CHAPTER - 3

A MIRROR TO THE MODERN WORLD: THEMATIC CONCERNS

It is theme that determines the controlling idea or the philosophical subject, which largely determines the selection and organization of various other elements of a short story. The thematic concerns of a writer lie deep in his values and understanding of the human condition. Through the incident and its artistic treatment, the writer tries to place before the reader, certain problems and their resolution. The modern short story writer finds the unity of his artistic expression in his thematic material, and in building it into a single flash of insight. Thus the entire story is the expansion of the theme. In this sense, a modern short story cannot be considered a mere narration of events, or the depiction of a situation. The events or situations in the story may echo those in the lives of the reader. This may, primarily, be the cause of interest on his part in the story. However, it cannot be denied that the events or situations echo the artist’s vision of life. The experiences, which have exercised decisive influence in shaping the values of a writer, may be the force that shapes the events in the story in such a way as to manifest his meaning in them. The meaning can be anything that the author desires. In the traditional stories, whether it is folklore, a fairy tale or a fable, there is a moral. The impact of the moral mood and tone running through the ancient tale has been too strong for the modern Indian writer to get away from. In most of the modern short stories, overtly or covertly, this aspect is manifest.
Mulk Raj Anand has said: “I sought to create a new kind of fable which extends the old Indian story form, into a new age, without the moral lesson of the Indian story, but embodying its verve and vitality” (Selected Stories 5).

The development of the short story has been towards a greater intensification of introvert methods of studying the mental process of the individual mind. The meaning derived from the individual experience is sometimes a moral, a philosophical idea or something that illumines life.

Theme has been described as the controlling idea or the central insight of a story. It is the unifying generalisation of life, stated or implied by the story. To know about the theme of a story, we have to probe into the central purpose of it—what view of life it supports or what insight into life it reveals.

In the Preface to his collection of short stories entitled Under the Lamp: Stories, Srivastava makes clear his concept of themes:

A short story is an artistic portrayal of ever-unfolding mysteries of human existence. It is a tiny mirror that intensely reflects a focused fragment of the vast moving kaleidoscope of life that each day, each moment passes by us in its new yet recognizable, ever-changing patterns and combinations. (v)

In the short story, as an art form, the inner life of man is more important than the outer, and the strife between the conflicting elements in the same person is more vivid than the strife between persons. The inner life is more important than the political and social background of the prevailing reality. “A fine short
story is the joint-product of the heart, the head and the hand. It originates from an inspiring idea, an appealing incident, a dramatic situation, a memorable character or an unforgettable experience” (Srivastava, Games 9). In this context, Lynn Altenbernd and Leslie L. Lewis in their work, A Handbook for the study of Fiction have observed that, “Not all stories are profoundly philosophic, but they either add to our knowledge of life or else give us a fresh, or subtly qualified, or vividly dramatised idea” (79).

An artist cannot abstain himself from the contemporary world. He is, in fact, one who sees the truth and the inner harmony on which things are strung together. His voice reveals peace and goodwill. The artist, like the thinker and the scientist, seeks truth. So it is not surprising to find Srivastava seeking to express the truth. Just like Katherine Mansfield, Srivastava believes that the author is the medium through which truth gleams. Katherine Mansfield has once prayed: “Lord, make me crystal clear for the light to shine through” (Murry 201).

Commenting upon the themes in Srivastava’s short stories, Atma Ram writes:

Srivastava takes up anything and everything as the theme of his fiction—from a farmer ploughing his field to a hawker balancing a brass plate or a cobbler mending shoes. However, his prominent motifs are love and sensuality, East-West cultural relationship, and problems and patterns of urban and rural mode of living in India.

(Indian Poetry and Fiction in English 72)
This is because every great writer is a product of his social environment and writes primarily for his own age. More or less the same view has been expressed by G.S. Amur while assessing the fictional writings of Manohar Malgonkar. He observes: “Properly speaking, the theme of a work is not its subject but rather its central idea which may be stated directly or indirectly. For example, the theme of *Othello* is jealousy” (Amur 22). Almost all Indian short story writers in English have essentially remained Indian in their themes and technique. The themes, notions and beliefs which form the driving force of Srivastava as an artist have their origin in Indian soil. The themes and subject matter of his stories owe their source to some scene, situation, incident or character he had occasion to come across.

He has drawn a very comprehensive picture of the problems and values with which he has made close acquaintance. Intimacy with the life of those people about whom he writes in its varied moods and turns furnishes him with ample material to work upon. The themes other than Indian are also dealt with in relation to Indian background. He writes about people and incidents he intimately knows. He often exposes the evils of the society as also its complacency.

Srivastava is well conscious that the success of a short story depends more upon the vision of the writer rather than on his feeling. He reflects on what is happening in the society at large. In another sense these stories mirror contemporary life and epitomize modern conditions, in relation to the individual
self. So anything and everything that comes across him in the society can be the subject of a short story. “Chekhov once picked up an ash tray and said he could write a story about anything—even an ashtray” (Faolain 168).

Just like R. K. Narayan, Srivastava writes about the life that he knows intimately. Again like Narayan, he considers himself a story-teller, not a commentator, and presents a subtle analysis of social reality. Narayan’s world has a limited range and his characters are not many. But in the matter of vision, Srivastava and Narayan bear similarities. Both have a broad vision of humanity. The relationships beyond family also shape the lives of the protagonists of these writers. The worlds of Narayan and Srivastava have simultaneous existence of good and evil. This determines the nature of their vision. Both are aware of the fact that evil exists along with the good. But we see in their stories a willing acceptance of evil along with the good. As I. R. Wadhawan has observed in a review of Games They Play and Other Stories, “His stories faithfully mirror life with all surface currents and undercurrents of cruelty and corruption, revenge and jealousy, love and romance, hatred and casteism, greed and generosity, senseless devastation and exploitation” (PJES 107).

Srivastava has a rare faculty of endowing his stories with that elusive element which we call human interest. He writes in such a way as to bring out the emotions of the personae he delineates, introduces the readers to identify themselves with the characters in their joys and sorrows and involve them in an intricate pattern of life. Thus experiences are derived from the social, political,
economic, religious, moral and cultural forces as well as from the sense of tradition and history. These experiences determine not only the themes, forms, and assumptions of the writer but also his rhetorical styles. “A short story,” Srivastava believes, “is the verbalized urge of the creative writer” (Preface Under x).

Srivastava’s themes are of a surprising variety. His fictional world has been built around plots drawn from contemporary socio-economic, political and cultural life. These themes are as complex as life. Presenting the themes, the stories assume different colours and shades. In the course of the stories he touches Indian sensibility from antiquity to contemporaneity.

In Srivastava’s stories, the controlling idea or philosophical subject which largely determines the selection and organization of material is his theme. Srivastava is a man of varied and complex experiences which have had a very deep impression in shaping his vision. The educational and professional opportunities endowed Srivastava with occasions to interact with people of varied socio-economic and cultural levels. As a humanist he had keen interest in their problems—social, familial, and economic. The rural background of the conventional, orthodox family, British colonialism and the new educational system pushed his generation into a world which neither accepted the modern western thought and culture nor the values, beliefs and routine life of the traditional Indian family. His extensive reading of the classical and contemporary literature in English and in his mother tongue made him
acquainted with the varied aspects of human mind and heart in their various relationships.

The impressions which the author has had about the system of government in India could never be accepted by the common people; in fact, the system happens to be a means of bringing about untold miseries to the common people. Srivastava’s family background, rich exposure to different educational institutions in India and abroad and his wide experience—all endowed him with occasions to know the entire socio–political impact of the new system of Government on people of different political and social strata in the country. The impression gained from close observation of men and manners in India and abroad, intensive travel, acquaintance with men and women of almost all social levels in these places and profound reflection all through his life enabled Srivastava to develop a philosophy and outlook on life, which can be found taking definite artistic shape in his stories. These insights which often gain philosophical heights lead him sometimes into metaphysical realms which he, with the clever designs of an artist of the higher order, makes use of for a conflict of good and evil. An understanding of these conflicts, in an appropriate manner, is aimed at the purification of the social order. This attempt of purification often involves the tragic end of some of his protagonists. However there is proper justification for this. The thematic base of an author is often shaped by his/her early observations of the landscape and socioscape, and it gains psychological and philosophical depth as he advances further in
understanding them. This is quite true of Srivastava. The artist in him was moulded by what he saw and heard in his youth in rural India. As an artist, he transcends the apparently inevitable limitations of region, caste, social classification and even his themes.

