

## **The Truths of Fictions**

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(The Eighteenth Gopinath Mohanty Memorial Lecture,  
Bhubaneswar, April 20, 2009)

It gives me great pleasure to be here this evening to deliver the eighteenth Gopinath Mohanty Memorial lecture. I am deeply conscious of the honour done to me by the Gopinath Mohanty Foundation Trust in choosing me to be its eighteenth memorial lecturer. It is a matter also of pride for me to be in the distinguished company of earlier lecturers like Mahasweta Devi, U. R. Ananthamurthy, Birendra Kumar Bhattacharya, Indira Goswamy, Namwar Singh, Ayyappa Paniker and many others all of whom I respect and admire as my superiors. I only hope that I'll prove worthy of the occasion.

Gopinath Mohanty was a great fiction writer; indeed, he was a great writer in all genres. He wrote much else beside fiction and also established himself as a leading expert on Orissa's tribal languages and cultures. His name is known throughout the country and his work is not unknown in Urdu, the language in which I write. My indefatigable friend Karamat Ali Karamat, in addition to being a fine Urdu poet and critic, is also a tireless translator. He has done much to make Oriya writers known to Urdu readers. In fact, only recently I read a story of Gopinath Mohanty translated by Karamat Ali Karamat about a harassed government clerk who discovers a fail-safe method of reducing his load by letting his goat dine on pending papers and files. I felt that it was difficult to find a more marvellous combination of dry humour, nuanced satire, and a laid back yet intensely moving portrait of life as lived by the nameless myrmidons who make up our vast bureaucracy.

In the last issue of my magazine *Shabkhoon* that I managed somehow to publish continuously from 1966 to 2005, I printed a story by Gopinath Mohanty, also translated by Karamat Ali Karamat. In this story, a young man loses his memory, but what is really important is not the amnesia, but the things that the amnesiac central character observes, or fails to observe. It ends somewhat abruptly, in the manner of Chekhov perhaps, but it makes you wonder not just about Ashok, who lost his memory, but also about

how the world treats such outsiders and how menacing the comfortable, familiar world becomes to one who has lost his memory. What seems important to me in this story is not the amnesia, or even there being no apparent reason for the amnesia. It is the subtlety of observation, the elegantly described serio-comic effects of loss of memory that make the story utterly irresistible to me. The narrator seems to be telling us that the world is the way it is. The protagonist loses his memory for no apparent reason. Then for no fault of his, he suffers various kinds of humiliation because of his memory loss. And the most intriguing thing is that he doesn't seem to be anxious to find out the reason for his loss of memory.

Gopinath Mohanty escapes again and again the labels that the critics would have liked to place on his oeuvre. For example, the reviewer of the *Times Educational Supplement* felt that Mohanty's great novel *Paraja* was "fictionalized ethnography". The reviewer from the *Guardian* felt that it was the story of "a materialistic civilization seeking to encroach upon and engulf an ancient way of life". But Gopinath Mohanty's other famous fiction, that is the story "Ants" as translated into English by Paul St. Pierre, Leelawati Mohapatra and K. K. Mohapatra presents a more cosmic and more tragic view of life as seen through the mirror of tribal existence in Orissa. "Ants" is a deeply saddening tale, though not without occasional humour and rare poetic beauty. The existential angst as seen through the eyes of Ashok who lost his memory is converted here into a play of mindless death that renews itself over and over again.

Yes this same story writer can also write a heart-wrenching account in "The Bed of Arrows" (translated again by the team that translated "Ants") of a literature professor's midlife crisis, but the crisis is viewed through the consciousness of the wife who began as wife-beloved and has now changed into a physical wreck, broken on the rack of cancer. Another example of the variety of Gopinath Mohanty's creative imagination is the story "Shelter" as translated by the same team. Here the writer takes us through scenes of squalor and general human indifference while a low-grade civil servant who has come back to his hometown on a posting looks for adequate housing. But the story is not about shortage of housing or minimum comforts of life so much as about the cruelties of the Joker called Life.

