CHAPTER VIII

Isvaran's Technique and Style

The technique of narrating a story is determined by the kind of experience and the quality of vision which the author seeks to convey through the mutual interaction of character and plot. Works by eminent practitioners of the genre, however, bear testimony to the fact that the artistic value of a good story lies ultimately in something beyond method and technique. Kempton has rightly observed, "a noble theme may sound merely pretentious under poor telling." Form and technique, it must be admitted, make the vital elements of the short story, for they are inseparable from the subject matter of the short story. To many readers "the way of telling is the mark of good fiction: scene, detail, dialogue all the elements that make an imaginative creation of life."  

As a pioneer of Indian short story in English, Isvaran attempts a synthesis between the old and the new, and the Eastern and the Western methods of writing short fiction. Since the short story is the chosen literary genre of Isvaran, he experiments with the form and tries to understand the vital and varied principles of its composition. He "experiments with form and technique with a considerable degree of success." Isvaran's stories, book-reviews, and literary essays, reveal his search for a consistent aesthetic. He maintains in his essay "Novelist as Artist:"
Fiction when it is art, is the offspring of pure temperament and temperament is infinite in variety. And it is temperament that creates the technique and technique which stamps the artist. Fiction as art succeeds to the degree in which the temperaments of both writer and reader achieve harmony. Isvaran is very much concerned with the technique of the short story and he has something very interesting to say about it.

Isvaran's acquaintance with the stories of the great masters of the art form makes him consider technique "as a tool box, an assortment of ways and means with all of which a writer should be familiar before he ponders the best way of telling a story." His successful stories are chiselled pieces of literary workmanship and art. They are compact, neatly structured and remarkable for their finish. A careful exercise of strict self-restraint in order to achieve unity of impression makes these stories well-knit. He is careful in eliminating the superfluous details detrimental to the creation of the singleness of impression, though some of his stories are wrought with features that may be termed "loose!" features, characteristic of the early practitioners of this genre in India. In the selection of incidents, and knitting them into stories of a high artistic order, Isvaran is supreme when viewed against contemporary standards of composition. Though Isvaran is familiar with the works of the great masters of the art, and has absorbed the best that he has come across in them, he has his own methods of telling a story. His technique at its best draws the reader
very close to the emotional centre of the story so that the author, the reader and the leading characters all seem to be experiencing the same emotions. In his best stories, he eliminates everything that decelerates the emotional impact.

As a writer, very much taken up by the short story form, Isvaran knows that the short story with its obvious limitations cannot exhibit life in its entirety and multifaceted complexity, for this needs a larger canvas than the story provides. We see characters in a short story only for a comparatively short span of time and see them circumscribed by a few relationships and limited circumstances. So he hardly attempts to entangle himself in the intricacies of plot and consciously veers away from complexity of structure and elaborate design which may complicate the interpretation of characters and of life.

The artistically successful stories of Isvaran reveal his belief that the significance of a work lies in the careful selection of its material. Isvaran's usual method is to select the salient details and then focus on a few striking details to make swift impression. Often he selects such material that will not go beyond the need set by the story, though there are a few exceptions to this wonted practice. He has an acute perception of the detail that he needs. In the details that he provides each word carries weight, laden as it is with layers of meaning.
Isvaran, who is aware of the limited scope of short fiction concentrates on a single situation and on one or two characters, on whom is centred the dramatic situation which forms the climax of the story. Even when the requisites of the story demand the involvement of a number of characters, the focus is invariably on one or two. Even in the long story “Rickshawallah,” that has all the potentialities and attributes of a novel, being “a photograph of life (rather than) a snapshot,” the centre of attention is the honest Rickshawallah. As in a novel there are many characters in the story and inevitably so, as it deals with the life and death of the protagonist. However, these characters, except the protagonist, are merely functional creatures adding to the stature of the hero and contributing to the development of the plot. In “Motorman,” another of the long short stories of Isvaran, there are several characters but none overshadows the protagonist. “Immeresion” which has been acclaimed to be Isvaran’s magnum opus, has only four characters, but here also Akhileswaran and Jagadamma stand out as the leading figures. Thus, in matters relating to characters Isvaran sticks to the conventional norm that, “short stories do frequently focus on one or two individuals who are seen as separated from their fellowmen in some way, at odds with the social norms, beyond the pale.”