In his uncontrollable urge for giving expression to his unique experiences, he found the short story an effective medium. What Henry James said about experiences in general, is true of Srivastava. He writes in Ten Modern Masters: An Anthology of the Short Story:

> Experience is never limited and is never complete; it is an immense sensibility, a kind of huge spider web of finest silken threads suspended in the chamber of consciousness and catching every air-borne particle in its tissue. It is the very atmosphere of the mind, and when the mind is imaginative, much more when it happens to be that of a man of genius—it takes to itself the main test hints of life, it converts the very pulses of the air into revelations. (550)

Srivastava’s stories are not merely illustrations of particular ideas. But images emerge from experience. His own opinion expressed in the Preface to the collection of stories, Under the Lamp: Stories, illustrates this point:

> The early stories collected in the present volume were written on my return to India when the memory of my visit to the United States was quite fresh. I remembered the American people, their
ways of life, their habits and peculiarities so much in contrast to the Indians. (Under ix)

The stories of Srivastava show the fact that the themes have a direct bearing on the subjective experience of the writer. He perceives:

One writes of people from personal experience, not from mere imagination. A writer can many times be like an experienced village “Vaidya” who holds a wrist, feels the pulse and diagnoses the disease in an instant what many physicians with a series of tests on ultramodern machines fail to find out. (Under vii)

Srivastava is noted for his sensitive portrayal of the inner life of the characters. In connection with the theme of his stories, Srivastava further says in the Preface, Under the Lamp: Stories:

Whatever drawbacks or departures from the current norms, my short stories have a world which is also a world of my own. They carry, too, my likings, disliking and prejudices. In them, I have taken certain moments of life, fashioned them to my likings, decorated them in appropriate colours and fused them with life so that the stories compete with the very life itself. (ix)

His treatment of themes is equally complex and baffling as the life he sees around him. Each story is a unique experiment in theme. So, a classification of his short stories into certain groups on the basis of theme becomes difficult. In fact, the key to the understanding of the themes of his fictional world lies in an
objective assessment of his varied experiences in relation to the materials that go into the making up of his literary endeavours. He states:

What one has to avoid are impossibilities—occurrence of unnatural feats and miracles. To superimpose divine exploits on mortals is to encroach in the area of fantasy and fairyland which might be a staple diet of Indian movies but must be kept out of the short story. (Under vii)

However, he considers the treatment of the themes and plot vital to the readability of the short story and makes it clear that:

The treatment of serious issues by no means justifies an uninteresting and tiresome short story; its essential trait lies in being interesting. For, a short story is the food that cannot go down the gullet without being palatable even if comprising all healthy and nutritive elements. I do not write merely for academicians and scholars whose praise for a literary composition, as for a crossword puzzle, increases or decreases in proportion to the brain-teasing complexity it has or lacks. To read a good story is like going on a pleasant journey in the company of personages who share an experience, exchange pleasantries, scour the gloomy cobwebs and end up by letting in a rejuvenating gust of fresh air. (Under vi)

Like the harbingers and contemporaries in the art of story telling, Srivastava orchestrates themes which belong to his age and place. Just like many
masters of the art of story telling, Srivastava shows that the best medium for reflecting the contemporary realities is the short story.

Srivastava has his themes set in real or nostalgically remembered setting. His most sympathetic presentation of moral life is based on his childhood memories in the village. In the Journal, Contemporary Authors, Susan M. Trosky, quotes:

Having been born and brought up in a village where people lived and continue to live in elemental simplicity, where the entire village is considered one family, where the joys and sorrows of one are shared by all, I developed a strong liking for their simple ways of life and became shy, even suspect, of excessive courtesies, polished behavior, and hypocritical nature. The widespread poverty and economic hardships of the rural people touched me more when, during my education, I saw their affluent, urban counterparts splashing around their easy-earned money for cheap pleasures and losing their heads when things did not shape up to their likings. Most rural people have been known to maintain their equanimity, cheerful attitude and helping nature in the face of natural disasters, man-made calamities and bureaucratic impediments. Hence, their frequent representation in my writings. (420)

Here, it is evident that just like his contemporaries he brings out the peculiarity of the Indian ethos. His treatment of social realities is all vibrant with
life. The essential correlation that he established between the natural and the fictional reveals his deep awareness and involvement in what he writes about.

Another thematic concern of Srivastava is the age-old practice of untouchability which has denied a major section of the society social justice and kept them exploited for centuries. In the story “Rebirth” the widowed woman Kiran narrates an incident:

One day I saw a poor, naked child crying inconsolably over his damaged plastic car. I brought him home and refixed his toy car, making his face beam like a full-blown cauliflower. My tiresomeness disappeared fast. I hugged and kissed the dusty, dirty child, but he had hardly turned his back on me when my mother-in-law scolded me for touching an untouchable. Later she forced me to take a cold bath. (Games 21)

The strong cultural impact on Srivastava is profoundly explicit in his writings that no critic can afford to overlook it. The profession he has chosen after having completed his education and teaching a foreign language made him acquainted with a cross-section of the Indian society. His study in America made possible extensive exposure to a culture about which till then he could only know through the literature he read. In addition to this, he had occasions to study extensively, Indian and Western authors. While personal experiences directly helped him in getting the raw material for his stories, the influences from Indian and western authors indirectly helped him in presenting the stories in proper
shape and form. The impact of Srivastava’s cultural heritage is visible in almost all of his stories.

He could make a study of the basic elements of the eastern and western cultures and could come to the conclusion that no culture can claim superiority over the other. His revelation of Indian life bears a tinge of sympathy. He unravels human life in its many aspects. In an E-mail interview, Srivastava categorically stated, “I give a sympathetic revelation of Indian life because, as you say, I am familiar with it. I have spent over 60 years in India.” About certain stories which reveal his experience in America he says, “If I had written more about American characters or incidents without being wholly well-versed with the American life, that would have been a good example of intellectual dishonesty and falsification of real life” (E-mail interview).

His childhood experiences in the rural background find expression in his fictional writings. But the realities of those experiences undergo certain modifications to suit the shape of the story, at the realms of characters, scenes, action and even experiences themselves. Justifying this in the interview Srivastava remarks:

One cannot write a short story or a novel without modifying the facts with varying amounts of imagined experience, characters, scenes and actions. One can write a newspaper report without modification, but for a short story to be effective, characters, incidents, dialogues, situations are bound to be modified. A
successful story depends primarily on the totality of effect it has on
the reader. Other things mainly contribute to it. (E-mail interview)

Srivastava began his literary career by writing his first short story, “One
Rupee” in Hindi, in 1956. He remembers: “While I was working for a
Bachelor’s Degree in Arts in 1955 and 1956, I wrote my first short story (“One
Rupee”) in Hindi on the shock of losing a rupee (equivalent to seven cents) and
it was published in the local newspaper” (Torosky 420). Ever Since this period
he published a number of short stories. After his higher studies in the University
of Utah in USA in 1972, he wrote mainly in English.

The world of Srivastava reveals the ways in which he is able to transform
day to day experiences of life into delightful and memorable stories. Srivastava,
just like his immediate predecessors like R. K. Narayan, Raja Rao and MulkRaj
Anand, and contemporaries like Sashi Tharoor, Kushwant Singh, Arun Joshi,
Manohar Malgokar and Anita Desai, wrote about Indian life that he intimately
knows. His fictional world is not confined to an Indian village or town. He has a
broad vision of humanity. Relationships beyond family or friendship shape the
lives of his characters. I.R. Wadhawan rightly observes:

Srivastava has observed life keenly and provided fertilizing
environment to effect ripening of the observations in the crucible of
his imagination for fruition of the creative cycle, while successfully
reining the gushing fountain- head of inspiration, channelizing it
into such moulds as to capture the crucial moments enlivening or illuminating the tangle of human relationships. (PJES105)

The India of Srivastava is complex and diverse. On the one side rural India is a symbol of simplicity, mutual co-operation, love and charity. On the other side, it is a place of social evils like the denial of social justice, casteism, superstition, corruption and bribery. His stories take on a new significance in the light of the fast changing circumstances of socio-cultural scene and the changing values of life. He never dabbles in the great, throbbing sensational issues of life; the events which take place in the lives of his characters are not so memorable. They may be trivial or superficial, not worth bothering about in the hectic business of living. He brings his insight to bear on the particular aspects or facts of a character which are pertinent and relevant to that moment only. Neither events nor episodes are developed to their logical or catastrophic end.