## 2.

Gopinath Mohanty was a writer whom every budding fiction writer would have loved to emulate. As some of you might know, my main if not the sole ambition as a boy was to become a short story writer, preferably one like the hugely popular and widely respected Urdu fiction writer Krishan Chandar (1912-1977)

who seemed so full of compassion for human sin and sorrow and who, to my disappointment later in life became an equally popular satirist-humorist dealing with the more obvious aspects of modern life. Doubtless, I had other favourites too, and was also an avid reader of English thrillers and mysteries copiously translated into Urdu by Munshi Tirath Ram Firozepuri, a writer who was universally sought after by lovers of thrillers and crime fiction. But I didn't write, or maybe couldn't write, in the manner of any of my favourites. Still, by the time I was sixteen I had written and published a short novel in a magazine in four installments and had published a handful of stories too. Not a scrap remains today of those efforts, and I thank the Lord for it. For I look back at them with embarrassment, they look so very puerile even in memory. The sole exception is a story that I wrote in Urdu at about the same time as my short novel and which I later translated into English to be published in the Allahabad University magazine. But I didn't preserve even this story, even though its Urdu version was much liked by my teacher in college, and its English version was immediately accepted for the magazine by my teacher at the university of Allahabad many years later.

I don't know if my negligence in not preserving any of my early stories was motivated by an unconscious sense of their inadequacy, or because I was sure that I could, and would do much better. However, for reasons that are too tedious to explain here, I strayed into literary criticism when I was in my early twenties. Barring a handful of somewhat immature poems, often in imitation of the English Romantics, I wrote nothing but criticism for a long time and for a number of years my reputation as a critic, such as it is, overshadowed the public image of my other work.

Still, I continued to harbour a secret ambition to become a novelist, or at least write one substantial novel. At one time many decades ago I had decided upon a name too for the yet unwritten novel. I even imagined a bit of its opening paragraph. But the novel never came, at least not in those years, and a time came when I ceased to cast a nostalgic eye on my childhood ambition to write a novel. In the mean time, I continued to read a lot of the theory of fiction in the West. I read a great many modern fictions in and through English, and wrote several quite controversial essays on the theory of fiction, many of which are debated about, condemned, or embraced even now, nearly forty years on.

Just for the record, let me add here that I did write the novel. It was a very different novel from what I had imagined years ago. It was published in both India and Pakistan in 2006 and was something like a big success.

Meanwhile, I had continued to write a lot of theoretical criticism, but in spite of a passionate interest in the theory of

literature, in none of my forays in the field of the theory of fiction did I consider the question of what makes a story. (For my present purpose, I use the term "story" as an umbrella term that subsumes all kinds of narrative fiction.) The problem of what makes a story had been with me like a quiet niggle under the skin over the years but I couldn't be bothered to address it. It was easy to say like Gerald Prince and others that we can instinctively distinguish a story from a non-story and that one knows a story when one encounters it. This definition, while having the great merit of not being counter-intuitive, doesn't really tell us much by way of the taxonomy or epistemology of stories. It doesn't help to say that the definition is ontological. For though it does tell us that a story feels like a story, it doesn't tell us anything about how or why a text feels like a story. Also, the all-knowing stances and postures of the critics notwithstanding, the definition doesn't address the question of relativism: Does a text that we experience as a story would be experienced in the same way by a reader or hearer from another culture?

We could say that a story is a description of events: the stress in a story is on action, on things happening, and not necessarily in a strict chronological order. But in that case how does one distinguish a history, or a biography, or an autobiography, from a story? All three are examples of action-based narratives. However much analysis of facts or intellectual speculation a work of history may contain, it must retain a very firm hold on the events, which it is supposed to describe. The same is true of other narrative, though non-fictional, genres. Even the ponderous argument of George Lukacs that it's only in the novel that an objective and authentic portrayal of the past as past is possible, doesn't take us very far because Lukacs doesn't tell us why such "objective and authentic" portrayal of the past is not a feasible project for a biographical or historical work. And it's a moot point anyway if anyone can really make an objective and authentic portrayal of anything at all. Aristotle taught us this wisdom and it still remains true in this ultra-scientific age.