Technically, a story tries to set up and maintain an illusion of life by recording a sequence of facts. This is achieved by the dramatic treatment of themes and by the pictorial clarity of the scene
and action which produces a powerful dramatic appeal than by presenting a logical sequence of events. This method is perhaps most suited to present and project the characters' states of mind without any authorial interference.

The most significant aspect of technique, viz. point of view, draws attention to the "relation in which the narrator stands to the story." In the short story, more than in any other fictional form, the point of view is vital both as a device for the heightening of the dramatic tempo and, through the handling of the perspective upon the material, for the positive explanation and analysis of the theme.

Isvaran uses point of view to gain greater objectivity. In some of his stories he seeks it through self-effacement, by introducing a first person narrator who is a participant in the action. In the stories which deal with serious themes, or reworks on ancient ones, Isvaran adopts a point of view that is totally impersonal. As the 'acknowledged creator' he knows everything, but is no more than a witness to the action of the story. He does not adopt the point of view of either the focal characters or an omniscient observer in these stories. He is omnipresent, that is all. In "Immersion", "Dance of Siva", "Sivaratri", "Revelation" and a number of other stories he is both omnipresent and omniscient. In these stories the author talks about the characters and about the story. He sees into the minds of the characters and chooses sometimes to report what they are thinking. In "Immersion" we hear the authorial voice as in the passage "In his
perch in the cart he was as happy as a king.” The following passage is another illustration of the omniscience of the author:

He was in such a fine frenzy of bliss that he wanted to catch the stars in the loop of his whipstring, pull them from the sky, and set them as jewels on rings for his fingers and the fingers of his beloved.

Again, "Akhileswaran’s thoughts hovered round the pot, thoughts of profound worship and devotion, withal of great ache, of an endless sorrow.” In "Revelation" Isvaran lays bare the mind of the young couple. "She dwelt pleasantly on the many sweet, secret things of him, of which she alone had the intimate knowledge." In "No Ankletbells for Her" Isvaran not only reports, but freely offers comments in his role as the omniscient author:

May be she remembered vaguely, when she smiled, the painted eunuchs she had seen dancing before shop fronts during the pongal festival. No ballerina that pirouetted on a stage that changed under changing lights and shadows, with an auditorium bewitched before her starry eyes and the symphony of the orchestra falling divinely on her ears, no devadasi that did her natya in the temple in the presence of the decorated idol of god or goddess could have been so ecstatic as was this child of the gutters.

As a story-teller he knows naturally much more than what the characters in the story know. For example, he tells us of the unspoken
thoughts of the priest in the story "Immersion" who cleverly guesses "what had happened" between the cartman and Jagada on hearing the last words of the cartman. Again the attitude of the priest towards Akhileswaran on knowing this is not known to the protagonist but to the author. Omniscience of the author also permits him to delve into philosophic depths on what happens in the story. Isvaran's concept of beauty as manifest in Jagada illustrates this:

What is beauty and perfection in the eyes of man is not so to the creator who endowed such on an individual life; if it is destroyed in an unnatural way it cannot be said that an accident caused the destruction, it is the result of a sin the individual had committed in a previous existence. Beauty and perfection are only when God liberates that life from the bondage of birth.¹⁴

Isvaran's stories do not suffer from the major drawback of third-person omniscient point of view—distraction from the main issue of the story, the central character and his/her problem when the author concentrates on certain minor characters as the course of the story warrants. This is mainly because of the authorial preoccupation with one or two major characters.

