CHAPTER VI

A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF THE TECHNIQUES AND THEMES
OF O. HENRY, LEO TOLSTOY AND PREM CHAND

In the last three chapters we looked at the three writers O. Henry, Leo Tolstoy and Prem Chand separately. We now examine the similarities and contrasts between them in respect of the themes and techniques of their short stories.

It is important to note that the three writers were witness to some major political, social, cultural, and historical changes in the society they lived in. The India of Prem Chand was measuring British rule, combating alien influence and its own sick traditions and social ills. Tolstoy’s Russia under the Tsar was also passing through a difficult phase where people suffered immensely without having anybody to turn to. O. Henry’s people bore the onslaught of industrial Era and were given little breathing space to adjust to the quick changes brought about in their lives. The turmoil caused unforeseen hardships and people in general could not cope with the abrupt nature of the new changes, the injustice of the social institutions and the new emerging culture. The sociological import of the stories
of the three great writers is quite evident. O. Henry blazed a
trail and so did Tolstoy and Prem Chand. O. Henry in particular
is the writer of the toiling masses — the four million people that
he chose to write about — their life, failures and
disillusionments, the lingering pain which was both physical and
psychological in nature. Prem Chand also chose to write about
the toiling millions — that constituted the eighty percent of the
population of his country — their suffering and sickness. Though
there was a difference between their cultures and historical
truths as India was under British rule which was not the case
with New York people who crowd most of O. Henry's short stories.
They did not have to face the humiliation which most of the
Indians and some of the Prem Chand's characters had to, they
did not stand at the political cross-roads that Indians of the
period did, they were not ignorant, superstitious or culturally
backward in the same sense but there are some universal
truths. Poor people, deprived people are often exploited
anywhere — be that Tolstoy's Russia, O. Henry's New York or
Prem Chand's India; they suffer and meet tragic ends. O.Henry's
Brickdust Row, Elsie, Lost On Dress Parade reflect his deep
insight into the sufferings of the victims of the system, the
environment in which they lived and worked. Tolstoy's Russia — the Russia under the Tsar — with its feudal and capitalistic structure — was a place where the gap between the rich and the poor was too wide to be bridged and Tolstoy painted rich, complex and varied pictures of Russian life in his characteristic manner. It was his knowledge and belief, his grasp of history, philosophy, religion and literature that made his stories aesthetically satisfying and intellectually illuminating. Prem Chand wrote about a quarter of a century after Tolstoy and revealed the many facets of truth about Indian life under the British Raj with the touch of moral candour and artistic commitment. His stories are not just stories or realistic picture of contemporary Indian life but may be regarded as sagas of human predicament and the assertion of human will to triumph over evil. The foundations of Tolstoy's work rest on realistic portrayal of life as it was being led in Russia at that point of time. Critics have unanimously referred to his comprehensiveness and the totality of impression that results from his clear perception of and an insight into the variety of life as well as its conflicts. Isiash Berlin asserts:

No other author who has ever lived has shown such
power of insight into variety of life' (as Tolstoy) ¹

George Lucas refers to Tolstoy's realism in the context of European realism and boldly declares:

There is perhaps no other modern author in whose works the totality of objects is so rich, so complete as in Tolstoy. ²

This suggests that Tolstoy's works represented the culmination of Russian realism which had started with Gogol, one of the great masters of Russian literature.

Tolstoy's views on the subject of Art are reflected in his treatise *What is Art?* It took him fifteen years to elucidate the ideas expressed in it. Here Tolstoy analyses the commonly held concept of art as an activity that produces beauty -- the term which according to Tolstoy has not been justly or properly defined. The definition of beauty as given by different aestheticians lead to two fundamental conceptions. The first one of these, the objective—mystical one, which was accepted by Hegel, Schopenhauer, their German followers and some French thinkers (Cousin, Jouffroy and others) describe beauty as something having an independent existence as being one of the manifestations of the absolutely Perfect, of the idea, of the

² Ibid., P. 128.
spirit, of will or of God. The second one i.e. the subjective one which describes beauty as a certain kind of disinterested pleasure, finds favour with Kant, his followers and the English aesthetic writers.

