Chapter Four

Montages of life:

The Short Stories of Githa Hariharan and Anita Nair

We have had in India stories which lie embedded in the hymns of the Rigveda, or scattered in the Upanishadas and the epics, the stories which constitute the Panchtantra, the Hitopadesha, the Sukasaptati, Dasakumaracharita and the Vetalapanchvimsati in Sanskrit, the Buddhist Jatak katha in Pali and a host of similar stories in modern Indian languages (Rama Rao).

The short story form in India has evolved from the various forms of narratives like, Folktales, Epic tales – especially from the Mahabharata and Ramayana, the Panchtantra and the Hitopadesha. Indian English Short Story owes its origin to Kamala Sathianandan for her collection of stories titled Stories from Indian Christian Life published in 1898. Indian English writers Mulkraj Anand, R.K.Narayan and Raja Rao were instrumental in pioneering both the forms of novel and short story. It was in 1930 that this genre made its real beginning. Mulkraj Anand was influenced by Western masters like Maupassant, Katherine Mansfield, Gabriel Garcia Marques, O Henry (William Sydney Porter). While R. K.Narayan was influenced by Chekhov and Raja Rao got his inspiration from the French masters. Though these writers borrowed the style from their Western counterparts, they found the source for their
themes in Indian myths, epics, folk tales and ancient tales. According to Shiv K. Kumar:

...the Indian Short Story in English is a recent phenomenon; its genesis may be traced back to the ancient fables of the sixth century A.D. Its origin lies in such ancient classics as the Katha-Sarit-Sangara, Yogavashishtha, Brihat-Katha or the Panchtantra. As stories, these fables and tales were tightly structured and ingeniously conceived, although their primary objective invariably was didactic – geared more to instruct than to entertain their readers. (9).

Short story as a genre was popularized among readers between nineteen thirties and eighties owing to the contributions made by the triumvirate of Indian English Fiction – Anand, Narayan and Raja Rao. They were followed by other writers like K.A.Abbas, Khushwant Singh, Anita Desai, Sunita Jain, Kamala Das, Shashi Deshpande and a few others. When the post 1980 trends in Indian English short story areanalyzed, it can be observed that the stories are reflective of contemporary society (i.e. the post- 1980 period). Stories are written on various aspects of life and society such as love, death, and attitude to women, corruption in public life, human relationship, and above all, superstitions and rituals that are prevalent in society. The perceptive changes in society due to urbanization and industrialization brought about newer themes. The stories rooted in Indian tradition, culture and myth are being written by writers. Based on the Panchatantra Tales, animals again appeared and played vital roles in the stories written by Manoj Das and Ruskin Bond. The writers chose the medium of short story for giving moral and philosophical discourses and
therefore they started employing myths and anecdotes. Fantasy, folk beliefs and ghosts are employed as themes in their stories. The stories with supernatural elements and ghosts appealed to the readers. The stories with autobiographical elements by Ruskin Bond and Shiv K. Kumar cater to the changing tastes of readers. Stories with psychological insights into human nature also added variety to the genre. Shiv K. Kumar also observed the fact that the short story did not take off till the first quarter of 20th century but later on it gained popularity due to arrival of the televised serials in Doordarshan. The serials were dramatized version of stories by popular writers like R.K.Narayan and Satyajit Ray. The adaptations of the world classics encouraged the new breed of writers to take to the short story.

Indian women writers have provided a new dimension of sensitivity and perception to the short story in English. The limited canvas of short story provided them ample scope for expressing their experiences in accordance with their sensibilities. The Indian short story writers like Dina Mehta, Kamala Das, Shashi Deshpande, Anita Desai, Sunita Jain and a few others contributed to this genre and thus popularized it. Most of these writers were inclined to respond to reality rather than imagination in their stories. This they attempted "with reticence, quietude and endurance." (Das 110).

Kamala Das wrote two collections of short stories: *A Doll for the Child* (1977) and *Prostitute* (1977) and *Padmavati the Harlot and Other Stories* (1992). Love is the central and recurrent theme in her stories. Her ability to churn stories depicting love
relationships between men and women with frankness made her one of the earliest bold writers in Indian writing in English.

Shashi Deshpande also has a number of short story collections to her credit. She began writing for various magazines like Eve's Weekly, Femina, The Illustrated and Weekly of India and Mirror. Later on these stories were published in book form under the titles The Legacy and Other Stories (1971), The Miracle and Other Stories (1986), It Was Dark (1986) and The Intrusion and Other Stories (1993). Her stories depict Indian life as perceived by her in today's times. She recreated a range of characters with 'authenticity and conviction'. Her characters truly represent the middle class women in India. G.S. Balaram Gupta observes that, "Deshpande’s women are conscious of their predicament: they are victims of inequity: they are creatures of conventional morality: they are the ones who are unfairly abused, misused and ill-used." (VJES I, 39). She used mythical characters and ordinary middle-class men to depict the plight of women. Her stories are primarily women-centric and her themes focused on the various moods – such as guilt, loneliness, and failure. Her lucid and direct style with use of simple and natural English drew more readers towards the short story.

The stories written by Anita Desai came to be labeled as psychological stories for her ability to explore the subconscious human mind. She has to her credit two collection of short stories: Game at Twilight and Other Stories (1978) and Diamond Dust and Other Stories (2000). Her stories deal with feminine mind and sensibility. She employs evocative images in her stories. She writes about people who live in India as well as U.S.A. On Desai's stories, M.K. Naik and Shyamala A. Narayan.
observe that her stories set abroad are better than the Indian ones, for the simple reason that the Indian scenes are recreated based on her memory and therefore slightly out of focus.