Since literature is a part of the complex social organization, it is naturally influenced by the society in which it is produced, and the society in turn is found being influenced by the literature. So the literature produced in the geographical region, in a particular historical context cannot be properly understood unless it is placed in the context of social realities. Thus an objective assessment of socio–political, cultural and economic setting in which a literary work is produced becomes inevitable in determining its literary merit. It has been generally accepted that no other literary genre, except the short story, is so
intimately connected with the individual self and social consciousness. For the same reason, it is keenly sensitive to the transformations taking place in the society and individual self, consequent on the developments in different areas of human activity. This capacity of the short story is evident in the vivid expression it gives to the rapidly changing socioscape, in the stories produced in different languages across the world. Most of the stories of Srivastava deal with human relationships based on love, charity, greed, lechery, duplicity, and hypocrisy. Norman Friedman says:

A short story may be short, then because its action is inherently small. But, as has been indicated a story may encompass a larger action and still be short . . . And here he [writer] will be guided by his desire to maximize the vividness of his effect on the one hand and to achieve that effect with the greatest economy of means on the other. (Friedman 109-10)

The stories of Srivastava vividly depict life with its beauty and ugliness, pains and pleasures, and humour and irony. Because of this feature, no two stories of Srivastava are alike, though the theme of several of them may remain the same. Srivastava seems to agree with H. E. Bates that, “no two stories are alike, no two methods” (219). Srivastava makes an assessment of his own works in the Author’s Note in Games They Play and Other Stories: “A story is a frozen moment of life, carrying in it the seeds of perennial truth. It reveals in a flash an
image of hitherto unexplored aspect of life fleeing each moment before us” (9).

Meenakshi Raman, in *Contemporary Indian Writing in English: Critical Perceptions* edited by N. D. R. Chandra, writes:

> Literature as does any art form represents human experience in a way that is both revealing and compelling, that tell us something about the world, holds it up for our examination and does so in a way that engages us. This telling about the world will also tell us about ourselves, about the nature of human experience. (220)

Broadly his first collection of stories *Love and Animality: Stories* deals with the themes of love, sex and sensuality. The stories in the next collection, *Cooperative Colony: Stories* by and large depict the social, economic and political problems which vex the common man in his everyday life, and present artistic portrayals of East-West interactions. The stories in the collection also satirically portray corruption, opportunism, selfishness and exploitation rampant in the socio-political scenario, which the author happened to see around him. The third collection, *Masks and Men: Stories*, as the title indicates, is on the conflict between appearance and reality. The stories in the collection present the serious concerns of the author—hypocrisy, selfishness, exploitation, and lechery. The six stories in the collection, *Under the Lamp: Stories* which have not been included in the previous collections deal with the higher planes of human mind. They reveal those recesses of human heart which reiterate our claim to call ourselves human.
The stories in the collection, *Love and Animality: Stories* portray love and sex life in its varied aspects. The first story in the collection, “The Living Doll” presents the traits of love and animality. The protagonist Kashi, a mentally retarded youth can pull a wooden cart or bend a tree with his hands. But he cannot stay without his Japanese doll which is a gift from his psychiatrist. Neeta Maini observes:

His love for the doll reveals the delicate springs of his being and retains his sanity but when he is denied this symbol of love, his enormous physical strength, like that of a sleeping giant, becomes transformed into animality so much that he mistakes his sister-in-law for his doll and kills her. (188)

The story is a warning against the inordinate desires, whether they are of material well-being or sensual pleasures. Karni who is dissatisfied with the sexual performance of her lazy and unhealthy husband thinks that Kashi can be an alternative. Taking advantage of an opportunity, she entices Kashi into a dark room. She ensures that there is nobody in the house. She poses the posture of a doll for him to play with. Instead of sexual enjoyment she is wringled into death. Karni is the victim of her own unholy desires. On the other hand Kashi is a symbol of the aroused passions, in an insane mind. The story is also a dig at the follies of thoughtless women.
In “The Drowning Man,” the hero Shyam chooses to marry a girl whose chastity, he considers is guaranteed because she was brought up in a thoroughly conservative atmosphere. Shyam drew Sarala close to him, put his right hand around her neck, and then tried to kiss her. She objected and said: “It is a shameful act. . . . It is against our Indian culture. That is why our government has not allowed kissing in the movies.” (Under 20) Shyam was really impressed at her comment and thought “I was disarmed, not by profundity of her argument but by her innocence.” (20)

S. N. Sharma in his article in The Tribune entitled “Urges of Unguarded Moments” comments:

The author assiduously builds up the lecherous nature of Shyam as compared to the very reserved disposition of his bride Sarala. Shyam insists on celebrating his marital union in Honolulu and manages a visa within two days of marriage! The rustic village belle Sarala is the epitome of coyness and does not allow her husband even to kiss her unless the room is darkened. In the end she casually tells her husband that she had had sexual escapades in the Opium fields of her village. (August 4, 1984)

In the story the author depicts the two worlds which seem initially to be poles apart with contrasting backgrounds, situations, characters, attitudes to life, ways and manners but ironically enough towards the end, the differences wane. Ultimately the two worlds remain more or less the same. The initial euphoria of
Shyam in having found in Sarala the kind of wife he really wanted, gradually changes into depression and shocking disappointment, when he realizes that his wife whom he considered chaste and innocent was really not so and that she had enjoyed sex with the boys of her village despite the fact that she was shy in exposing her face or in baring her body even in privacy. Ironically what is considered good and acceptable in one society may not be so in the other. The story highlights the societal realities and cultural differences. In this context, Neeta Maini has remarked:

In ‘A Drowning Man’ details are accumulated to show the sensuality of the American girls just to reveal at the end that Sarala’s chastity in the story too is not what it was thought to be. It seems that all the details in the story were brought to enhance the effect at the end (194).

Srivastava makes a true assessment of the values of the East and the West. Sarala is no better than her American counterparts—Amelia, Cathy and Jamie who had pre-marital sex relations and the author seems to establish that the American girls with their promiscuity are better because they are honest. When compared to the West he finds that many Indians are tainted with corruption and hypocrisy. Shyam, who wants his wife to be chaste, pure and intact, indulges in sexual adventures with American girls.

“Friendship, Love and Marriage” is a poignant tale of hypocrisy of an American girl for hooking a rich Indian husband. Maharaj Kumar Chaturvedi
feels desperately lonely at Los Angeles. His thirst for friendship unwittingly lands him in a situation fraught with social and legal complications. Loveleen mistakes him for a real Maharaja and dreams of being his Maharani. The initial meeting makes Chaturvedi thrilled. Chaturvedi who feels lonely longs for friendship and he tries several devices to get a female friend and he makes friendship with Loveleen and the friendship crosses all the limits of morality and decency. But Loveleen had certain very secret aims and Chaturvedi is put in an awkward situation.

But as soon as the realities dawn she stands exposed as a mean money-hunter. Chaturvedi was not sure whether Loveleen was really a friend of him. He said, “Friendship is something in which one opens up completely—inwardly and outwardly. You haven’t yet” (20). In course of time Chaturvedi wants her not to understand his real intention. “Then the fear arose that due to some misunderstanding this pleasure might get lost. She might not misunderstand that he was more interested in sex than in friendship” (19). What follows between them is much beyond the expectation of both of them. She went to him and kissed passionately. “Loveleen looked like Giorgione’s sleeping Venus he had seen in the corridors of the Fine Arts Building.” (20) Chaturvedi said: “I am so happy to have you as my friend” (20). Chaturvedi expressed his sincere and deep love towards her, “You know, you don’t fake or pretend. You are honest, like me, and sweet and loving. You say what you mean. I love you so much for all your honesty” (21).
Reference to Jacqueline Kennedy and Onasis marks the motif of Loveleen to have Chaturvedi’s wealth, not his love. A number of questions, for which Chaturvedi could not find proper answer, were posed before him. “What had gone wrong? Why did Loveleen change her phone number, severing even a remote contact that he could have maintained with her? Were all her claims of love and marriage false, pegged on to his misunderstood kingship?” (30)

“Friendship, Love and Marriage”, “exposes the hypocrisy and hollowness of human relationship, the sanctity of which is desecrated by the mercantile mentality and commercial attitude of an acquisitive society.” says Mehta in his article in Indian Book Chronicle (81).

It seems the intention of Srivastava in the story “Century” is to show how Indians abroad spoil their image. Jasbir is obsessed with the idea of completing his century of love affairs with American girls. He even makes false promises of marriage. Mohan repairs the damages on Indian image made by Jasbir. Both the characters stand poles apart but both are not devoid of the capacity to love and the desire for sex. Jasbir “was accepted among the Indians as a guru in the art of love making and I was told he knew various tricks to suit different persons and occasions” (Cooperative 55-56). On the other hand Mohan presents a contrast to Jasbir. He says:

I knew that our centuries were of a different nature. His was of exploitation; mine of humanity. Marcy had experienced both, and her parting comments and glances towards both of us had made me
realize the difference between the two. Jasbir took the girl to the
parked car and drove away with her towards the west, while I
turned in the opposite direction to my dormitory to complete my
assignments. (Cooperative 72)

Srivastava has had direct experiences of the deeds and actions of Indians
abroad. East-West relations have been the theme of many Indian writers in
English. Srivastava had occasions to know very deeply certain aspects of
American life which he has artistically represented in the stories dealing with
East-West interactions. His experiences of American culture made him aware of
the cultural parallels between America and India. Raja Rao’s “The Serpent and
the Rope,” Kamala Markandaya’s “Possession,” Khushwant Singh’s “A Bride
for the Sahib,” Bhabani Bhattacharya’s “A Dream in Hawaai,” Anita Desai’s
“Bye Bye, Black Bird” and a number of stories and novels written in the
background of globalization have as their major theme the East-West relations.
The intimate knowledge of the two cultures makes Srivastava to choose the same
theme with a difference. To him the East and the West are not poles apart.