Even in its objective aspect we acknowledge beauty to be something absolutely perfect because we receive from the manifestation of this absolute perfection a certain kind of pleasure. Thus in reality both these conceptions of beauty, define it as that which pleases us without evoking in us desire. The question why a thing pleases, links beauty with the question of taste as highlighted by Voltaire, Diderot and others. The criterion of taste cannot, however, be taken as the standard touchstone for judging good or bad art.

Tolstoy feels the reasons of inaccuracy of most of the definitions of beauty in what these writers and thinkers consider the pleasure art may give and neglecting the purpose it may serve in the life of man and humanity. He views art as one of the means of intercourse between man and man -- and to evoke in oneself a feeling one has once experienced and having evoked it in oneself, to transmit that feeling that others experience the same feeling. Art for Tolstoy is thus one of the indispensable
means of communication without which mankind could not exist. Because in every age and in every human society there exists an understanding of the meaning of life accessible to its best and foremost men. This understanding represents the highest level of which men of that society have attained and hence it indicates the highest good at which that society aims for the well being of its people. The feelings that art transmits should express this highest understanding of life or religious perception of the society of its time, according to Tolstoy.

As was the case, the christianity of the first centuries recognised as productions of good art only legends, lives of saints, sermons and prayers, evoking love of Christ, his basic teachings, renunciation of worldly life, humility, and the love of others. Christianity drifted away from its original teachings with the appearance of church-christianity which made blind faith in the chruch and its ordinances the essential point of its teaching. After the maximum development of Popal power and its abuses, people of the rich and upper classes began to discern the wide gulf between the church doctrines and the original teaching of Christ. They therefore ceased to believe in the doctrines of church-christianity; but they were not willing to revert to genuine
teaching of Christ, which were being propagated by Wyeliff, Luther and Calvin for owing to the emphasis on brotherhood and equality of men by these teachings, upper class people feared to lose privileges by which they lived. These rich and the ruling class people cared only for personal enjoyment and therefore acknowledged their criterion of what was good to be pleasure, that is beauty -- which they measured according to the enjoyment it gave. Thus the art of the upper class people separated itself from the art of the rest of the people, resulting in two types of arts - the art of the people and genteel art. The art of the people or folk art transmits religious view of life. While the genteel or refined art of the upper class remains the past time of a small coterie of the rich people for it is completely unintelligible to the mass of the people. The refined art led to three damaging results according to Tolstoy. Firstly, that art was deprived of the infinite, varied and profound, religious subject-matter proper to it. Secondly having only a small circle of people in view, it lost its beauty of form and became affected and obscure; third and the most disturbing for writers like Tolstoy was that it ceased to be natural or even sincere and became thoroughly artificial and brain-spun. Tolstoy remarks:
An Art-product is only then a genuine art-product when it brings a new feeling (however insignificant) into the current of human life.\(^3\)

According to Tolstoy the greatest art of our times, i.e. Christian art should celebrate the glory of the poor, the weak and the humble and not of the rich and the powerful. It should be universal and therefore it should unite all men without exception—made possible by the brotherhood of man, the simple feelings of common life accessible to every one without exception—such as feelings of merriment, of pity, of cheerfulness, of tranquility, and so forth.

Prem Chand also assimilated the best of European realism and humanism through Dickens, Victor Hugo and Tolstoy during his formative years. The influence of Tolstoy on Prem Chand was certainly the most visible. Like Mahatama Gandhi who derived his inspiration for Ahimsa (non-violence) and satyagrah (non-resistence) from the Russian seer, Prem Chand also followed the Russian artist's example in his creative works. Prem Chand's stories depict Indian life in as

thorough a manner as Tolstoy's writing portray Russian life.

All the three writers club characters of all types in their gallery — the exploiters and the exploited, the rich and the poor at work and at home in different and difficult situations reflecting the contradictions both at the individual level and at the collective level. The social and the cultural aspects are every now and then highlighted in their stories. The sickness of the New York culture projected in story after story by O. Henry in the shape of suffering shop girls and the sick values and attitudes of the members of the new emerging society — the society that was witnessing the hardening class structure imposed by the industrial era. Prem Chand's stories are full of farmers, labourers, government officials ranging from patwari, superintendent and senior officials. He projects the deprived men and women and highlights the role played by moneylenders, zamindars, pundits and political leaders in Indian society. As a highly self-conscious artist buoyed with patriotic zeal he deals with social problems of communal riots, plights of the poor, bane of corruption, ignorance and superstitions, to mention a few. He writes about the agonies, pains, dreams and illusions of the Indian masses under the
British raj with the firm conviction of a dedicated patriot-artist. In stories like Sadgati and Thakur Ka Kuan, Prem Chand reflects the plagued thinking and sick attitudes of the higher-caste-people who are responsible for the miserable plight of the low-cast, down-trodden and underprivileged people. Without bating an eye-lid, Prem Chand exposes these including the 'holy-man' the money lender etc. with the purpose of making necessary corrections in their behaviour or sometimes challenging the validity of such sick customs and traditions.