Yet another point of view effectively experimented is that of making one of the characters narrate the story. This, he thinks, suits the immediacy of characters and actions. One of the disadvantages of this method is that of finding out a suitable place to fit the author...
in the story as the narrator. However, Isvaran's stories of this kind prove to be some of his best, but some others are technically failures. "The Man Behind the Chairs" is a successful story of this kind. The story begins with an account of the circumstances which make the narrator listen to the story of the protagonist. Though the introduction seems a little longer than is strictly necessary, once the reader begins to experience the tension in the story, the listener's (narrator's) response becomes vital. Here the dramatic situation and the tension are provided by the narrator and the protagonist, though several characters figure in the story. Though the narration centres round a series of misfortunes which should naturally arouse our pity for the protagonist the reactions of the narrator at certain stages arouse feelings of humour and irony. "Toilette" depicts an aged husband's indifference to, or even ignorance of, the romantic longings of his young wife. The heart of the situation is revealed by the reflections of a witness to the whole drama. The presentation here is graphic. The narrator, who is also a passenger in the crowded Third Class railway compartment bound for Calcutta, does not philosophise or make any comment on what happens. But his reactions make a clue to larger significance. In the stories "Annihilation," "Only a Sparrow," "That Moan", "A Bold Stroke" and "Strictly Professional" the narrator's role is only that of a witness. But the narrator is not characterised as illiterate or too ignorant to understand the full implications of the happenings. The philosophic musing on the apparently trivial
incidents form the central elements in these stories. Each narrator is assigned the appropriate status to create the necessary credibility. Some of the episodes in the stories emphasise the mood and inner feelings and the appropriate nature attributed to the narrator.

The frame of reference for the short story is rarely the totality of a human life. An experienced artist, however, knows the appropriate point at which he can approach the story and the point selected determines the form. He observes:

Form need not always be the God of Gods in the short story—for every artist creates his own form—but such description inside its taut frame and texture swamp its purpose and the montage of multicoloured words while displaying glamour debilitates its energy. A novel has many mansions for such display, but the short story is a little room which cannot admit any redundancy.  

Isvaran experimented with a wide variety of approaches vis-a-vis the form of the short story. Apart from the third person narration and the first person narration, he has tried the autobiographical, reminiscential, flashback and one-sided personal correspondence. In "Painted Tigers" and "Gold on His Lips" the form of telling is autobiographical. He begins some of his stories in a slow, casual and leisurely manner as the narration in the stories "Motorman" "A Madras Admiral" and "Painted Tigers" reveals. The long introductory passages betray this weakness of Isvaran's technique though it was a fashion of
the day. Despite this, Isvaran could write technically perfect stories. The two stories "Consummation" and "Revelation" on identical themes and situations unravel the strength and weakness of Isvaran's technique. Both the stories are the revelations of the state of the mind of the ultrasensitive husband on the first night. In both the stories the narrator is the omniscient author. In "Revelation" the story is narrated directly whereas in "Consummation" it is constructed from a one-sided correspondence made by the protagonist to a journal of which the narrator is the editor. "Consummation" begins in an "irritatingly" slow pace and lingers "to unfold for the reader the little incidentals and way-ward episodes."16 The narration of the circumstances which lead him to reconstruct the story from the pages of a journal itself takes as many as four pages. The conclusion is a letter received by the author from the protagonist, and it consists of about three full pages. The reader of the story has to grope for the 'single episode' that is the "heart of the story." The story is an illustration of how an effective theme of a good short story can be smothered under the combined burden of long drawn-out and rambling introduction, vague and diffuse presentation and a loquacious and dissipated ending. "Consummation" bears out the truth of M. K. Naik's charge that "His besetting sin is the irritatingly leisurely mode of narration he often indulges in, and his fatal habit of prolonging the story even after the point has been made."17 On the other hand, "Revelation" consists only of six pages in which the theme is presented in a dramatic manner. It
begins with a brief statement of the special reasons for the hilarity of Savitri who has been married for two years, on the third anniversary of their nuptial night. The whole atmosphere and background of the story are suggested in a short eloquent paragraph and the atmosphere which prevails throughout the story is in consonance with the tempo of this introductory paragraph. The scene of the first night of Savitri and Brihadisvaran is recalled from the point of view of the husband and wife. The embarrassing situation of the husband on the nuptial night and the bride pretending to be asleep and the final revelation of the secret to him, all are dramatised in the most effective manner. The story is considered to be one of the finest by Isvaran in its thematic unity, homogeneity of mood, clarity of tone, economy of narration, structural harmony and emotional richness.