It has always seemed to me that critics and theorists of the short story and the novel tend to make exaggerated claims of Truth in regard to modern fictional narratives. Nothing less than a claim of fiction being "Full Truth" seems to satisfy most theoreticians of modern fiction. Perhaps this is because similar claims have not been made, and could not have been made about poetry in a post-Platonic literary culture. The novel, like a johnny-come-lately, rushed in to fill the void caused by absence of "Truth" in poetry. Maybe I am not being fair to our great theorists, but the fact remains that many critics of fiction do tend to believe that "Realism" and "Reality" are one and the same thing, and that

"Realism" is the opposite of "Idealism" and therefore a fiction which is "Realistic" reveals to us the "Reality" of things, much in the same way as Wordsworth claimed that contemplation of the "beauteous forms" of nature carries us into the "blessed mood" in which:

*...with an eye made quiet by the power  
Of harmony and the deep power of joy,  
We see into the life of things.*

Realism thus was a complacent concept based on the notion that there is an objective reality, or there are objective realities "out there" which can be faithfully presented, or imitated, or broken up in the writer's imagination and then reassembled in his words. This attempt to define fiction as something that comprehensively captures reality left me unconvinced because I found quite easily that even the extreme realism of Robbe-Grillet could capture "reality" from only a certain point of view. Robbe-Grillet denied that fiction could or should create "a universe of signification". Instead, he said, it should try to construct a "more solid and more immediate" world. Though this made me happy, I couldn't help wonder if there could be a universe devoid of "signification". As Wayne Booth showed us, signification either crept in despite the author's desire to keep it at bay, or it was always there even in the most "realistic" of writings, like the fictions of Flaubert or Balzac.

Still, for a long time I was enamoured of the world as seen or created in the fictions of Beckett and Robbe-Grillet because it freed the writer from the other, more deadening kind of Realism which was understood by many as "Socialist Realism" and many others as "Naturalism". I however was obliged to grant that even the "purest" form of Realism was tainted by the fact that all narrative constructions had meaning, even if their maker, that is, the author, didn't endow them with meaning. Robbe-Grillet claimed that in his fiction, an empty chair was just that: an empty chair. It didn't signify that it is empty because someone had occupied it and they are now absent; nor did it signify any expectation that it will be filled and occupied by someone in the future. But I couldn't help feel that since chairs were meant to be sat in, the meaning of the word "chair" could not be established without the notion of occupancy or emptiness.

This takes us to the question of meaning. Is something a story because it has a universe of meaning, which is peculiar to it? But this can easily be claimed for any artifact created by words. But maybe a story has a special kind of meaning, a kind that is not within the grasp of other genres? This again brings us to the question of Realism. Ian Watt claimed that the "novel's Realism

does not reside in the kind of life it presents, but in the way it presents it." Ian Watt himself conceded that this position was very close to that of the French Realists but went on to say that actually, the Realism of the novel flowed from the fact that modern philosophical Realism was "critical, anti-traditional and innovating." Premchand must have been aware, at least vaguely, of the anti-traditionality and criticality of modern philosophical Realism because he insisted that he never wrote a story unless an event or incident presented for him the possibility of extracting some psychological meaning from it. "I don't write a story just for the sake of narrating an event", he asserted. "I want to express some philosophical or emotional truth through it....No event is a story until it comes to signify some psychological truth."

Premchand was distancing himself from the Urdu oral romance, and particularly the "*Dastan* of Amir Hamza", which he himself said had been one of his early influences. However, since he didn't see the oral romance as expressing "some philosophical or emotional truth", he rejected the oral romance as "story" and emphasized the primacy of "meaning" over "event". Thus an "event" was a "story" only when it became the conveyor of, or the site for, some "meaning".

We can see the naivety of the positions of both Ian Watt and Premchand when we consider that the terms "critical, anti-traditional and innovating" are as slippery as the terms "psychological truth" and "philosophical truth." For one thing, these terms cannot be claimed to be the exclusive property of the novel or the short story. Some kind of meaning is embedded in all narratives. Every narrative is, as Todorov said, "a discourse, not a series of events. There exists no "proper" narrative as opposed to "figurative" ones (just as there is no proper meaning); all narratives are figurative." Modern studies of folk-tales, myths and oral romances have shown that these narratives are as well-structured as any modern novel or story, except that the structuring principle can be different in the case of each genre.

We can see how circular all our efforts have been to establish a definition of "story" which can stand outside the story and can be applied to a special genre of narrative. We are back to seeing all events as "stories", because a meaning can be imposed upon, or extracted from, any narrative event, even if it is so colourless as the emptiness of a chair.