Tolstoy and Prem Chand lived and wrote under the shadow of despotic regimes in their respective countries. Both evince profound knowledge of human nature and consciousness of historical, political and economic forces determining human destiny. Yet, neither discusses ways and means in his writing to fight evil or establish God's kingdom on earth. Fiction remains for them history, human history par excellence. Prem Chand seems to agree with Tolstoy's view about the artist's task which he thinks is not to offer any solutions but to compel the reader to see all its forms, which are endless.

There is no denying the fact that the range of Tolstoy's writing is wider and his insight deeper than O. Henry and Prem
Chand. Yet, Prem Chand achieved the same distinction in Hidustani fiction as Tolstoy did in Russia and O. Henry through his short stories delighted his readers — a new reading public — with romantic entertaining and realistic stories which capitulate every scene of New York of that period. His readers would immediately identify themselves with his characters and recognise the difficult situation they found themselves in.

O. Henry once admitted to his friend W.W. Williams that often he began a story without knowing how it was going to end, that occasionally he developed the narrative to fit a pre-conceived ending. In each instance, however, the characters react to the situation consistently, and the laws of dramatic logic, as well as the traits of human nature, are never disregarded. The other pattern that emerges from the stories, involves the idealization of young love's triumph over shabby circumstances, epitomized by rooming houses full of transient and impoverished people; at other times it is pastiche treatment of ancient story telling devices like the talking animal -- always the technique relies on poignant contrasts and simple substitutions.

The short stories of all the three writers are enlivened with sincerity and intensity because they lived with the masses and
experienced their suffering and pain. This lends to their writing genuine authenticity. Tolstoy felt deeply for the Russian starving peasants and the oppressed people of the society. His sensitivity to the macabre human situations is pronounced loud in his short stories. This note is reinforced because of his being a true Christian and attentive to the most essential aspect of human life — i.e. soul. He did not stop at projecting the physical only but stretched out to reach beyond it. This is the reason why he referred and turned to folk tales and parables for his ideas and themes. He was actually aware of his role in an otherwise sinking society. Through his stories he made people conscious of the futility of running after material gains (How much land Does A Man Need), at the cost of inviting wrath of Almighty. He stresses the spiritual and offers spiritual solace as do the teachings of Christ. Tolstoy believed that man needed a change of heart and the society would be restored to the order and harmony that God originally willed. It is this change of heart that is projected in Elias, Ivan Illych and Master and Man — that saves an otherwise sad situation and brings human beings closer to each other and nearer to God and restores peace and harmony in the world around. Tolstoy
wants people to rise above the narrow confines of self and the same feelings are projected by Prem Chand and O. Henry in most of their stories in ways which are all their own. Prem Chand on his part identifies with the common man, the mass movement, the national struggle for freedom and many of his stories project the patriotic theme. His earliest anthology of short stories Soz-i-watan for which he was charged with sedition; and his other political stories that were published mostly in Hans with a view to helping the freedom struggle, give a graphic account of the suffering of the freedom fighters. Stories such as Ahutis, Holi Ka Upchar, Akhri Tohfa and Tavaan capture the political temper of this period. Prem Chand appears to have felt the need for political as well as social reformation and this was uppermost in his mind while writing the short stories. He wanted peace, harmony and justice to prevail but felt that the bureaucracy, the judiciary and the British institutions of legislature stood in the way of the attainment of true Samarajya unless there was a change of heart in the people themselves. He did not hesitate to criticise even religious rituals and practices that stand in the way of a healthy society. He proceeds very carefully and cautiously, accuses the evil-doer
and gently pushes him to the wall — leaving the reader to condemn or applaud or even to draw his own conclusions as in *Shatrang Ki Bazi*. In this way he educates his readers and instructs without being drab.