Isvaran’s descriptions of the personal appearance of his characters at times appear incongruous with the purpose of the story. At times they have no relevance to the theme or mood or tone of the story. The first three pages of the story ‘The Motor man’ is devoted to describe the circumstances which lead the author to become interested in the story of the protagonist. This naturally mars the singleness of effect. Similarly “Tu Quoque” begins with a description of the beauty of a girl seen through the eye of a petty thief who, soon afterwards snatches the necklace of the girl. Anyway one can hardly associate a thief with the following passage:
He saw her standing on the threshold of the house door opening on the street, a very pretty child about four years old, just a tiny bloom, windblown from a bloomy spray. She had eyes wide as wonder, and dark, dark abundant hair, too abundant for her age, plaited from the middle of the brow and joined to the braid curling petal-like at the nape. Child's innocence was her shining apparel, but her virgin shame was covered by a piece of beaten gold, fashioned like a little peepul leaf and swinging from a twisted alpaca thread tied about her waist. A necklace with a sovereign pendent was the only other ornament on her person and she stood on the threshold, opening and closing the door vigorously and delighted with the squealing of the hinges.\(^\text{18}\)

In "crutches," "Counsel for Defence" and "Silver Bead Golden Bead" a past incident is recapitulated by one of the characters. In "Between Two Flags" the form is that of a flashback in which the retired loyal bureaucrat R. Kalyan Rau Sastri recalls his past. In "Tu Quoque" the reader is taken directly into the story. In several of his stories he does not follow the convention of ending a story in a passage that is characterized by brevity rather than loquacity. In them he continues putting down words after the solution has been reached, producing such an anticlimax that causes the loss of the effect that the beginning so richly promised.
In some of his stories Isvaran adopts a technique in which he integrates modern elements with those of folk-lore. In the individual and social life, he believes that the traditional culture and literature have infinite connotations. The story "The Miracle of the Door," a rework on a cultural lore, is written more like a fable than as a modern short story, a fable told by the narrator's grandmother who is a "first class raconteuse" whose story contains moral as bright as mirrors. In order to explain away things which are irrational the narrator says that it all happened when the grandmother was young. And now it seems to her "a dream, a shadow of superstition." With its brevity, compression, dramatic touch and the focus on a moral, the story bears close resemblance to the fables of yore.

In all the stories of the collection Fancy Tales Isvaran carefully balances nostalgic recollections with objectivity and judgment. Isvaran's contemporaries, by and large, have tried to relate their tales in some way or other to the great classics of India. Isvaran's method is to introduce into his story events that run to those in the ancient ages or juxtapose certain modern situations with those of the classics. "Jagadamma" the major female character in "Immersion" is, as her name suggests, the mother of the universe and the archetype of Indian womanhood. In Ramayana Sita undergoes a series of sufferings for no fault of hers and is subjected to the process of purification by fire. Rama's life in the wilderness for fourteen years forms part of his sacred duty to enable his father keep his promise to
the royal consort, 'Akhileswaran' means 'the Lord of the universe' and the Akhileswaran of the story is bound with his 'sacred duty to his father.'

Apart from drawing characters and situations parallel to those in antiquity, Isvaran refers to episodes in Indian classics to evolve a sense of deeper perception. The helpless Jagada before the satyric cartman is compared to Draupadi in a similar situation, a situation that ultimately leads to the annihilation of a whole dynasty.