Dina Mehta also has two collections of short stories to her credit: *The Other Woman and Other Stories* (1981) and *Miss Menon Did Not Believe in Magic and Other Stories* (1994). Her stories though focussing on feminine sensibilities offer variations on the theme of man-woman relationships. She is endowed with a simple, spontaneous style and an ability to vary her narrative strategy based on the thematic need of the story.

The other Indian women short story writers include Sunita Jain, Raji Narasimhan and Lakshmi Kannan. Sunita Jain has two collections of stories titled, *A Woman is Dead* and *The Eunuch of Time* and other stories to her credit. Her stories are primarily based on the theme of the betrayal of woman by man. Her women characters are projected as weak and they fail to revolt against injustice. Raji Narasimham. (1930) a journalist by profession gave up her journalistic career to become a full-time writer. Apart from a number of novels she has also a collection of short stories titled, *The Marriage of Bela and Other Stories*. Lakshmi Kannan, a bilingual writer who writes in Tamil and English, has two collections of short stories to her credit: *Rhythms: A collection of Short fiction* (1986) and *Parijata and Other Stories: Tamil Stories in Translation* (1995).
Githa Hariharan and Anita Nair have one collection of short stories each to their credit. A detailed analysis of Hariharan's, *The Art of Dying and Other Stories* and Nair's collection of short stories titled, *Satyr of the Subway* (1997) will be undertaken to understand and explore their art of characterization as well as their chosen themes.

In her short story collection, Hariharan has captured the images of confident and determined women who have to face hurdles created by society. The influences of feminism on early women writers like Shashi Deshpande and Anjana Appachana created themes centered on women and primarily their feelings and struggles for existence found expression. Diasporic writers like Jhumpa Lahiri have attempted to portray the state and stream of consciousness of the non-resident Indian through their short stories. These two became the prominent themes, which have been the concern of short stories. With the passage of time universal themes of life, love and death became the preoccupation of writers in the 1990s. A close reading of the stories of Hariharan hints at the theme of death that surfaces even though feminism is a key issue in most of her stories. Hariharan's adept skill at describing the process of death/dying is reflected through her characters. Her characters possess immense courage in accepting the inevitability of death and that becomes the author's prime concern.

In the title story, "Art of Dying" the mother lying on her death-bed tells her daughter that death is an act that requires strength and understanding. "Death, she says the word rolling off her tongue with intimacy, demands strength not a final
weakness” (AOD 70). The plight of her suffering mother makes the daughter utter these words, “To come back. nurse her again, relieve the burden, feel the same remorse: who says she should be kept breathing at any cost? It would be simpler to help her forward. It would take only a minute or two to give her what her heart yearns for.” (AOD 79).

While writers like Manju Kak and Tara Deshpande deal with the theme of love and life, Hariharan deals with death and the theme takes the central position in her stories. Death plays a pivotal role in the story and it is described as a painful process in the story. As a result, both the characters and style become subservient to this central preoccupation of the writer.

Indifference and callousness of the present generation is reflected in her story, “Voices in the Twilight”. Society has moved on from the joint family system to a nuclear family. This has led to self-centeredness in man. Children too, become self-centered and obsessed with their own individual lives. Their reaction at their mother’s death is bereft of any emotions or sense of loss. The son and the two daughters have no time to mourn the death of their loving mother. On the contrary, they are relieved at their mother’s death since the bond that bound them together has been snapped. The indifference of the children is depicted through their inability to even complete the rituals after their mother’s death. Shakuntala (the daughter) says: “I left before the thirteen-day ceremony… it makes it that much easier for me though, to spend a little more time in the city” (AOD 143).
In the story, "The Rainmaker", the narrator's confrontation with her mother's ghost brings back all the happy and sad memories of her dead mother. The protagonist, who lost her mother when she was eleven, is shown in confrontation with death. The daughter keeps her mother alive in her memory. The story, "The Will" revolves around the hapless condition of a nervous widow. A foolscap handwritten sheet containing some good thoughts, handed down to Sushila by her husband prior to his death, gives her the strength and confidence to survive. It transforms her into a philosophical individual. The story primarily captures the mental state of a widow and the anguish, adjustments and compromises made by her. The portrayal of an Indian woman and her hapless existence in her state of widowhood is captured well by the author. Sushila's attempt to stay alive with the good thoughts handed to her by her late husband defeats death.

The protagonist in the story, "Forefathers" is playing a guessing game as to when his father would die. He awaits his father's death to be freed from the shackles of nursing him and feels that death would also elevate his own position as the man of the house. He says, "I become a man, at long last in the funeral atmosphere of death certificates, burning pyres at the ghat, bones and ashes collected the next day to be immersed in the Arabian Sea." (AOD 56).

The present generation, engrossed with their respective careers, is shown taking the death of their near and dear ones bereft of any emotions. The narrator bemoans the lack of privacy in the confines of the circumference of his father's kingdom. His sisters have learnt the art of slyly dressing in public. They put on some
of their clothes in the narrow, wet bathroom — a fine balancing act — and then rush to
the kitchen to finish dressing behind the open doors of their steel cupboards. Even
sleeping is communal activity. The author describes the plight of the suffering
women who cloak their pain with a mask of humbleness, dutifulness that ‘absorbs the
sharpest sarcasm and hides the angriest of tears’. Engrossed with the act of looking
after his ailing father, he has lost contact with the outer world. “I no longer know
anyone in college.” (AOD 52).