Srivastava’s depiction of East-West interaction, however limited it may be
is highly revealing. Like Raja Rao, Srivastava doesn’t believe that the Americans
are at once direct and profound. But he agrees with Raja Rao who thinks that the
Americans are too much engrossed in achieving success in terms of material
gains.
The East and the West are seen initially to be poles apart with contrasting backgrounds, situations, characters, attitudes to life, customs and manners. But ironically enough towards the end of the stories the differences disappear to a large extent. The viewpoint of Shyam, the medical practitioner at the beginning of the story “A Drowning Man” changes thoroughly towards the end of the story.

“Friendship, Love and Marriage” is a story set in American background. Loveleen and her mother Patsy beamed with pleasure on seeing Chaturvedi.

“They were quite anxious to know about India but even in their enquiries he saw their condescending attitude towards his country”(12). These American women, who assume to know all about India, wonder if India is a part of Bombay. Once Chaturvedi comes to know of them, he begins to enjoy befooling them by presenting a highly exaggerated and funny picture of India with a view to teasing their crazy imagination. Chaturvedi is depicted as one who has great concern with India and all that the country stands for. Ultimately he tends to violate the sanctity of marriage which the Indians uphold and flirts with the American girl Loveleen.

But once he comes to know that he has got Loveleen into trouble, he feels a prick of conscience and thinks of making repairs of his misdeeds by divorcing his wife and marrying Loveleen. Chaturvedi who had a strong feeling that he is the representative of India in America would never like to give an impression that he had cheated an American girl, but finally the revelation that Loveleen is a great cheat and that she had never loved him makes him much
disillusioned. Her ultimate intention in making friendship with Chaturvedi was aimed at acquiring a luxurious life as the wife of a Maharaja.

“Tigers of the Steering Wheel” is the story of an affair between a crazy American girl, Marilyn and a Punjabi truck driver, Palwinder. The driver offers her a truck ride as she desired. Palwinder just like other drivers is passionate and he “wasn’t altruistic” in his intentions when he offered her truck drive. Palwinder had “taken it as a potential windfall”. The conversation between Palwinder and Marilyn happens to be on a number of topics. They talk about the Indian truck drivers who are “a barbarous lot” and “who had no mind to abide by traffic rules” (Under 25).

East-West interaction is presented in a new manner, in a new environment by the author. There is no trace of racism in the presentation of the East-West theme. The concern of the theme of human relationship goes beyond the individual level to a universal level and he has artistically dealt with the theme. He doesn’t deal with the cultural clash of the East and the west. This theme assumes varied hues in his stories. The East-West theme in most other writers is that of cultural conflicts, tension, and differences in approaches to life.

Even in approach to life Srivastava doesn’t find any basic difference between the East and the West. Srivastava is only a detached observer. He doesn’t favour the East or the West. He rather brings to light certain aspects of life which can be dealt with by the short story rooted in native soul; the Indian writing struggles to cope with the spirit of the modern world and puts forth its
own peculiar fruit. Bhabani Bhattacharya says in an interview with Atma Ram, published in the World Literature written in English, "... a writer cannot live without roots. An Indian writer deeply concerned with the lives of the people cannot get transplanted from the earth of centuries-old traditions despite full exposure to alien influence.

“Straw in the Eye” and “Lasting Victory” show that the long adopted course of punishment only makes men worse. It is forgiveness, love, and compassion towards the wrong-doer by the sufferer that is capable of bringing about a change of heart in the wrong-doer. This psychological insight and the wisdom derived from experience are deep-rooted in the cultural tradition of India. As the other stories of the collection, the story entitled, “Love and Animality” portrays love and sex life of the protagonist, but with a difference. In this story Srivastava draws our attention to another aspect of man-woman relationship which mars all pleasant aspects of family life.

A semi-literate wife is like a hot morsel in your mouth; you can neither swallow it nor spit it out. You may, with some help, hope to tame a wild elephant or to grow a tree on your palm, but you cannot make your half-eclipsed wife happy. Her tastes are odd imitations, her opinions, borrowed notions, and her arguments sheer rationalizations. (Under 60)

What Manjula expresses in the following words shows the dangerous aspect of a woman who is led by nose by an outsider. Manjula says, “I am a simple woman and
so everyone fools me. I was misled by Mrs. Chadha. You were right when you had said that these are not tests of love but of animality” (Under 73). Neeta Maini rightly comments:

In “Love and Animality,” Sharma never treats his semi-literate and irritating wife inhumanly, whereas Chadha treats his educated and intelligent wife inhumanly, by indulging in immoderate sex and physical thrashing. Out of such contrastive studies emerge the values that the writer upholds; love against animality, chastity against impurity, sanctity of marriage against promiscuity.(188)

Another story showing a different aspect of human relationship is “Hospitality.” “Hospitality,” says Srivastava, “was the result of a shocking treatment I had in my first few weeks in Punjab” (Ram, Atma Interviews 17).

“Century,” a story which seems to deal with a cricket match uses the term as fulfillment of the hero’s quest for making a century in the field of sex. It satirizes the American educational system in which both the unprincipled teachers and students exploit each other. “Straw in the Eye” reveals how a spoiled and mischievous student is set right by the college sweeper. The two stories bear clear indications of the author’s direct experience which he has taken as the source of the stories. “In the story, “Confession,” Dhar writes in Hindustan Times that, “Lajvati has lascivious adventures with Kewal and plans to murder her husband in order to be with her paramour permanently.” Many years had passed since their marriage but Sajjan and Lajvati had no children. Sajjan devoted
himself to the cause of the people of the village and considered every child his own. He says, “If I do good deeds now, I’ll be remembered for ages to come. We remember Kabir, Rahim, Gandhi for their deeds, not for their children” (Masks 43).

But as a woman Lajvati could not have such a complacent attitude to life. She could never reconcile herself to the idea that she might not have any child in her life. She had undertaken fasts and given offerings to some Pujaris (Priests) and made pilgrimages to the abodes of celebrated gods and goddesses.

Lajvati established illegal unpardonable connection with Kewal Singh. Once she tried to kill Deepa, a four year girl, to sacrifice her to God. One day Lajvati decided to run away with Kewal Singh after killing Sajjan. She had caught pneumonia that night. Local “vaidya” declared that she could not survive beyond twenty four hours. She later says, “Had I not been ill, I and Kewal Singh were going to get rid of you [husband] tonight – forever” (Masks 51). The story tells one of the most detestable traits of family relationships.

The title story of the fourth collection, “Under the Lamp,” is a fine illustration of the courage, hope, and sacrifice of a low caste woman Karmaibai for her son. On the other hand Bichitra Singh, a wolf in human shape exploits her helplessness. Human goodness on the one side, lechery, and indignity meted out on a poor working class woman on the other, are the significant themes of the story. The words of the main character, Karmaibai in the story focus on a universal problem. She says, “My problems have been the problems
of my unusual beauty in my adolescence which had attracted the boys of
neighbouring villages to me” (Under 105). Bichitra Singh represents the class of
exploiters in the guise of social workers. He goes on to exploit the helpless
Karmaibai. It is an illustration of the universal truth that “There is always
darkness under the lamp” (Under 114). He is the “only one dark spot remained
under the lamp and it is with that spot that my tragic tale is associated” (Under
115). The destiny of Karmaibai is not only that of her but of many Indian women
of the lower class. After having gone through a series of bitter experiences in life
caused by Bichitra Singh and by the Indian system of law and administration,
Karmaibai proclaims: “On my part, I am reconciled to my stay in the prison. I
have no desire to defend myself. I have no faith in the police, in judiciary or
even in humanity” (Under 121). It is a popular conviction that our judiciary and
administrative system have been a total failure in maintaining human rights and
social justice. This theme has been dealt with by Indian novelists and short story
writers. Though there is nothing new in the theme, Srivastava’s handling of it
has a freshness and intensity. Through Karmaibai the author sees “so many
criminals masquerading as Samaritans under the very lamp which lights the path
for others that the vision of a cool death seems so satisfying” (Under 105). The
dominant symbol of the story is that of darkness and light which are built up by
carefully detailed imagery. This light and darkness are symbolic microcosm of
the world which is characterized by the cruel and unfeeling aspect on the one
hand and the helplessness and dismay on the other. The title of the story is
symbolic of these strata and suggests at once the interplay of light and darkness and presents the various levels of the story on which the symbols function. The mood of the story which is set in the opening paragraph itself is consistent throughout. In “Century”, the protagonist Mohan claims:

Humanitarian considerations have been the heaviest fetters on me. I do not exploit a person, I do not know and I cannot exploit a person I know. The mere sight of a girl arouses within me feelings of amorousness. I envision loving and sleeping with her. . . The net is tightened, but when we become friends and the moment of fulfilment comes, I feel somewhat the twitches of conscience. My resolve weakens. Humanity awakens within me, and I withdraw myself, weak and repentant. The original motive of exploitation shies away and I remain rooted where I was at the beginning.