O. Henry in his typical manner points to the ills of the American Society, the failures and buckling-in of individuals as well as the system of corrupt practices and temptation. To it he adds humour and makes it easier for the reader to assimilate his meaning and purpose of writing while being entertained. His treatment of the subject matter and felicity of expression has rarely been equalled. Humour of this type is almost missing in Tolstoy's short stories but then with his deep insight and seriousness of purpose it is not to be expected. His dominant Christian spirit would not allow room for it.

Tolstoy's fulminations against those exercising social functions like politicians, bureaucrats, career officers, attorneys, judges, teachers, preachers and even writers is well known. He pleaded for a change of heart as an essential pre-requisite for the harmony of life and other forces of nature that would in turn lead to establishing the will of God. The three writers attempt and succeed in cajoling the reader to look beyond
what is obvious — the real truth about people and situations and not rest at what is shown. They also help the reader to look into the working of a character’s mind — a peep into the psychological realms. O. Henry, Tolstoy and Prem Chand share their concern for the economic aspect of social injustice. They are good plot weavers — their characters are human and have human weaknesses. They suffer the agony of pain and failure, fall and rise again to learn from their experiences. Prem Chand like Tolstoy believed in the goodness of man. We often see tyrannical men repent their action as in Prem Chand’s Pachchtava and Tolstoy’s Master and Man. Here we see the victory of man’s conscience over the lower side of his nature. Where Tolstoy often chose a parable for a theme O. Henry and Prem Chand looked around them and into the sack of their own experiences with the same purpose in mind being artists and moralists at the same time.

All the three writers approach their subject sometimes directly and sometimes indirectly introducing it through a soft talk about some past incident that helps in building an atmosphere for what is to follow or by describing a scene of nature. Nature is used by Prem Chand in his stories only to aid,
describe, project or as a backdrop to highlight a particular human aspect or situation. It is important for the context and its scope is restricted and highly objective as in *Pus ki Raat*. Tolstoy also gives the objective nature as much role to play as is important for the context of the plot in a particular story like in *Two Old Men* and *The Three Hermits*. Neither Tolstoy nor Prem Chand believed in the unnecessary ornateness of art. Compared to these O. Henry is liberal in referring to and injecting the scene of nature but not without purpose as in *Brickdust Row*, *The Guilty Party* and *A Cosmopolite in a Cafe*.

Apparently the technical aspects of Tolstoy and Prem Chand seem to be different at first sight. Tolstoy experiments with what Keti Hamburger calls the 'open form' and 'the principle of decentralization'. The open form implies direct relation to life and decentralization means writings without heroes and heroines. In Prem Chand's stories heroes and heroines stand out distinctly. And yet, the perceptive reader is struck by the element of modernity in their stories which is derived from a striking immediacy, naturalness and directness in the manner of representation. They do not believe in the ingenuities of some of the modern writers who had made their
mark solely due to technical perfection of their works. Both the writers believe that since there is so much of life to be incorporated in fiction there is hardly any need for stylistic devices like Jamesian obliquity or Joycean meanderings in the mazy motion of mind. Tolstoy and Prem Chand wrote in the tradition of realism they had inherited but scrupulously tried to avoid the danger of realistic fiction to degenerate into extremes of arid naturalism or excessive and meaningless formalism and symbolism. Both these writers were against propaganda literature. To them the artist's task lies in communication, revelation and illumination. Some critics argue that Tolstoy hardly leaves any room for action in the world created by him, complaining that instead of approaching the peasants revolt in a sympathetic manner he gives poetic expression to its half-heartedness, its backwardness and its hesitations. And Prem Chand though scared of bloody revolution, takes delight in highlighting the heroism, sacrifices and suffering of his characters — who are the people who surround him. Yet, on the whole he follows Gandhian ideals of non-violence and peaceful revolution. But taking into consideration the fact that a writer's job is not to provide solutions to the problems or puzzles, he perceives
through his sensitivity and creativity to make the readers aware of them and prompt them to think on their own afresh — the criticism Tolstoy and Prem Chand had to face in this regard is of little importance and not justified. The two writers do succeed in highlighting the problems of their times — social, political, cultural — and secured results in the form of changed systems or even guiding the change in the thinking of people through the written word. Ernest J. Simmons points out that the European doctrine of natural law was the starting point of the philosophy of life that Tolstoy developed in his old age. That is, all man's moral, aesthetic and spiritual values are objective and eternal and his inner harmony depends upon his right relation to these values. By his own example and through the medium of his writing Tolstoy held forth to all the possibility of the triumph of truth and good over evil on earth. Emulating him, Mahatma Gandhi asserted the efficacy of Ahimsa (non-violence) and Satyagrah (non-resistance) which might help attain swaraj, Ram raj or god's kingdom in India. Prem Chand assimilated Tolstoyean and Gandhian doctrines and then transcreated these in his masterpieces. Like Tolstoy who aspired to make this world more beautiful and more joyous for
contemporaries and future generations, Prem Chand also
dreamt of the final victory of good over evil and the
establishment of true Samraj in his country. He never allowed
clouds of skepticism and pessimism to blur his vision. Both
Tolstoy and Prem Chand tapped religious literature of their
own and secular literature of Europe for their inspiration and,
as a result, their works evince moral and artistic affinity to a
remarkable degree. Tolstoy had read the Holy Bible,
Rousseau's *Confessions*, Plato's *Dialogues* and novels of
Dickens, Thackery, Pushkin, Gogol and Turgenev. Prem Chand
felt the impact of Rama Krishna Paramhans, Swami Vivekanand
and their religious teachings in the early years of his life. The
influence of Tolstoy on Prem Chand was more pronounced than
that of any other writer. He was drawn to him both as a writer,
artist as well as a social thinker and reformer. The artistic and
moral framework of Prem Chand's work reveals the indelible
stamp of the Russian masters.