As an author who is fascinated with past traditions, Hariharan has portrayed
the character of Nagaraj, an old man in “The Reprieve”. The sensitivity of Nagaraj
remains the focus of the story. He retreats from the world around him after the death
of his wife, Mangala. Throughout the story, he remembers his wife constantly; tries to
understand his wife by remembering past events. The older generation and their failed
attempts to express their love for their spouse when alive, become central to the story.
His wife’s death makes Nagaraj value her, understand her and miss her. Before her
death, he prides himself of being the provider, of enjoying the authority and power of
hierarchy. When Mangala dies, he experiences a sudden loss. All his life he had but
thoughts about himself, his comforts and discomforts. He did not even have the
faintest memory of what how she actually looked, how she talked and how she slept.
The author points out that, women in general, are so preoccupied with their household
chores that they hardly find time for their own joys and dreams. Thus, death becomes a
prominent theme of the story. Almost all the stories of Hariharan’s anthology focus on
death and its place in life. Death occupies the quintessential place in Hariharan’s
thematic concerns; the artistic process is also a leit motif in her short stories.
"The Remains of the Feast" reveals the callousness of a daughter-in-law at the death of her mother-in-law. The red silk sari brought by the grand-daughter to cover the dead body is rolled up and flung aside by the daughter-in-law. The old lady is burnt in a pale-brown sari, her widow's weeds, and she is adorned with the prayer beads which she never touched during her life time. All her hidden desires die with her death. An old widow, who is obsessed with the best things of life, is treated differently when death overcomes her.

Hariharan's understanding of the artistic process can be attributed to her being an artist herself. She reveals the steps followed by an artist before creation comes into being. The stories, "Untitled Poem", "Love Poem", "Repeat Performance" and "The Close-up" depict the writer's keen interest and sensibility in various forms of art and different forms of expression.

In "Untitled Poem", a retired salesman's attempt at poetry composition is central to the story. The readers are made aware of the nuances involved in the process of composition. The salesman attempts to compose a poem using appropriate words at the right places combined with the right emotions. The aspiring creative writer and his wife Sarala move into their new house with a small garden. Sarla had lived in flats with no scope of planting anything that could 'dig its roots deep into the soil'. The couple has nothing in common to share and no children to strengthen bonds between them. The villain in the story is a rodent that creeps into her Eden to destroy the paradise. He picks on the most lush, the most fecund of her plants; he uproots them, tears them in shreds. all stalks and leaves. 'He does not eat any of it. It is a
song of pure destruction’ – a very apt comment that comes from every suffering woman. Sarala manages to strike the rodent at the right time. The message is loud and clear. Do not underestimate the power of a woman, who might live a non-existent life. She can take the form of Kali, the destroyer of evil when the time is ripe.

In “The Close-up”, the different artistic aspects involved in the art of photography are depicted through the character – a photographer by profession. He is a photographer with a mission to beautify things around him. He also possesses a complete, versatile and priceless collection of photographs. Moreover, he refuses to do nude photographs as that has been his principle all his life. He says,

“It has stood the test of twenty years. I began with village Belle, The Girl Next Door and Cocktail Sophisticate. In the last few years I have added: Bridal Night, Wet Nymph, Veiled Mystery, Rugged outdoor, Innocent Babe and, in honour of an actress who is now all rage, Silken Siren.” (AOD 86/87). The protagonist is a thorough professional. He does not talk and interact much with his customers and refuses to mix business and pleasure at his studios unlike others who entertain their clients to procure lucrative deals. The photographer’s mental state is thus described, “Like the missionary who deals in truth, the photographer walks a lonely, solitary path.” (AOD 87).

Neeta is the protagonist in the story “Love Poem”. She is a newcomer to the city. A girl in a protected and protective women’s college, she learns the power of image. metaphor etc. Her love for poetry and her potential for something different set
her apart from the other students. The process of poetry composition as an artistic process is emphasized in the story. Hariharan’s love and knowledge of poetry, painting and photography are reflected in her stories. In her story, “Repeat Performance”, painters such as Remembrance, Van Gogh, and Sisley are mentioned, which also indicates the author’s knowledge about these painters. A forty-plus protagonist becomes an artist, when the newspaper publishes her interview with the title, “housewife turns expert reproducer.”

Thus, apart from death, artistic process or art is also a leitmotif in some of her stories in this anthology. The title of the story indicates the theme of the story. Death is not shown merely as an event but as a shadow looming large over life. Death is portrayed as a phenomenon which is sometimes dreaded and sometimes welcome, but inevitable. Hariharan deals with death in most of the stories, but her characters are brimming with life. In this anthology, Hariharan presents a wide variety of characters, both age wise and occupation wise, ranging from a great grandmother in “The Remains of the Feast” to a young boy Krishna in “Field Trip”.

Character in literature is the always shifting and changing element that makes each story different no matter how similar the plot. Character, in fiction in general and in the short story in particular, acts as the x variable in what could otherwise be a too obvious and easily enumerated, fused equation. Character plumps as the heart of fiction (Tom Bailey 26/27).
The stories of Hariharan show how the currents of life leave an impact on her writing. Being a woman writer, feminism is one of her chief concerns. Her stories reflect the stereotypical roles women have to play in the so-called educated and enlightened middle or upper middle-class society. Kate Millet comments in *Sexual Politics*:

“Patriarchy’s chief institution is the family. It is both a mirror of and a connection with the larger society; a patriarchal unit within a patriarchal whole. While mediating between the individual and the social structure, the family affects control and conformity where political and other authorities are insufficient.” (Millet 60).