(Cooperative 69)

The story “Century” focuses on higher moral and ethical values. Whether the characters are fully conscious of the moral values is another question. The author is highly concerned with humanitarian causes.

The protagonist who prepares himself for a sexual escapade with Marcy, his student, is unwilling to exploit her against her will. On the contrary, Jasbir has already sexually exploited her. When he knows that she is pregnant, he abandons her after having made a false promise of marriage. At the time of Jasbir’s departure he tells Mohan in a language which he cannot understand,
“Saadi century ho gai. Tuhadda ki hal hai?” (“I have completed my century. What about you?”) (Cooperative 72). His Century is that of exploitation and immoral activities. So Mohan says “I knew that our centuries were of a different nature. His was of exploitation; mine of humanity” (Cooperative 72).

Srivastava, like Khushwant Singh, handles a wide variety of themes that show a rare faculty which cannot be seen in his contemporaries, to ridicule whatever he considers repugnant. Though it is the comic spirit that dominates most of his stories, Khushwant Singh is much in earnest exposing the darker, the stupid and hypocritical aspects of the Indian life. Similarly, Ruth Prawer Jhabvala is a short story writer, who deals with the Indian life objectively; with consistent seriousness of purpose. The world that she depicts is convincingly faithful. If we compare Srivastava with K. A. Abbas, we see that his handling of Indian social realities is similar. K. A. Abbas’ stories are reactions against exploitation, pretense, selfishness and wickedness. Almost all his stories deal with one or the other of these themes in objective terms, with a higher degree of sentiment. The real India with all that forces retarding the growth of the country—poverty, communalism, corruption, inefficiency, hypocrisy, self-centeredness, problems arising out of overpopulation—all have been presented with the zeal of a reformist.

Bhabani Bhattacharya’s stories deal with less serious issues, though his stories are concerned with social issues. His story “Steel Hawk” subtly recounts the corruption of the rustic mind with the coming of modern civilization. He is
very much interested in rural India with its innocence and simple logic of the rustic as well as the destitute. Bhabani Bhattacharya’s themes are predominantly satiric and do not reflect the serious aspect of the social scene, like those of the other Indian short story writers. His target of ridicule is quite often superstitions and the road-side quacks. He presents life-like pictures of the characters about whom he writes.

Anyone who is well aware of the socio-political scene in India will admit that hypocrisy and duplicity have eaten into the very vitals of our existence. As a committed and responsible University Professor of high acclaim, Srivastava is also concerned with shaping an ideal society. So he is deeply concerned with social evils. That may be the reason of his focusing recurrently on hypocrisy, duplicity, moral deterioration and corruption at various levels. One of his characters in the story “A Drowning Man” observes: “Hypocrisy is usually another name of our culture” (Under 17). M. L. Mehta, one of the well known critics of Srivastava’s stories puts it rightly in Indian Book Chronicle that:

Today life is a masquerade and men masqueraders who hide their greed, lust, venom, and treachery behind the mask of affability, respectability, public service and piety. Their only craze is money; their chief weakness is sex and their only sin in life is self-aggrandisement. These wolves in sheep’s skins are worse than those in their original who like Gurmel in “Lasting Victory” and the trio in
“Rescuers” makes no pretensions about their lasciviousness or lechery. (80)

The stories “Road to Prosperity,” “Seeds of Democracy,” “Rescuers” and “Under the Lamp” expose corruption and exploitation at various levels of Indian social and political strata. M. L. Mehta further comments:

Sarpanch Kaiso Singh in “Road to Prosperity” and Lokendra Singh, a feudal lord-turned politician in “Seeds of Democracy” wear the mask of public service, but actually work for their own advancement, stifling the very spirit of democracy at the grassroots level. They symbolize political exploitation, which implies the negation of Gandhi’s idea of democracy. (81)

The three stories in the collection Masks and Men, “Road to Prosperity,” “Confession” and “Seeds of Democracy” tell tales of the mask of public service. Actually those who wear the mask of public service work for their own advantage. They represent political exploiters who mar the very spirit of democracy. All these stories are set in the background of Indian villages which long for development. The following words in “Road to Prosperity” illustrate a dominant scene of the Indian village. “The village panchayat politics is a dirty mire. Once you get bogged down in it you can’t come out” (Masks 33). When India became independent, people heaved a sigh of relief. The voters were told that they were the real kings. God-fearing people of the surrounding villages
elected Lokendra Singh as the M.L.A. who turned out to be anti-people in his activities.

Srivastava reveals the moral degradation and lack of education and culture of the politicians in our present day democratic system in “Seeds of Democracy.” The voters are made to believe that they are the real kings and the government officers and political leaders are merely the servants of the people. But later it is realized that money power and muscle power play an important role. Lokendra Singh, the highly influential dethroned king cannot survive without having power. He wielded his real power in the village. The highly immoral and deplorable plight of politics is revealed in his statement: “I had spent five lakhs of rupees in my elections” and he continues “I should at least recover that amount with interest unless you want all MLA’s to be bankrupt” (Masks 104). Srivastava also reiterates the inefficiency and irresponsibility of the legislators who become autocratic than democratic. “Before elections he had to remain awake canvassing for at least five weeks. Now he has won the election so he can comfortably sleep for five years” (Masks 104).

In the story, “Seeds of Democracy”, Prabhua, a farmer who fought for justice lost everything and was on the brink of ruin. People of the village felt grieved at the miserable plight of the man who had suffered so much for saving the democracy in its infancy. This happens to be the fate of every true democrat in India surrounded by corrupt politicians with criminal background. More or less the same view has been expressed by Azad Gulati while commenting on the
story “New generation” in a review published in *The Tribune*. He observes:

“New generation delineates the revolt of a modern girl against hypocritical social codes for exploiting innocent girls. By her bold plunge into a situation where she rips off the mask from the womanizer Yadavendra’s face, she converts the hatred of elders into admiration for her” (July 4 1987).

One of the characters in the story, “Masks and Men,” Sudama, seems to say with the author, “I have seen so many persons, and most of them are hypocrites!” Sudama exclaimed in disgust “They wear masks. In order to succeed in this world, we will have to wear masks. It is hard to find one sincere unmasked man. If I begin painting masks, they might have a great market in India” (*Masks* 87).

“Lasting Victory” exposes the hypocrisy of our educationists. It is through the story of Vimmi, a lady lecturer in a boys’ college that Srivastava exposes the pretensions and vanity of the so called academicians. It is a story which has a bearing on the actual experience of the author. Vimmi, the protagonist of the story struggles to win a lasting victory over the wolves masquerading as academicians. An institution which imparts higher education, is supposed to be an epitome of culture and refinement; but unfortunately it has turned out to be a den of moral and ethical degradation.

Another theme of hypocrisy in human relationships is demonstrated in the stories “Friendship, Love and marriage” and “New Generation.” These stories...
are fine illustrations of vanity and hollowness in social and familial relationships.

The story “New Generation” delineates the revolt of a modern girl against hypocritical social codes for exploiting innocent girls. This story is also presented in the background of a higher institution of learning. The symbol of a self-styled modern young man is Yadavendra Singh, a handsome Rajput hailing from a respectable family:

For him, girls were like flowers to be used and discarded—a source of recreation. Virginity was an old concept; fidelity and chastity were medieval notions. The new generation, for him, implied permissiveness in sex. He embraced some of these distorted notions about the new generation as a man does his life credo.

(*Masks* 95-96)

Pitted against Yadavendra is Jyotsana, who rebels against customs and rituals and who “protected her other frail friends—timid and inhibited—particularly those who came from the country side” (*Masks* 94).

