel’ (The over coat).

Pushkin and Gogol created the first realistic "minor prose works with a marked desire to solve not only personal problems, but those of Russian life in general. In 1840’s the people were desirous to know the actual living conditions, moral needs and spiritual aspirations which resulted in the appearance of physiological essay in Russian literature. The physiological essay was widely used by Vladimir Dahl, Dmitry Grigorovich, Ivan Panayev and others.

The success of the short story began in the 60’s and continued into the 70’s. During this period a new group of democratically inclined populist writers appeared in literature under the leadership of Gleb Uspensky. The populist writers through their work expressed their own ideas and opinions on the topics of the day. They described the life of the masses as a whole.

However the golden era of short story began with the emergence of Maupassant as the successor of Floubert in France and Anton Chekhov that of Gogol in Russia. The traditions of Chekhov’s prose were continued by
Bunin and by Soviet writers such as Victor Astafiev, Vassily Belov, Yuri Kazakov, Georgi Semyonov and others.

Anton Pavlovich Chekhov (1860-1904) is regarded as one of the founder of the short story in world literature. The most vivid and talented short story writer of that time was Chekhov. One reason for the rapid growth of Chekhov’s reputation in literary circle was that by late 1880’s both Dostoevsky and Turgenev had quitted the scene and talented young men like Maxim Gorky or Ivan Bunin had not yet arrived. There was lack of major figures to admire or criticize and then came young Anton Chekhov gifted fresh and original.

“The little tales he wrote to earn money soon brought him great popularity. When he began to write seriously, he arrived on the literary scene at just the right time, when there was plenty of room for the growth of a new reputation. And when later, as a dramatist, he needed a different kind of theatre to do his work justice, the Moscow Art Theatre was created just in time. He was an unlucky man but a lucky writer”

Chekhov’s short stories gave a true depiction of life in Russia and he painted an amazingly varied gallery of characters from Philistines who had retired into their ‘Cockroach Corners’ to pure, ecstatic and naïve dreamers
with faith in the triumph of noble ideals. Chekhov’s characters were not the bearers of the writer’s conceptions and the mouth pieces for programmed ideas. They lived their own independent lives and behaved in accordance with the logic of their own nature. The actions and the conduct of Chekhov’s character acquired amazing psychological verisimilitude. He focuses his attention on the critical moments and turning points in the inner life of the characters. That is the reason why his stories are so emotionally tense and expressive.

Chekhov’s writings epitomized the essential characteristics of the Russian short story: freedom of narration not limited by a strict story line, flexibility and eloquence of the descriptive passages and extreme objectivity in depicting events. The reader was not to expect a ready made solution, he had to make his own deductions and generalisations.

The relation between India and Russia is a long standing one. Russian writers have been attracted and influenced by the rich traditions of Indian art, literature and religious thoughts right from early times. In 1469, Afanasij Nikitin, a Russian merchant of Tver came to India and remained here for three years. He wrote about India and remained here for three years. He wrote about India in his book Khozhdenie za tri morja (“A Journey Across Three seas”).
During the eighteenth century a number of works of Sanskrit literature were translated into Russian usually via French, German or English versions. References of India are also seen in the oriental tales, novels, poetry and Russian opera of the eighteenth century. Occasional references to India are also seen in Russian prose and other arts and in the writings of Russian philosophers and thinkers of nineteenth century. In the twentieth century there was a very great increase in the number of translations from Sanskrit, Pali and the modern languages and literatures of India and an even greater number of publications in the field of history, economics, politics and diplomacy when compared to the nineteenth century.

Here in India also within the first half of the twentieth century itself the people became familiar with the works of many famous writers like Pushkin, Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, Turgenev, Chekhov, Gorky, Sholokhov etc.

From the first half of twentieth century Chekhov’s translations began to appear in different languages of the world. Ever since his translations began to appear, Chekhov became more and more appealing to majority of his readers. These translations are helpful to point out Chekhov’s place and popularity not only in the literature of his country but also in world literature right from the beginning of the twentieth century. The second half of the twentieth century witnessed a number of translations of the plays and short stories of this unequalled writer appearing in many languages, especially in
English. In 1985 Raduga publishers, Moscow published a complete collection of Chekhov's short stories in five volumes. Many other collections with selected stories of Chekhov reveal the unfading popularity of this writer. All the four plays of Chekhov have their translations not only in English but also in other languages. Between 1918 and 1985 books written by Chekhov have been published in ninety two languages spoken by the people of U.S.S.R. and other countries all over the world.

Although some critics, such as Prince Mirsky, denied Chekhov's influence on Russian Prose ... the imprint he has left on Russian letters is unmistakable and his popularity among Russians is steadily on the increase. The perfection, the finish of his stories, their combination of simplicity and complexity, the graceful artistry of all his work, its economy of means enlivened by the lyrical movement of his style, all acted upon Russian literature as a new stimulant. "After Chekhov it was impossible to write carelessly". This was the slogan for many pre Revolutionary writers.

His influence on the art of the short story had spread far beyond the boundaries of Russia. In 1920's many writers such as Katherine Mansfield and Virginia Woolf in England and Ernest Hemingway, Dorthy Parker, Katherine Anne Porter and others in America, have plainly shown their indebtedness to the Russian story teller.
Lev Tolstoy had said about Chekhov “As an artist,” he said, Chekhov was in a class of his own … that sums it up perfectly … He was an artist of life … One quality of his writing is that everyone, whether he is Russian or not, can understand it and identify with it … That’s the most important thing.