Millet further elaborates on how the power of ‘patriarchy’ is maintained even in modern societies where women have access to education, financial resources and extensive civil and political rights. According to her women are socially conditioned to embrace their secondary status. Patriarchy is deeply ingrained into the minds of both the sexes, more as a habit of mind and way of life. It is this social structure that is evident in some of Hariharan’s stories. The women protagonists in her stories are shown as opposing their oppression and suppression. The intentions and themes of the post-independence women short-story writers can be recognized/identified in the characters of Hariharan through their thoughts, actions and dialogues.

The conventional short story with a linear story line has given place to narrative sophistication, which is evident in the portrayal of character. The writers
delve into an analysis of the inner workings of a character’s psyche. Therefore, many of them also adopt the monologue or the stream-of-consciousness technique to take the reader to the inner recesses of the character’s mind. Through the character’s thoughts, actions and dialogues, the readers can easily identify the intentions and themes of Hariharan. In his paper, “Post-Feminist Configurations in Githa Hariharan’s Short Stories”, Rajul Bhargawa comments:

Hariharan has projected the post feminist ethos with perfection. The main text runs smoothly well within the orthodox order as if upholding the traditional power equation, but very subtly she lets us see and feel the simmering ferment just below the surface. The muted subtext, the ‘unsaid’ seven-eighths of the story speaks louder than the voiced narrative (Jain 226).

The traits of the characters are indicated through their thoughts, feelings, words and actions in some of the stories whereas in a few of the stories in her anthology, Hariharan explicitly guides the readers through commentary and evaluation. The all-knowing third-person narrator may choose to guide the readers’ understanding of characters and the significance of their story. Hariharan’s “The Will” has a third person narrator: “Voices in the Twilight”, has multiple narrators. Aryan. Shaku and Vidya come together for the last time to mourn the death of their mother. Each narrator narrates her own version as the story is in progress. “The Rainmaker”, “Revati”, “Retrospective” have first person narrators, who participate in the story. In “Virgin Curry”, Brenda Lobo, the narrator, is also a character in the
story. She, an observer happens to see the events of the story and also plays the minor role of the protagonist, Patricia Mennez’ colleague.

The range of characters portrayed in Hariharan’s short story collection is neither restricted to male or female protagonists. Both sexes share almost equal footing in donning the role of the protagonist. “Field Trip”, “The Reprieve”, “Forefathers”, “Untitled poem” have male protagonists whereas “The Remains of the Feast”, “The Art of Dying”, “Gajar Halwa”, “Revati”. and “Virgin Curry” are stories projecting female protagonists. The protagonist in “Retrospective” is a clerk busy with his routine work that makes his life monotonous and mundane. The Retired salesman turned poet in “Untitled poem” reflects on the romantic, creative and refreshing side of his personality. Thus, Hariharan’s pen can aptly describe the old and the young, the dull and the thoughtful, and the callous and the sensitive.

Hariharan’s portrayal of the hilarious character of the ninety year old Rukmini in “The Remains of the Feast” depicts the author’s inherent sense of humour. For instance, “She could fart exactly like a train whistling its way out of the station and this achievement gave her as much joy as a child might get when she saw or heard a train.” (AOD 10).

On the contrary, some of the old characters are shown to be symbols of traditional conventional society. The father in “Forefather” strictly stands for tradition, whereas the present generation represents modernity. The young working
girl, Patricia Menez is depicted as a carefree girl, who leads an ostentatious life in her pursuit of materialism. Her individualism rejects ‘the moth-eaten morality and its rules’. She breaks all rules, sweet talks her local guardian into signing blank sheets of paper and uses them to get late-passes and night-outs whenever she wants. Pat in “Virgin Curry” is a modern girl who lives in a metro city (Calcutta) but on the other hand Chellama in “Gajar Halwa” comes from a rural background. She has a messed up opinion about the city and its people. She says, “These memsahibs in Delhi know nothing; you’ll learn their cooking in a day or two.” (AOD 80). Hariharan experiments with familiar settings. A conventional theme is set in a rural background whereas a modern theme is set in metros like Delhi, Calcutta in “Gajar Halwa” and “Virgin Curry” respectively. In “Field Trip” the young protagonist from Bombay discovers the rural-urban divide. Both, rural and urban India is represented in the anthology. It appears that Hariharan seems to focus on some underlying truth that is not always described or even referred to in the story. There are so many empty spaces that the reader has a fair chance to infer from. She tries to give a realistic account of certain matters or events that otherwise look trivial. The stories seem to have some internal disconnectedness, some disjointedness, with ending as much as the beginning, not providing a resolution, but the stories have an internal design. Her stories share the untold sufferings of suppressed women. Hariharan attempts to use an internalized voice constantly searching for answers. As a result, her stories facilitate a new portrait of the Indian woman, who is stronger, more balanced and also proud of her limitations. Bhargava says, “Her stories create a one to one correspondence between singular and the universal, the part and the whole, the trivial and the significant, what appears to be a trifle is potently important.” (Jain).
In her anthology of short stories, Hariharan has combined a contemporary method of character portrayal by shifting her focus on the inner aspects of characters and the traditional methods by focusing on their physical aspects. She has also tried to delineate the modern man and distinguish him from the traditional woman. Through her character portrayal Hariharan has exhibited her interest in representing the current trends of society and the changing scenario.