Where was He Whom Draupadi invoked in the darkest hour of her shame and grief, Who came to succour her? Perhaps the present situation was not tragic enough to deserve His attention, His glance of compassion; perhaps He regarded what He said, that to destroy the wicked, to protect the good and establish dharma He was born from age to age. 20

In "Immersion" Isvaran utilises myth to give a concrete shape to the abstract thought of Akhileswaran. The stories "Sivaratri", "The Dance of Siva" and "At His Nativity" are studded with mythical parallels and references as well as legendary tales to such an extent that any average reader is apt to be struck by the contemporary relevance of our classics. It becomes imperative for a reader to share the myths with the story teller for a thorough comprehension. Though frequent references are made to local myths, they are explicit enough to be easily comprehensible to the reader.
As the tone of a story is inseparable from style, so style is inseparable from the meaning that it attempts to convey. The voice of the artist emerges from the very vibration of his prose—the stylistic devices which initiate the reader into an awareness of the contrived significance. So any investigation into the stories of Isvaran will be incomplete without a study of his prose style in relation to tone, mood and atmosphere, for "the words used by the tale teller were as the colours used by the painter or the clothes of the tale." 21

Isvaran’s theories on the art of short fiction, that lie spread over various literary pieces and reviews reveal that he has made ardent efforts to cultivate a graceful and elegant style. However, there seems to be no strain involved in those efforts and no pain is manifest in his attempt to be brilliant and effective. About his own efforts to achieve stylistic perfection he observes, "Every story or poem I wrote I destroyed three, often six and got my hand steady, stiffening myself the while within, not to inflict any piece I considered feeble on others." 22 It has to be acknowledged in this connection that a great master of the short story genre has done similar things, to achieve perfect style and craftsmanship. While reviewing the book The Stories of Frank O’Connor Isvaran quotes O’Connor’s words: “Some of the stories had already been re-written twenty, thirty, even fifty times.” 23

In bringing the language under perfect control to suit the tone and theme, Isvaran has achieved a success that is comparable to that of the great masters of the art form. His language is simple, lucid and
effective without being deliberate or laboured. In giving forth the
tone by means of the texture of his prose and by the verbal resonance
of the recorded event Isvaran’s attainment is remarkable. The authorial
voice reveals itself from the very vibration of his prose. The
structure of “Jowramma” consists of a series of shifting moods of
agreement and disagreement. The meaning of the story is formed by the
structure of contrasted moods. The description of nature becomes
eminently symbolic of the changing pattern of the relationship of the
village girl Jowramma and her husband. Their life is temporarily
shrouded in misery by the fog of disagreement and finally the shadow is
cleared by the light of conjugal pleasure that has hitherto
characterized their life. The changing patterns of fog and sunlight are
represented symbolically in the very rhythm of his prose. Here is a
passage, for instance:

The day had begun clear and bright but before moon the sun
fell; shadows raced like steeds, dimpled in rings, and
dissolved in hillslope, meadow, and valley; from beyond the
greys and quiet greens of silver oaks and eucalypti a mist,
thin as muslin rose and moved on gathering speed and
thickness. Soon the countryside was in a huge cloudage of
fog; heaven and earth had blended in radiant obscurity.
From somewhere a sound came startling the silence; it
swelled, it was the electric horn mooing the hour of twelve.
The fog which had begun to lift a while ago cleared away
completely when the mooing ceased; church steeples tapered into the sky again; and treetops shed their opals enriching every dip and dingle, every hole and hummock in the earth; and meadows lay freshened and humming in their emeraldness.

The purpose of the artist at the beginning of the story "The Miracle of the Door" is to make the reader believe something unbelievable. The primary device used is to show the distance between the date of the actual happening and the narrator-observer's retelling the tale. It becomes a thrice-told tale. The purpose of the writer then becomes that of creating a mysterious atmosphere built out of the setting, located vaguely as 'long ago' and by a chain of supernatural incidents.