Tolstoy’s words were prophetic. Now Chekhov is read throughout the world.

One can find similarities between the short stories of Chekhov and the short stories of some of the major short story writers in India. The Book Chekhov and Tagore – A Comparative study of their short stories written by Sankar Basu in 1985 and the thesis Short Stories of Anton Chekhov and Karoor Neelakanta Pillai – A Comparative Approach by A R Rajasree in 1997 serve as typical examples. In his book Sankar Basu gives a short analysis of the historical conditions of Russia and Bengal at the end of the nineteenth century and has also attempted to analyse the stories of Chekhov and Tagore on ideological and thematic level as well as on characterisation. While analyzing the similarities in the literary approach the artistic merits of Tagore and Chekhov as short story writers have also been revealed. In the thesis submitted by A.R. Rajasree she has attempted to analyse the stories of Chekhov and Karoor Neelakanta Pillai in their way of writing, selection of
characters, language used, humanism, influence of profession, humour and satire, plot construction, selection of themes, psychological analysis etc.

The Indian English short stories is only a hundred years old. But it made a big leap forward only in the nineteen thirties. This was largely due to the major contribution to the Indian English short story made by Mulk Raj Anand, R.K. Narayan and Rajo Rao. Their work is still unsurpassed in quality, and quantitatively too, is quite important.

Among the Indian writers, R.K.Narayan seems to be closest to the literary principles of Chekhov. R.K. Narayan is one of the most popular and prolific short writer of India. His first collection of short stories Malgudi Days came out in 1941. It was followed by two collection titled Dodu and other stories and Cyclone and other Stories published in 1943. An Astrologer’s Day and other Stories came out in 1947 and was followed by Lawley Road in 1956 and A Horse and Two Goats in 1970. His short stories collection Old and New saw the publication in 1981. In 1983 another collection under the title Malgudi Days, which he had used earlier, was issued. All these collections does not contain new and unpublished stories but the same stories appear in several collections.

Many of the stories in these collections were first published in the leading Madras daily, The Hindu. Narayan also contributed some stories to leading American Journals like The Reporter, The New Yorker, Vogue and
others. The stories published in *The Hindu* were meant largely for the Indian readers. These stories belong to the Indian soil and are redolent of its culture. They serve as a good introduction to the foreigner who wants to know Indian life.

The sincere and considerate attitude to people and to outer world, peculiarity and originality of characters in his works, and sympathy and susceptibility towards urgent social problems all these qualities make Narayan an original and a truly Indian writer. His success lies in individualizing his characters and exposing the unnoticed, subtle possibilities of the average and the unremarkable. His strength of characterisation lies in his thorough and close observation of life's little incidents, a healthy sense of humour coupled with irony and satire. He gently pushes the readers right into the midst of life that he is presenting. Entertainment and readability are the keynotes of his stories. He resists moralizing which is seen in many fiction writers like Anand and Raja Rao.

The fate of the common man in society is the main theme in the stories of Chekhov and R.K. Narayan. They create a panorama of tragic-comic human life in the world of sufferings and bogus moral values. When Narayan began to write Chekhov was very popular in India. But there is no direct evidence to assume that R.K. Narayan was directly influenced by
Chekhov at that time. He read the stories of Chekhov only when Graham Greene compared him to Chekhov.

“They compare you to Chekhov – Have your read him?”

Yes after G.G. (Graham Greene) compared me to him ...

Yes, I do think he wrote like me: (laughing) Chekhov has similar attitude to story and character\(^8\)

As Graham Greene avers R.K.Narayan is closer to Chekhov than to any English author. “The resemblance indeed is striking – the same objectivity, the same freedom from comment, the same ‘intricate alliance’ of humour with tragedy – the comic flowing into delicate pathos, as delicate as the faint discolouration of ivory with age, as Greene puts it – and the same seeming indirection of event with which the characters, on the last page, appear to vanish into life. ‘Narayan’s light vivid style with its sense of time passing, of the unrealised beauty of human relationship so often recalls Chekhov’s’\(^9\)

Both are outstanding comic writers. The likeness between the two great humorists came out even more pointedly in Harvey Breit’s comment: “Narayan is to India what Chekhov was to Russia; he has the same dispassionate mind and compassionate heart”\(^10\)

While reading the stories of these authors one can easily find certain similarities between their literary principles; especially in the themes and
problems. These writers never go in search of extra ordinary life or fantasies. They depict ordinary people doing ordinary things. Other common factors which can be noticed in the works of these two writers is the simplicity of their language, their straightforward method of narration and the use of uncomplicated themes.

No political themes can be seen in their works. While their contemporaries were trying to expose socio political events in their words these writers tried to keep themselves away from these kinds of themes. They tried to show human natures and their psychology unnoticed by their contemporaries. In their stories the characters are not called for any political agitation.

We find that both Chekhov and Narayan are writers who occupy their own unique places in the respective literature of their country. Though they lived in different countries at different times the works of these writers show a number of similarities between them. However no work, not even a full length article comparing these writers have been published so far (except some critical comments shown above). This is the reason which inspired us to select this topic as a subject of study. Of course, these authors are known not only for their short stories. For example, Chekhov is also well known for his plays and R.K.Narayan has also written novels. But in this work
we have chosen for our analysis only selected short stories of the above authors.
Reference


10. Ibid, pg.206.