The great French naturalist of the eighteenth century Buffon believed that style reflects the author’s intentions. This statement has been supported by myriad writers and critics in every language. The style of an author is thus inseparable from what he has to say, his treatment of the subject. Hariharan’s portrayal of characters and varied themes in her short stories reveal her intentions to her readers. Hariharan’s style reveals certain post modern traits in her writings. There are no heroes in her stories. Her stories show her concern with individuals in isolation. Socially relevant issues such as the plight of widows and old people, mundane life are highlighted in her short stories. Like most of the post modern writers, Hariharan does not focus on the linear plot but on the character’s psyche to disclose her intentions. Frank O Connor in The Lonely Voice has rightly remarked, “Any realistic art is a marriage between the importance of material and the importance of the artistic treatment.” (41). Artistic treatment is as significant as the subject; therefore style becomes an inevitable aspect of any writers work. The writer is required to invent such a style as may best suit the subject. Edgar Allen Poe points out:

A skilful artist has constructed a tale. He has not fashioned his thoughts to accommodate his incidents, but having deliberately
conceived a certain single effect to be wrought, he then invents such
incidents, tone as may best serve him in establishing this preconceived
effect (Poe 105/106).

Style can be broadly categorized into two main kinds:

Conventional style comes with a linear development of the story i.e.
beginning, middle and end and in the Experimental style; the writer utilizes new
experiments with technique. The main focus of the writers using the experimental
style is not on a linear plot but on the characters psyche. A writer uses techniques of
poetry and drama to achieve the end.

It is interesting to note that most of the post-independence women short story
writers like Shashi Deshpande, Anita Desai, Anjana Appachana, Jhumpa Lahiri, Gauri
Deshpande and R.P. Jhabvala in IWE used the experimental style. In the backpage of
the book Michael Ondaatje remarks, “Githa Hariharan`s fiction is wonderful, full of
subtleties and humour and tenderness.”

Hariharan has adapted a unique style for narration. As mentioned in her art of
characterization she has used first person narrators, third person narrator and multiple
narrators. Most of her stories have first person narrators. While stories like “The
Warden” has two narrators and “Voices in the Twilight” has three narrators.
Hariharan’s tact of creating images with the help of similes and metaphors is the
noteworthy feature of her style. She compares human beings with animals in “The Remains of the Feast”. The great grandmother of the narrator is described thus, “Her neck was a big hump, and she lay in bed like a moody camel that would snap or bite at unpredictable intervals.” (AOD 9). The images created by similes are so concrete that a clear picture is formed in the reader’s mind. In her story “Love Poem” the image of a classroom is thus described, “The benches and desks... formed a close, tight square, like an airless box; or like an orderly phalanx of identical, blank-faced strangers advancing on her.” (AOD 119). In the same story the poems recited/quoted have a lot of metaphors and similes related to the main theme i.e. death.

There is one hour alone, long as an artery.

And between the acid and the patience of crumpled time

We voyage through

Parting the syllables of fear and tenderness

Interminably done away with. done to death (AOD 119).

The use of figures of speech makes her writing very pictorial and creates concrete images instantly before the readers. One of the best examples of imagery in the whole text is the description of the city.“The city is a big insect with its beady, wandering eyes. Nothing escapes its hunger. It sucks golden honey. It smells of sweat and rotten tears. It grows an evil flower in its heart of deeply scarred stone. Everything is found in the sweet, heady poison that oozes out of the loving tarantula.” (AOD 145).
It is significant to note Harihan’s ability to blend the comic and tragic wonderfully. “The Remain of the Feast” has a comic strain in it as an old woman near the end of her life suddenly feels the urge to sample all the food she has been forbidden to eat. Simultaneously it is mingled with a tinge of sadness. The descriptions of her past life and of her emotions move us.

Harihan’s stories unfailingly surprise and delight as her short stories are executed with precision of style and magical imagery. Her use of modern methods of narration rather than clinging on to the conventional mode of narration is the most significant feature in her short stories. Innovative techniques and lot of experimentation combined with wide range of characters, theme and setting make her stories stimulating.

It took Krishna only a week in the village to find out. Village boys were stupid. He was also scared of them. They know so little, they made him laugh. They had never seen an aquarium or a planetarium. Their English – what little they knew of it – was really hilarious.

(AOD 24).
In “Gajar Halwa”, the protagonist compares the city life with the village life, “At the milk booth, the queue reminds me of our fights at the water tap in the village. But I don’t have to push so much here.” (AOD 83).

The city of Delhi is described above, which is again a familiar place to the author, her having settled there. In this manner Hariharan experiments with familiar settings, as Margaret Atwood said in her interview, “Using what you’re given”:

I don’t think you transcend region, anymore than a plant transcends earth. I think that you come out of something, and you can then branch out in all kinds of different directions, but that doesn’t mean cutting yourself off from your roots and from your earth. To me an effective writer is one who can make what he or she is writing about understandable and moving to someone who has never been there. All good writing has that kind of transcendence.

In his book, The Art of Fiction David Lodge has mentioned that it is the weather that affects ones moods. The writer is thus, able to evoke the appropriate mood in his work by attempting to invent the weather required for the same.

In Hariharan’s anthology, setting is more than the approximate time and place in which the work is set. It encompasses a wide variety of physical features. In some of the stories the events seem timeless and universal, while in some others no particular time or place is specified or even suggested. Perhaps, she does not consider a specific setting to be important. As in “Gajar Halwa”, “Field Trip” or “Virgin Curry”
minimal information about setting is provided. The author has attempted to clearly identify and fully describe the setting where it is a key factor influencing the characters or the plot development.