O. Henry as such is not to be put into the same frame as
Leo Tolstoy and Prem Chand though both O. Henry and Prem
Chand took the cue for their stories from anywhere and
everywhere. The thematic richness and complexity can be
accredited to their keen observation and their proximity to the life as it was lived by common people or by the millions of people rather than the few rich. O. Henry admits to having deliberately chosen to write about the 'four millions' rather than the four hundred rich men of New York. Prem Chand likewise projects and immortalises the eighty percent of his country men. O. Henry blends romance with realism to focus the reader's attention upon the background. The everyday scene furnished his material, and through him New York city revealed itself and its people in their daily struggle for existence — sometimes drab or sunken but never futile. O Henry was associated with one of the principal movements of his day, for along with the rise of the fifteen cent magazine had come the muck-rake era. S. S. McClure for who's syndicate he wrote was engaged in exposing corporations and investigating municipal corruption and reform movement of which Theodore Roosevelt's 'Trust busting' became the practical application in politics — sympathetic for the underdog and believing the man's ability to better himself. O. Henry approved and by giving his followers enough sensation and sentiment to satisfy — by using humour to present social problems, was able to develop the themes he
regarded seriously. This together with his art as local-colourist
his narrative skills and abundant humour makes his works rich
and valuable. His contributions to various journals had become
so popular that the genre of short story was thereby
standardized. Handbooks teaching the art, the tricks of narrative
art appeared in the market. Correspondence schools were born
from which aspirants to quick and easy money were urged to
try literature. The approach to writing was presented as wholly
mechanistic, forgetting O. Henry’s talent, teachers of the short
story instructed their students in his manner — so well had
his manner been established by the original that many imitators
achieved a lucrative market with his methods — though some of
them could only repeat his mannerism and did not have
anything worthwhile to say. This led many a critic to blame
O. Henry for debasement but his importance as a humorist
craftsman and a social historian, though in a limited sense,
cannot be undervalued. In spite of the fact that his career was
so brief that it has been likened to the burst of a comet, his
quick success and influence led the unwary to suspect that
his writings depended on mere cleverness. The fact is
O. Henry’s stories offer a series of narrative stunts and,
keeping one eye on his readers, he juggles with his character’s
lives or conjures a trump card to lay down at the last minute — every thing is explicable. This bears out the fact that form is solely the author's province. O. Henry's place is determined by his brilliant and highly amusing stories, the technique he employs to project his ideas and characters while he genuinely represents the socio-cultural scene of his people and place.

All the three writers have acted as major influences on the coming generations of writers and thinkers. Their greatness lies in the fact that they continue to live in those who have been moulded by their influence. This is how great literature achieves permanence and transcends the bounds of time and space.