“The Handicapped” is a story set against the background of the reservation policy of the government. It expresses the vanity and hypocrisy of the ruling class whose concern is only the vote bank. “A Beggar’s Daughter” is a picture of the hollowness of the lifestyle of the self-styled rich. The author compares the typical behaviour of the so called rich with all its evils with that of the deprived classes. The stories in the collection *Masks and Men: Stories* are an
exposure of the nascent truth which his contemporaries are not courageous enough to unravel. The major characters he presents are masqueraders. The title is self explanatory. M. L. Mehta, reviewing the collection in *Indian Book Chronicle*, observes: “Grounded in a penetrating study of the tainted milieu, the stories–fictional re-creation of felt experiences–highlight Srivastava’s penchant for satirical portrayal of a society plagued with moral duplicity and hypocrisy” (80). His assessment of the modern society differs essentially from those of many of his contemporaries. The characters he depicts are seen in every part of India. The incidents he delineates are seen anywhere in India.

He is deeply pained at the deterioration of the moral and ethical values. Srivastava writes “like an angry man who has suffered at the hands of social snobs and sharks”, observes Mehta(81). He further comments, “Srivastava presents familiar social situations, which build into them a good deal of comment on the social and cultural scene of contemporary India”(81).

The oddities, eccentricities and hypocrisy of certain classes of people earning money by illegal means have all been dealt with movingly. The moral and ethical values of the upper class people and lower class people of rural India are themes of many Indian writers of repute. In some of the stories of Srivastava, the moral and ethical values of India are compared to that of the middle class people of America. Moral and ethical values which lie deep in the consciousness of an Indian have always been a preoccupation with Srivastava and a fine illustration of this theme is there in the stories, “Friendship Love and Marriage,”
“Century,” “The Drowning Man” and “Tiger of the Steering Wheel.” In spite of his dealing primarily with men and their masks, he is not unconcerned with the qualities of his stories which make them artistic creations of a very high order. He has a rational mind, and a clear vision formed by an objective assessment of the world around him and so he is not superstitious. He is well aware of the superstitions prevalent in Indian social system and their moral and cultural relevance. In many of his stories he expresses his indignation at blind faith and superstitions. His unmasking of Maharshi Satyanand’s real identity as Ranga, the dacoit, is a fine example of his attitude to superstitions rampant in Indian society. “Satyanandas” appear in one or the other forms everywhere in the country. They exploit the innocence and ignorance of the masses.

“The Living Doll” depicts a village life with all its superstitions, ignorance and immorality which lead to disasters. The story was inspired by real characters as Srivastava reveals in an interview published under the title Interviews with Indians Writing in English edited by Atma Ram, “‘The Living Doll’ was inspired by the two real brothers–Darua and Kashi–whom I knew from my childhood and who probably are still alive” (17).

In “Maharshi Satyanand” Srivastava explores the myth of maharshis, babas and bhagwans that has been plaguing the Indian sensibility from ancient times. Maharshi Satyanand, a wild animal in the guise of a sheep cheats the innocent and God-fearing people, but he is adored as a God. Srivastava
expresses his strong stance against exploitation of the imprudence of the Indian village people. Mr. Verma says, “We are the corrupters of these priests who fatten, like leeches, on the credulity and gullibility of the ignorant devotees” (Cooperative 9). The dacoit turned Maharshi discloses: “I tried to conceal my identity by this method and it turned out to be a good money-minting business”(23). Similar incidents can be seen anywhere in India in different forms.

“Maharshi Satyanand” is one of the stories which takes the reader to the ancient Indian culture and it is juxtaposed with the modern conditions. He cannot turn his back to superstitions, ignorance and the blind faith of the village folk. “Ganga Ma” is another fine example. It is pitted against the world of superstitions and blind faith. In the story Srivastava seems to speak through Kanika, who believes in God but does not confuse hypocrisy for faith and coincidence for miracles. In the story truth wins at last and the fake saints and priests are exposed.

“Ganga Ma”, says Karnail Singh, in a review published under the title “Other Experiences” in Indian Book Chronicle,

Pitted against the world of superstition and blind faith is Kanika whose scientific temper shakes up the self complacency of Buddhan and his wife. As an exponent of scientific attitude, Srivastava exposes the “avidya” to which an overwhelming
majority of the Indians are subjected, for the stream of their reason
has lost its way into the dreary sand of dead habit. (306)

Khushwant Singh’s short story “The Mark of Vishnu” can be contrasted to
“Ganga Ma.” It is “a delightful exposition of the stupidity of the superstitious mind,
through portrayal of a tragic experience that lingers long after the story is kept aside
by the reader” (Venugopal 231).

Raja Rao, Mulk Raj Anand and R. K. Narayan have all been concerned
seriously with these issues; but their approaches are different. The stories, “The True
Story of Kanakapala,” “Protector of Gold” and “Companions” by Raja Rao are based
on popular snake myths. Raja Rao’s characters are predominantly from rural India;
they are simple and are moved by primary emotions. Though R. K. Narayan has much
affinity to Indian tradition of story telling, he is “a moral analyst.” What he is
concerned with is the individual feelings, emotions and actions in an exploration of
hidden human conflicts. He wrote about the part of India which he knows intimately.
He proved himself to be a story-teller first and last, not a commentator. He writes
stories out of casual roadside events. He doesn’t go deep into the meaning and
significance of these events. Srivastava had an insight into the deplorable social and
economic conditions of that part of India which he is familiar with. He longs for an
amelioration of these conditions.

Another theme Srivastava has dealt with is the unimaginative and defective
socio-political reforms, introduced by politicians without any social commitment,
vision, imagination or credibility. The stories “The Handicapped” and “Cooperative
“Colony” focus on two such reformatory measures introduced by the government aimed at improving the conditions of certain sections of the society. These reforms, instead of making the life of the beneficiaries better, push them into untold miseries. Another disaster caused by the politicians is that a major section of the people is denied their social rights. The horror and anxiety of the author is revealed in the extract taken from the story, “The Handicapped” which expresses the righteous indignation of the author towards the newly introduced reservation system. The story shows the feeling of common man against the present reservation system. Srivastava writes:

I also had a feeling of anguish and horror that in the long run the ever increasing reservation quotas would make India a country of blind or one-eyed people with handicapped workers, ignorant teachers, inefficient administrators, slow-witted professors, dull judges and bureaucratic scientists. The meritorious candidates might have intelligently to pull a rickshaw, efficiently ferry luggage at the railway station, and scientifically wash dishes in some restaurants. (Games 24)

The revelation of Srivastava gains ever increasing relevance in the Indian context as the controversy over reservation policies of the government aimed at political gains assume wider significance. The author draws our attention to another social situation in which “our high caste, considered a god-given boon and a privilege once, made us feel handicapped now” (Games 24).
The short stories of Srivastava tend to present life from new angles. “The Handicapped” makes a blind statement which none before him dared to make. The story is “the predicament of efficient, honest and hard-working individuals who curse the reservation policy till they realize the necessity of reservation for the handicapped since by irony of fate, Sajjan is rendered handicapped” (Wadhawan 106).

Srivastava is not absolutely pessimistic about the future of India. In the haven of filth and mire Srivastava finds a ray of hope in the young men like Mahipal Das. Srivasatava says in the story “Road to Prosperity,” “The power of youth is like the power of a mighty swollen river. Allow the river water to go its own way, and it playfully leaves behind a scene of destruction—breached roads broken bridges, damaged crops, crumbled building and despondent faces. Channelise it, and it brings prosperity in several ways” (Masks 31).

The stories are also a revelation of his childhood impressions. The lifestyle of the miserable village folk left a very deep impression in the artist. The tinge of his life is seen everywhere in his artistic expressions. He writes: “the widespread poverty and economic hardships of the rural people touched me” (Games 17).

The impressions of the rural India on its march towards development remain ever fresh in his memory. “Road to prosperity,” “Confession” and “Seeds of Democracy” have a rural setting. The story “Road to prosperity” carries the message, “If the village is a mire, instead of avoiding it, I’d like to transform it
into a road which might lead all of us into prosperity” (Masks 31). And Srivastava is quite unhappy about the condition of the villages. He feels, “If only some improvements could be done without spoiling their basic rural character, these villages could be transformed into veritable paradises” (32). “Half Rupee” by R. K. Narayan deals with a black marketer who brings death upon himself by his greed and “Desperate Women” by Bhabani Bhattacharya deals with a black marketeer in the guise of a liberal.

Anita Desai’s short stories, in spite of her varied experience abroad bear the colours, smells and sounds of India. Her themes dwell mainly on the temperamental difference between husband and wife, pragmatic relationships and psychological complexes. Another serious concern of the artist is the poor social conditions in India. Many reviewers have praised her intellectual rigour and vivid portrayals of India, particularly her insistence on the multi-cultural dimensions of contemporary Indian society. The collection Games at Twilight consists of eleven short stories that describe events from the every day life of various members of the Indian middle class. Another collection, Diamond Dust features tales set in America and India, illuminating Desai’s thematic preoccupation with the psychological effects of multiculturalism.