Like Hariharan, Anita Nair too, has only one collection of short stories. Nair’s anthology of short stories titled, *Satyr of the Subway* has fifteen stories. Nair begins her literary journey with the short story before experimenting with the novel. Both the writers’ accomplishments as successful writers gained ground with their first novels, *The Thousand Faces of Night* and *The Better Man* respectively. Whether it is Kamala Das or Shashi Deshpande, they took to writing novels after their tryst with short stories. ‘As novel is an extended piece of narrative fiction’, the short story is limited in length and scope. Unlike the novelist, the short story writer cannot devote a great deal of space to developing a highly complex plot or a large number of characters. As a result, the short story begins close to or at the height of action and develops one character in depth. It usually concentrates on a single incident. The writer develops a character by showing his or her responses to events. Therefore majority of the fiction writers begin with the short story before attempting to write a novel. The Indian women writers seem to have lent a new dimension of sensitivity and perception to the short story in English but are less noticed for their contribution to this genre. Both Hariharan and Nair took to serious novel writing after their first foray with short story writing. In the 1990s, when universal themes of love, life and death became the preoccupation of the writers, Nair in her collection engages with unconventional themes: themes such as lesbianism, business rivalry, loneliness, supernatural (encounters with witches), sexual predators and old age issues. Unlike Hariharan, Nair
does not bring feminism as a key issue in her stories. Her stories are known for their evocative prose, visual images and cultural observations. No two stories in this collection are alike. Each story works around a dramatically different situation ranging from the mundane to the bizarre. This fascinating collection of stories traverses the entire gamut of human emotions, wherein the male-female relationship is explored and one is constantly reminded of the futility of expectations from life or lovers. This collection is suffused with metaphor, myth and montages of life. Therefore it offers variety and sustains the interest of the readers.

*Satyr of the Subway* is a tale of Basil Bayleaf, a sexual predator, who narrates his latest rape making a forced attempt to experience it as beautiful and erotic. “To Touch a Rainbow” exposes the younger generation as over dependent, self-centered and uncaring and the fiercely independent nature of the older generation. The story speaks volumes of the difficult but not impossible dreams nurtured by the older couple. “The Witch Wife’s Tale” revolves around the misadventure of a wife, who gets hooked to a blonde, attractive married man and thus cheats on her husband. Saro, an Indian, gets involved in an extra-marital relationship with a married European. This incident mirrors the changing image of Indian women.

“The Heart of a Gerund” holds up the mirror to the pitiable plight of the senior citizens leading lonely lives in old age homes. Norah, the protagonist is compared to Gerund, stuck in the grammar book of life. “Mistress of the Night” is a tale of a reputed man, Vice President of an advertising agency. The story reveals the protagonist’s encounter with a prostitute, Lisa whom the former handsomely pays for
one night. The protagonist engages in a conversation with Lisa and satiates his quest to learn about the nuances of life.

"The Karmic Cat" is an evocative tale narrated by a cat that is sexually obsessed with a woman. The story is inspired by Lord Buddha’s attainment of enlightenment. The karmic cat having sought eight-fold path of discipline brings an end to his suffering. The theme is ‘To exist is to suffer’. Suffering has its roots in desire. The cat seeks the lady of the house with a fierce possessiveness to the annoyance of her husband, who feels neglected. When the husband makes a triumphant effort to win his wife, the cat lets its animal nature take over and hurls itself at the man, raking his claws across the bare chest. The woman directs her anger towards the cat and thus shows her concern and protectiveness for her husband. The miserable cat withdraws to seek peace and salvation of his bruised spirit.

"Consider the Tree", accentuates on the power of a drumstick tree. There is a reference of King Vikramaditya and the Vampire that lived in the branches of a drumstick tree and how it helped the former fathom the meaning of life. For the protagonist (Amma), the drumstick tree is her true friend, companion and provider. It acts as the repository of her confidence, treasury of her hopes and the vault of her memories. Her strength, toughness and capability are the result of the drumstick tree.

"The Hippoman" throws light on the waxing and waning of one’s fortune. Lewis, a singing Hippo becomes king of the nursery land, in the foyer of the world’s
cutest store for kids. Hippoman has a voice that soars into the skies. He becomes the most popular star of the store attracting attention of children and women alike. Popo the clown, half French and half Indian, arrives to shake Lewis’ foundation. Within no time the clown replaces the musician. Lewis decides to pursue his dreams; sing his favourite songs, go on a holiday, ride a camel, do all the things he never had a chance to do before. All this, he intends to do not before taking revenge on his arch rival Popo, the clown. The story reveals the paradoxical situation, when the miserable plight of a great singer trapped in the Hippo-suit is exposed. It also depicts the stiff competition amidst which great artists struggle to find a place. But no place is permanent, even for the greatest of artists. The sense of insecurity of the once popular singer is revealed.

‘Come to Bed, my Pretty’, is a tale about a husband’s absolute love for his wife of twenty-five years. The wife acts with ‘a sense of remoteness and an aura of touch-me-not. The wife, Bella has mixed up her fairy tales; wide-eyed Gold-locks, the Ugly Duckling, who becomes a swan, a sleeping beauty and the Snow Queen. Her fantasies revolve around how much her husband (the narrator, here) cherishes her. The devoted husband risks his reputation and works hard to acquire the glass that Bella sets her eyes on. at the Fernandes’ home. The glass is a symbol of the ‘ultimate love’. The tale reveals the unconditional love of a husband who intends to win his wife’s heart, body and soul even at the cost of endangering his reputation. The undying hope and dedication of the husband for his wife Bella is exhibited here.
“A Prayer for Sax” depicts the emotional state of a mother who is miles away from her only child (a son). The mother recollects the moments of joy experienced since her son’s birth. The ambition to become one of the richest men in the world takes him away from home. The astrologer warns the husband and son to be careful as ‘the oil dripping’ lamp is a bad omen. It is the belief that on the eve of the darkest night in the year, unhappy spirits emerge to torment and cause pain to men in their prime, pregnant woman and gifted children, who become their prey. Before the mother calls up her son to ask him to avoid flying for the next two or three years she is informed about her young son Sax Sekharan’s death in a crash. The mother’s dreams, fears and anguish for her only son are well-articulated.