Sean O'Faolain remarks that a writer, at the very opening, "must make an immediate and intimate contact with his story." He further observes, "For this reason, I confess, I tend to judge most of the stories I read by the opening sentences." If judged on the basis of the standards set by Faolain, the beginning of a story like "The Painted Tigers" or "Motorman" or "Mythili" is guilty of being slow and leisurely, setting the scene and giving us information which has no direct bearing on the core of the tale. What we recognize as crucially important is often distanced. The descriptions given at the beginning of these stories are quite irrelevant in a good short story for these descriptions are general and vague and an ideal short story cannot afford to be vague or general at any point. The beginning should be
direct and to the point, like that of stories like "Tu Quoque" "The Kolu" or "The Cradle."

However, the clarity of Isvaran's mind can do anything that is required by the context—modulate the trivial into the momentous, the prosaic into the eloquent, without ever losing the poise and authority of aesthetics.

"As a stylist he has an unerring ear for the right word in the right place, which can neither be translated nor transposed. His word-music casts a spell. The finest nuances are at his command. He is something of a word-juggler too, and the rarest expression, if it is the aptest, is to be found in his bag of verbal tricks. But he hates to revel in mere bombast or wallow in empty rhetoric. Nor does he like to indulge in obscurity for obscurity's sake."27

It is also noteworthy that the meaning of narration in his best stories is carried to some extent by pitch and syntactical arrangement.

A study of the style of a creative writer who opts for a language other than his mother tongue must examine the extent to which his language is conditioned by his sociocultural background and the linguistic features of his mother tongue. It becomes natural for such a writer to exploit various linguistic devices to develop a medium that fully suits the needs of expressing his thoughts and sensibilities. This will inevitably make the language different from the variety of the language used by the native speakers of it. The variations are
manifest at various linguistic levels—lexical, syntactic and semantic, apart from the idiosyncratic features of his use of the language.

At the lexical level, Isvaran has drawn a number of words from myths, scriptures, classical literature, and folk-tales, in addition to the names of characters and places which are Indian. Words like 'upanayana,' 'dharma,' 'Karma,' 'Saptapadi,' 'bairagee,' 'shradha,' 'kolu' etc. have spiritual and philosophical connotations. These words have no exact equivalents in English.

Expressions like 'Exit from this world' 'Sacred Vigil' 'Married with Agni as witness' are all alien to the native variety of English. The use of proverbs like "eating goose berry tastes sour at first but which a draught of water makes sweet," "After all, every God-created thing, however small has a belly to fill," and "as a drop in the ocean" is another significant aspect of his diction. Images like "bearing the figure of Goddess Lakshmi rising from the full-blown lotus," "The doors of the temple shut and no lamp burns;" "flowers of yesterday lie festering" require for full comprehension, a knowledge of Indian background.

At the syntactic level, a marked feature of Isvaran's style is the use of complex sentences which result in large scale embedding. This feature was common in Tamil and Malayalam in the forties and fifties. However, it must be noticed that, apart from these inevitable features of mother tongue interference Isvaran's English carries the essential features of "Chaste British English."
Notes

2 The Dimensions of the Short Story: A Critical Anthology 514.
3 John Hampson, Intr. No Ankletbells for Her XV.
5 Kenneth Payson Kempton, The Short Story 33.
7 Ian Reid, The Short Story 27.
9 Immersion 4-5.
10 Immersion 6-7.
11 Immersion 12.
12 No Ankletbells for Her 26.
13 No Ankletbells for Her 3.
14 Immersion 48.
16 Valerie Shaw, Short Story: A Critical Introduction 46.
18 *Naked Shingles* 74-75.
19 *Agry Dust* 12.
20 *Immersion* 47-48.
22 "The Indian Writer in English" 10.
24 *Naked Shingles* 16-17.
26 Sean O' Faolain, *The Short Story* 192.