Raja Rao who had attempted some of the finest short stories in English is deeply Indian in his thematic concerns. “He paints the darker side of our inherited customs and beliefs too. . . ” (Venugopal 60). His stories may be
considered his commentary on certain conspicuous social institutions as well as on events of national importance.

Raja Rao uses short simple sentences to show the misery of the womenfolk. The sense of the continuity of life in spite of individual misery, sickness, madness (as the case of Motilal) or death is stressed by the introduction of the character ‘Ananda’, who is an observer and the little green parrot kept in a cage in the shop. (7), says Shyamala A. Narayan.

“Javni” is the tale of a poor illiterate woman who belongs to a low caste family. Raja Rao tries to unmask the social evil of casteism. In his stories one has total vision of life. Some of them have a contemporary social and political relevance. The range of Raja Rao’s short stories is amazing with every facet of India being presented in them. The problems of the Brahmin widow (Akkayya) or the unfortunate wife (Rati) is shown in his stories.

The major concern of Srivastava has been to understand the changing realities of life to transform them in an artistic form. On the other dimension, the theme of Srivastava is the encounter between tradition and modernity, between the old order and the new. He cannot, however, ignore the usual scene in Indian villages in which people are denied their basic needs and rights. “One half of your life is spent in queues for sugar, for wheat, and for Kerosene and the other half in criticising the policies of the government” (Under 17).
In “New Generation” Srivastava portrays the picture of the new generation boys and girls. Social changes like liberalization, privatization and globalization brought hitherto unknown changes in the physical and mental make up of the new generation. These are well reflected in their mode of dressing and mode of behaviour. A modern girl is,

. . . critical of her long, unbraided, messy hair; her road-sweeping, broad belted bell bottoms; her bra-less shirt or psychedelic banyan, her claw-like nails and the brick sized thick soles of her sandals. The use of chewing gum, unintelligible monosyllabic slang words, L.S.D., ear-splitting jazz or pop music, complete the picture of a species of girl as peculiar as one from a distant planet. (Masks 94)

Jyotsna, a representative of the new generation has a clear opinion on marriage and divorce. She says “Ring out the old, ring in the new” (101). But at last she shows her courage and sincerity. She responds strongly against Yadavendra’s attempt to get him married with her, after ruining the future of his wife and son “. . . the old and orthodox people watched with fascination and silent praise this inexplicable lady of the new generation who had done with extraordinary vigour what many would not have been able even to utter” (102).

“A stray Mongrel” contrasts a poor humble junior clerk to his dishonest colleagues. Srivastava has direct experience of college administration in which he could come across corruption, self interest, egoism, and quite a number of untoward tendencies. The story “Stray Mongrel” reveals how the ludicrous,
flimsy, even absurd objections are raised by the clerk to extract money from a pensioner who is asked to certify that he is alive and would not die before he gets pension. “My Experience,” says Srivastava “in the US–both real and vicarious–formed the plot of many of my short stories” (Ram Interviews).

Indian English writers like Mulk Raj Anand, R. K. Narayan, Ruth Prawer Jhabvala, Arun Joshi, Anita Desai, and Ramesh K. Srivastava are the outstanding short story writers who uphold the Indian tradition and assert the Indian ethos. They could not ignore the people in their society. Anand has always been the spokesman of the downtrodden. He is concerned with social problems and eradication of the evils infesting the society. In his stories we see the voice and feelings of the peasants and the working class. He was much disturbed by the social injustice and innumerable attendant evils that make up the social set up around him. His stories expose darker sides of the social system rather than the brighter aspects. Anand’s presentation attains a tragic intensity that is rarely seen in his contemporaries. The story “Mahadev and Parvati” exposes the exploitation of the pilgrims by Pandas. The story expresses the views of Anand on Hindu religion as practiced by the people. It also exposes the pilgrim centres visited by crowds of incorrigibly superstitious people and the half-naked heartless Pandas dominating the entire scene. “The Cobbler and the Machine” is the story of uncle Saudager, the cobbler, who is tempted to buy a sewing machine. Once his dream is realized, he undergoes a slow death in his attempt to repay the loan he has taken to buy the machine. “A Rumour” exposes the evils of industrialization.
Old Dhandu, the central character in the story is tempted to leave his village for the city to secure a job in a factory. He finds that the rumour he had heard about the job in the factories was baseless. He fails to secure a job. He becomes blind with disappointment on his way back to his village, and is run over by a lorry and gets killed. “Lajwanti” depicts the hopeless situation of a rustic woman who runs away from her parents-in-law, unable to withstand the amorous advances of her brother-in-law in her husband’s absence. Her father, who is more concerned with his honour rather than the safety of his daughter, sends her back to her husband’s home and to her doom. “R. P. Jhabvala’s “Like Birds, Like Fishes” has stories every one of which is a near perfect understanding of the middle class Indian in his complex personality” (Naik 231).

The English short story writer A. E. Coppard put Anand on the way to adopt folk tales as models for his craft. His work is deeply rooted in village life. Mulk Raj Anand is passionately concerned with the villages, with the ferocious poverty and the cruelties of caste.

The true tradition of Indian “Irshis” who had higher attainments is juxtaposed by Srivastava with the story of Maharshi Satyanand who was really an outlaw. The story begins with the ways of how the false saints exploit the people by appealing to their credulous nature. Sheela the mother of ailing Babloo takes him to Maharshi Satyanand instead of consulting a doctor, though her husband is reluctant to go to the ashram, he has to yield to the decision of his wife. The Maharshi works certain miracles in the ashram and there is evidence
of Babloo recovering from his ailment to the great relief of his parents. Towards the end of the story the maharshi is exposed, he turns out to be a manipulator of the weaknesses of the illiterate folk to extract money.

“Cooperative Colony” after which a collection of his stories is entitled, exposes the myth of co-operatives, characterizing the economic set up of bourgeois democracy. The Cooperative endeavours aimed at the promotion of the causes of the weaker sections of society end up in their miseries and ruin. The story highlights social, economic and political problems which vex the common man in everyday life. The author satirically portrays the government sponsored cooperative projects, which breed corruption, selfishness, opportunism and the exploitation of the poor and the downtrodden on whose behalf huge amounts of money is bailed out from the government exchequer, and which finds a way eventually into the pockets of the rich and the influential. The Cooperative Colony built mainly for the weaker sections of the society, only pushes them into hardships for securing the amount which they have to make as initial deposit. In his efforts to collect the initial deposit, the protagonist meets his end. A note that he left behind reads as follows:

Not getting any job, I begged day and night to collect two hundred rupees which was short of the required amount of one thousand rupees fixed for a house for the weaker sections of the society, so that I could get a house in the colony. I have great desire to live in the colony, but if I fail to collect the required amount in time, or if I
die before I have a thousand rupees, I have no one in this world and
my money should go to the welfare of the residents of the
Cooperative Colony. (Cooperative 41)

Garibdas, the main character of the story is a symbol of the miserable
condition of millions of poor Indians who struggle to secure the basic
requirements of life. The very treatment of the theme shows how the author looks
at the politicians and their farcical approaches. Karnail Singh, in his review of
Cooperative Colony:Stories in Art of Living , says:

The writer has a dig at the system which pretends to provide ‘for
the weaker section of society’ by raising a colony but in actual
practice it precludes ‘the weaker section’ from enjoying this
facility, for the former has impoverished the latter beyond
recovery. That the residents of the colony take Garib Das for a thief
is well realised. As the tenor of the story shows earlier, the coming
out of a dog from the hideout forestalls the appearance of Garib
Das whose subhuman life, too, compares favourably with that of
the dog. Certainly, this is a poignant exposure of the
dehumanization to which Garib Das and his fellow-brethren are
subjected by the guardians of society. (25)

“Savagery” is a story in which Srivastava tells the story of a conflict between
Rajputs, the land owners and Rawats, the landless farm labourers. The Rajputs who
are proud of their royal blood tyrannise the lower classes:
Rajputs scrupulously spared the higher and middle classes, confining their tyranny and tortures to the timid, docile and uncomplaining lower classes. Born in a society where the cursed millstone of tyranny had been hung round their necks—first by Raja Lakhan Singh and then by the Rajputs—the people could neither furiously throw it away nor gladly accept it; but they accepted it like a filial corpse. (Cooperative 42)

The Rawats work hard in the farms and lead a tribal way of life. One day Bhola Singh, a Rajput, beat Kanna, a tribal young man with his shoes and later Kanna beats Bhola to death “The biter bit”. The distant spatio-temporal setting of the story enables the writer to see the working of violent-encounter. In the end of the story, Summa, the tribal leader says, “we are illiterate and uncivilized. What we have done is pure savagery” (Cooperative 54). Karnail Singh writes in Indian Book Chronicle:

At any rate, it is an ironic exposure of the so-called civilised mentality of the Rajputs who can out savage a savage. In this story, class consciousness assumes narcissistic dimensions in the persons of Roop Singh and Summa. As it were, the death of Bhola Singh may be taken to mean vulnerability and decadence of his class. The phrase “childish act” used at first by Roop Singh to water down the extravagance of his son is repeated by Summa when his son Kanna manhandles Bhola Singh. “We should’nt get involved in such
childish acts” (Cooperative 48). . . In a society in which the voice conscience is crushed under the weight of class loyalties, it is a means to self-vindication.(301)

The story “Confession” deals with another aspect of human psyche with a keen insight. It centres on initially, the motive of craving for motherhood. The story is ironic. M. L. Mehta, in a review, says:

Lajvati, her very name has symbolic, ironic connections, a barren women is guilty of pilfering, adultery and attempted murder; yet she wears the mask of Laj (modesty) as characteristic of a traditional wife. She eventually gets unmasked and, in death alone, makes confession of her moral aberrations. (81)

His stories “Road to Prosperity,” “Confession” and “Seeds Of Democracy” have a rural background. In presenting the characters and imagery, the stories are vividly rural. Even the names of characters are rural.