The story, “A Thanksgiving Tale” is quite indicative. As the title suggests very aptly. Mike alias Madhavan and Yvonne invite guests at their place on Thanksgiving Eve. Lonely and old Sarah is invited to their place along with many of Mike’ Indian friends and those of Yvonne’s. Yvone is embarrassed by Sarah’s presence. The cause for her embarrassment is, “Sarah gushed. Sarah talked too much. Sarah flung her arms and gestured wildly. Sarah giggled. Sarah fluttered her eyelashes. Sarah, in those few minutes of walking into the room, dropped her purse, her glasses and then her stockings.” (SOS 127).

All her mannerisms create a ruckus and irritate Yvonne. Sarah narrates an incident when she was mugged. Boredom creeps in when her story as a mugging victim is narrated with pauses and exaggeration. She is further subjected to humiliation. when the guests snub her. Her lack of etiquette was intolerable for
Yvonne. Driven by loneliness and rejected by friends Sarah, the inconsolable, ends her life by slashing her wrists with an old razor blade. The insensitive Yvonne detested the display of weakness of Sarah and Sarah the ultra-sensitive female could not handle the humiliation. The story is a portrayal of the urban lifestyle where people are sophisticated and formal in their approach but lack sensitivity.

“Mercury-woman” is an urban tale of a lesbian, Malini, who cavorts around with her girlfriend and apartment mate Ingrid Clark and introduces her to her prospective groom. The story concludes when the would-be groom Gautam reveals Malini’s sexual preference for girls to her family when he says, “If she were a planet, she would be Mercury. Small, virulent and extremely eccentric. There is something about her that would attract any man at first glance. Until you realize that it is impossible for a man to live with her. In her airless realm, there is no room for a man. He would suffocate and die.” (SOS 142).

“Two out of three ain’t bad” is the tale of Ila, a 37 year old woman. An unmarried lady, Ila is impatiently waiting for someone to arrive in her life. Since she was fourteen, she is the beneficiary of Arun’s love and loyalty but his body was on offer for the pretty young boys he picked up every night. All her efforts to find the right companion by going to parties, picnics, theatre festivals were in vain. Men of her age enjoyed her companionship but wanted only one thing – girls with slender haunches, dewy complexions and wide eyes. As the younger men, they wanted passion without strings, and maybe a pizza thrown in free. The tale is about a successful woman’s futile attempts at seeking an ideal companion.
In "Behe-moth", Moth, the narrator of the story is like Bheeshma in the Mahabharata, who continues to remain impervious to age and time. The moth narrates the story of Costa, a half-Portuguese man. His search for a bride, whose skin would match the translucence of his own, brings him to Marie, but he fails to obtain a milk-white child born out of their union. He rejects every brown child born out of their union. Besides, he is a Catholic and so divorce is ruled out. The moth is a silent witness to the sad demise of Costa. The house is converted into a women’s hostel after Costa’s death. The house acquires the disrepute of being a haunted one. It is a flagon of perfume with the shape of a woman that makes the moth seduce a woman. Every new occupant succumbs to the good perfume transforms into a womanizer sparing none who lives in the house. The moth pretends to be someone each day: Count of Monte Cristo, Casanova, Don Juan, Krishna, Indra and Rhett Butler (fictional character in Margaret Michelle’s, Gone with the Wind). It has mastered the art of forgetting and remembering.

"The Madness of Heracles" is the tale of a fearless writer who displays total disregard for bureaucrats and politicians. He is accused of having broken all laws of humanity, questioned all the norms and dictates. Because he braved it out and dared to question all the lives of the strong and powerful he faces isolation. To escape from the disgust and revulsion his presence evoked in the people around him from a writer he becomes a television producer The new role donned by the narrator erases the pride in him and he is showered with glory. His feats and accomplishments become the talk of the town. The producer of Family dramas, Lifestyle features, Interiors and chat shows. Cookery and made-up reality shows becomes a hero in the eyes of the people. But he
is engulfed with self-disgust as he feels a sense of futility and worthlessness in what he was doing. All this fame and popularity make him his mother's favourite son. In the depth of his heart he finds himself 'a mortal phantom stalking amidst the twittering society' (SOS 162). The writer's exasperation for not being able to express with freedom his true self is portrayed well. The writer has stopped writing but continues to be a keen observer. It is a tale of a by-gone writer who regrets not being able to be what he really yearned to become. The street of Darkness is a street lined with chambers where one may do things which one is not allowed to do otherwise. House of courting, nest of cubicles, chat room, smoking corner, wear what you want stop and artist's box. The protagonist narrator regrets his lack of freedom and liberty during his prime youth.

The characters in Nair's short stories reveal the emergence of the contemporary woman, who is aware of her potential; she is mentally and physically equipped to take part with the fast changing values of life. Both men and women, irrespective of their gender, adorn the mantle of self-emancipation. Some of the stories are concerned with feminist issues and the life of non-resident Indians. They echo the voice of the powerful, highly educated, intellectual, vocal and expressive ones with regard to their thoughts and vision. The stories reveal the true nature of the post-modernist era where arose a new class of women writers like Nair, who began to explore new sexual mores and fresh possibilities in human relations. Her attempt at recreating the urban landscape in this collection failed to move her. To her the books based in quiet villages and small towns offered a harmony between man and land 'strewn with a wealth of sub-plots'. And so this became the landscape she set in her novels. Contrary to her short stories, in her novels she sought to narrate the stories of people who would inhabit such a world. She has written in her blog an article titled
“What would Dickens Write Today” where she has mentioned, “We locate our stories in the world that we believe we have a rare understanding. A world that we internalize to an extent that it seeps into our every breath and thought. For only then can we recreate on paper that world with almost the life force it pulses with”.