The contemporary socio-political developments which very often renders people, especially the disadvantaged sections of people, helpless, is another major concern of Srivastava. As a writer, who has an in-depth understanding of the postcolonial socio- economic, political and cultural developments in the country, Srivastava portrays most effectively the theme in “Cooperative Colony” and “Road to Prosperity.” As one who has gone into the depth of these developments, Srivastava handles these themes in many other stories.
“A known witness” is an attempt at exposing corruption which has eaten into the vitals of the nation and which retards its progress. A nation flourishes only when the people from top to bottom—the bureaucrats and the common men—realize their duty towards the country and offer their services to the cause of upliftment of the whole society. In this story Srivastava portrays the picture of an irresponsible bank counter clerk. Another illustration of the same fact is present in the story, “Straw in the Eye.” It reveals how a spoiled and mischievous student is set right by the college sweeper.

Srivastava firmly believes that sympathy and love can bring about harmony and peace in the lives of those who have prejudices and hatred. Typical example of the treatment of the theme is the story “Rebirth.” It graphically represents the metamorphosis of Kiran under the influence of Margaret, a Christian nurse. The widowed woman Kiran is thrown out of her family by her mother-in-law who was prejudiced against her because of her lower sub-caste. After being thrown out of her home, she meets with an accident and is brought to normal life by Margaret. Margaret also enables the reunion of Kiran and her mother-in-law. The prolonged care and attention of Margaret saves the life of Kiran whom she had never seen before. The deep love and affection of Margaret is instrumental in transforming the very nature of Kiran and in building love in her mother-in-law who considered her a life-long enemy. The mother-in-law in turn becomes fully changed to utter, “my daughter, come back to your home
where you rightfully belong” (Games 23). It is also an illustration of the fact that love can bring about miracles in the life of individuals.

“The second Denudation” the story in Srivastava’s fourth collection of short stories, depicts constant fight between two neighbours, Prem Narayan, a pawn vendor and Basant, a meat vendor because of their caste differences. But on a critical occasion they come forward to help each other.

“Spilled milk” is a story in which Srivastava juxtaposes the rich and the poor. It is the story of a menial labourer in a remote village. Chhajjoo Ram, a major character in the story is presented as follows: “Dressed in a muddy shirt, a patched ‘dhoti’ and a multi-holed coat which might have been from Emperor Akbar’s time, he went around like a walking scarecrow, earning his hard living by replenishing water in many houses” (Under 122). Characters like Chhajjoo Ram is an integral part of any Indian village. Such people are being exploited by the rich and poor alike. S. C. Verma writes in Lokmat Times (Nagpur):

Koore Lal is really “A Ruby of the Garbage” because he is capable of showing concern for a small girl of a killer woman who is associated with the killing of his own father . . . The innocence that pervades this story actually defines the whole volume. (1994)

The unbridled pursuit of material possession is the theme in “Hospitality.” “I knew what an uphill task it was in India to do anything honest” (Under 34). The story “Human Thirst” as the title itself indicates is a pursuit after sensual pleasures. “Love and Animality” expresses a sense of wonder and irritation at
the traditional outlook and conditioned human behaviour of Indian women. The lasciviousness and infidelity of a woman who is unhappy with the laziness and disinterestness of her husband is illustrated in the story “The Living Doll.” The story “Lasting Victory” depicts the scene of our educational institutions. In it he tries to expose the hypocrisy, moral deterioration and the greed of the so called academicians.

R. K. Narayan was a detached observer of men and manners. He concentrated on a narrow scene, to sense the atmosphere of the place, to snap a small group of characters in their oddities and angularities. In this connection C. V. Venugopal observes: “Narayan is contented generally in skimming lightly on the surface of life. He takes life for whatever is worth, presents those familiar scenes which amuse or delight him, rarely bothering to touch its deeper and darker aspects” (22). Light and darkness in the story “Under the Lamp” are symbolic microcosm of the world which is characterised by the cruel and unfeeling aspect of the helplessness. “Living under the patronage of the police officers, he [cruel village saphapati] remains a great criminal and his crimes do not come to light” (Under 119). The interplay of light and darkness present at the various levels functions as effective symbols in the story “Under the Lamp”. The mood of the story which is set in the opening paragraph is consistent throughout. The characters move through the light and the dark. At every level the light is pictured.
Short story as a fictional form focuses mainly on human relations and story writers are concerned with problems arising from human relationships. Manjeri Isvaran who rose to literary fame by writing short stories in English, was concerned with probing the significant truths on which human relations are based through a picture of contemporary society. Great writers of the past have not been merely “entertainers.” They have been seekers, explorers and thinkers. They aimed at the revelation of a little of the mystery of life. Many short stories do focus on a single incident, moment in time or experience, but the reading experience of short stories reveal that it is not always the case. Not all short stories are deliberately crafted by the writer as a vehicle for a single effect. In fact some stories gain their impact because they do not operate on a “single effect” structure. In some instances, the single effect type of story can appear contrived. The short story as a literary genre has suffered a good deal of critical neglect. As an art form compared to novel, short story has been considered a light weight genre“... in short story writing, as in everything else, there is a golden mean. This will be found in the theme. It creates the characters; it—and it only –gives unity to the action.” http://www.everybodyscribbles.com/Themes_and_Characters.php>

The themes in short fictions are vast–ranging from ghosts, animals and humans to demons. The fictional world is warm and palpable; there are hints and guesses, pathos and humour, subdued irony and gentle mockery that go well with the plot and the situation. Eminent writers never spare people of dubious
nature and reputation. While dealing with contemporary situations they come
down heavily on those who corrupt the society and deceive the public.

Srivastava sought to penetrate beyond surface impressions to reveal a
deeper truth in every story, through the great complex of events and surface data,
he seeks new forms in which to express something more subtle, more complex
and nearer to the truth. Srivastava is endowed with deep moral, ethical and
humane concerns and has immense craze for social justice. According to
William Faulkner, the Nobel laureate, the writer deals with the problems of
“human heart” in conflict with itself. And he believed that only this conflict is
worth writing about. An artist, just like a common man, lives in factual world.
The real artist penetrates through facts in order to reach that realm in which truth
lies. The truth which he desires to present is ever present, immediately
experienced and in a sense is all comprehensive. In Srivastava’s stories there is a
merging of past and present time in an attempt to reflect an ever present reality.
He has realized, “there can be no other powerful tool in man’s hand than to
portray and document down his own society that writing about it that is intended
for the public” http://www.indianetzone.com/41/indian_english_literature_
during_british_india.htm

As we go deep into the stories, we realize that Srivastava has to set down
things in such a way as to make the relation of things apparent in themselves.
Here the author tries to relate his experiences of life to see them against some
kind of a background.
He does not consider the events and thrilling moments in the story sufficient. He goes beyond the impressions created by the events and situations to mirror the relation of things in such a way as to make the structure of the story reflect the truth. Thus every object in nature and every change in the atmosphere is linked with the mind of the characters.

One may feel that his themes do not depict a complacent view of our country. In the stories, “Friendship, Love and Marriage”, “Century” and “A Drowning man”, the author doesn’t show any feeling that India is superior to the West. Though all major Indian English writers hold the view that culturally and intellectually India is superior to the West, Srivastava, with evidence shows that the claim of our superiority in matters of culture is hollow. Srivastava has genuine concern for the miserable condition of a major section of the Indian people, thrown into endless miseries by another section of the population who are ruthless hypocrites and exploiters.