In the past, too, diaspora as a prominent theme has been explored by writers like Anita Desai, Jhumpa Lahiri, Gauri Deshpande and Ruth Prawer Jhabvala, who have tried to portray the state and stream of consciousness of the non-resident Indians through their short stories. The theme of values and predicamentsof life were also explored by Tara Deshpande, Manju Kak, Shalan Savur.

Nair explores the theme of loneliness in this anthology. The miserable plights of Norah in “The Heart of a Gerund” and Sarah in “A Thanksgiving Tale” are heartrending. The sense of loneliness can be a problem in one’s native place, but it is worse in an alien land. This is depicted in both the stories mentioned above. Sarah’s is the perfect illustration of the case of humiliating isolation in an alien land when she is ill-treated in the presence of all who have gathered for the Thanksgiving party.

In “The Witch Wife’s Tale”, Saro attempts to shun the moth-eaten morality that has always restricted her. Her dreams revolving around marriage are replaced by a craving desire to explore the forbidden territory. In her marriage she feels a familiar sense of doom descending upon her. Her husband Sushil would continue to treat her like a slave, a whore. The author’s conception of marriage is also revealed in this story. Saro dreams of friendship, love, warmth and companionship. Self-awareness is
her chief trait. Here, Nair has experimented with the settings. She has deliberately chosen New York and Manhattan as the setting of the story and is pursuing radical feminism, while exploring the life and place of women in the family and society. Not all stories adhere to this ideology. Nair deftly explores the feelings of people living far away from their homeland, dear ones groping for love, affection and warmth. The characters in this anthology get bored with the dull and mundane life around them and seek something hitherto unexplored, unchallenged. This quest is the chief concern of the author. Similarly, Nair attempts to evoke the same experience through the character of Saro.

All the fifteen stories in Nair’s anthology were written with different themes. Therefore, no two stories have similar themes or characters. As far as setting is concerned, Nair who is settled in Bangalore has experimented with exotic foreign locales. With the exception of her novel *Mistress* (where a small part of the novel is set in London) the author rarely attempts to explore foreign land. In one of her interviews she has admitted about her comfort with familiar locales only. Almost all her works have Chennai, Kerala or Bangalore as the setting; the places where she has spent her life. With her anthology, her first published work, she has chosen a setting to influence the plot. To enable the characters to behave the way they do, the urban setting helps to emphasize the story’s theme. “A Thanksgiving Tale” would not have made sense in an Indian setting. The stories in this anthology are set in New York and other cities, for instance, Manhattan. By recreating the western urban setting Nair reflects the kaleidoscope of urban life through her stories. She evokes the colour, mood, sound, weather of the cities in the U.S. Art and artistic processes also occupy
an important place in Nair’s themes. Lewis the singer-musician in “Hippoman” and the narrator-writer in “The Madness of Heracles” help the author explore the chief quality that distinguishes an artist from a common man.

Nair’s stories unerringly chart the emotional journeys of characters seeking love beyond the barriers of nations and generations. They are imbued with the sensual details of Indian culture. Though they do not present a consistent picture of India, they do bring out the distinctive features of India, Indians and Indianness. At the same time they do speak with universal eloquence to anyone who has ever felt like a foreigner.

Like Anita Desai and Jhumpa Lahiri, Nair also attempts to read the minds of the Non-resident Indians. Most of her protagonists of her short stories are Indians and have settled abroad. Indian men and women are portrayed in a variety of situations. The author captures their mixed reactions – naïve, sophisticated, alarmed and confident.

The characters have universal traits as the author probes the truth about men, women, their relationships, thoughts, frustrations and absurdities. Her characters cross the boundaries of cultural and national differences. This is because at the base all are human beings yearning and longing for love and happiness. Characterization is a quintessential part of Nair’s anthology as each short story is woven around a particular character. Every story strives to bring forth the distinctive traits of the character. The characters range from young, old, men, women. Cat and moth also play
the role of narrators in “The Karmic Cat” and “Behe-moth”. The author’s keenness to represent the current trends of society and the changing scenario is manifested by means of the characters she has created.

Like most of the contemporary women short story writers Nair has used the experimental style. The main focus is not on a linear plot but on the character’s psyche. The transparency of language and spontaneity of prose are outstanding features of her style. Like Shashi Deshpande, Nair makes use of mythic allusions and parallels in her fiction. In The Satyr of the Subway and “The Witch Wife’s Tale” she has drawn upon her material from Greek mythology. Her use of mythical material requires in the reader a sound knowledge of mythology (mostly Greek) to get the most out of her fiction.

The metaphor of the dark’ is a recurring metaphor in the novels and short stories of Nair. The story ‘The Madness of Heracles’ is set on the ‘Streets of Darkness’

The stories are written with the first person narrator, observer-narrator and participant-narrator. Nair’s short stories have no digressions or diversions and therefore one gets thoroughly engrossed. The subtle complexity of the various characters and their relationships have been satisfactorily brought out. The smallest of theme has been worked out. All her stories adhere to the preciseness and brevity this form demands. Nair is an impeccable craftsman and her stagecraft is reflected in
reviews by Indian Review of Books, Mid-day, Times of India, Indian Express and the like. Her book reads like a poem in parts, rich with rhyme, rhythm and alliteration.
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