Many years later, I tried to define the storyness of a story by saying that an event becomes a story when it engages our human interest. The utterance, "A leaf fell from a tree and sank in the stream below" describes two events, but neither event engages our human interest as individual entities involved in the human condition. But if we assume that "tree" means "the tree of life" and

the falling of the leaf and its sinking signifies or stands for the conclusion or cessation of a life, then our human sensibility is engaged or attracted a bit, but even then it's not engaged to the extent that we may feel sorry for the tree or the leaf on a personal level, as something that somehow happened to us, or could happen to us. The bare metaphoricity of the events did generate a common or general human interest, but the true human element embedded in the events did not yet come into play. True human element would come into play, I argued, when we could see tree, leaf and stream as characters having human attributes.

By way of another example, I constructed or made up the following sentence: "Suddenly a strong storm began to blow." This is an abstract, non-human statement. It can have many meanings, and all meanings can even be true. For example, "storm" could mean "revolution", or "a devastating military invasion", or "an epidemic", and so on. Now if my story were limited to just this event, it would certainly affect you because of its symbolic or figurative dimensions, but it would fail really to work in human terms. For example, when you look at a triangle or square, you know that you are looking at an Euclidian figure. But the figure doesn't tell you anything about the world in concrete, human terms. It just gives you an idea of one of the forms in nature, or in the universe.

Now suppose the story to be as follows: "Suddenly a strong storm began to blow, and the lamp was extinguished." Now an aspect of human transactions enters the narrative: a lamp, which a human being lights up and which she uses to combat the dark. But speaking of a lamp alone is not enough to fully establish a human situation. Abstract ideas provoked by the word "lamp" are quite prominent: A lamp, or a life; a hope; a desire. Thus this statement, involving a lamp, affects us on the intellectual level alone; our status as a human being is still not engaged. Now suppose the narrative is as follows: "Suddenly a strong storm began to blow, and the lamp was extinguished. The poor student was obliged to shut his book and put it aside." In this text, the metaphorical, or the abstract connotations of the words "storm" and "lamp" are absent. Instead, the narrative tells us of a directly human situation: There's a student who is so poor that he can't afford his own lamp, he learns his lessons in the light of a street lamp. When the blast of wind extinguished the lamp, the student was obliged to stop reading.

This version of the narrative is not so stark as the first two versions, but the three key elements of the narrative have an immediate human signification for us. Also, although the third version has more words, the information contained in it is much more limited, or much more focused. The active human interest

that the limited information arouses in us is different from the inert intellectual interest evoked by the comparatively unlimited information purveyed to us by the first two texts.

3.

The great Urdu poet Ghalib said:

*A profusion of naivety chokes up  
The ears of our friends. Otherwise  
In fiction lie hidden  
The interpretations of the dream.*

This verse has been with me for more than four decades but I can swear that it was not anywhere in the front or back of my mind when I wrote my first and so far only story<sup>1</sup> *Lahore Ka Ek Vaqi'a* (An Incident in Lahore) on the nature of fiction. Ghalib tells us that while dreams can have many interpretations, it is in fiction, or in the narrating of the dream, that all interpretations of all dreams lie hidden. This reminds one of Jorge Luis Borges, but while Borges would have written this verse to tease or confound his readers, Ghalib seems to have actually meant what he said here: No dreams are devoid of meaning, and no stories are incapable of being the repository of interpretation. The other notable point about my story is that though it is a bizarre mixture of historicisms and preternatural, melodramatic events, I actually saw most of it in a dream.

In my story the first person Author-Narrator is writing his autobiography with the avowed intent of recording nothing but the truth. Yet his narrative is full of the most obvious inconsistencies and inaccuracies. His friend, who reads<sup>2</sup> the autobiography as it gets written, points out the inconsistencies and anachronisms in the chapter just finished by my Author-Narrator and which we are now reading. The Author-Narrator feebly defends or explains away some of them but is caught totally flat-footed on many others. Ultimately he declares:

'Shut up. Do you know that the word "incident" [*vaqi'a*] also means "reality" and "dream", and even "death",' I said with great pride, as if I disclosing a great discovery to him.

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<sup>1</sup> "Lahore Ka Ek Vaqi'a", translated as "An Incident in Lahore" by Mehr Afshan Farooqi in Mehr Afshan Farooqi, ed., *The Oxford India Anthology of Modern Urdu Literature: Fiction*, New Delhi, OUP., 2008, pp. 258-276.

<sup>2</sup> Here again, I must say that although I have known Baudelaire's line"- hypocrite reader, - my alias, - my twin!" for nearly as much time as I have known the Ghalib verse, I had no conscious intention or knowledge of using Baudelaire's line (presented here in Richard Howrad's translation) for my story.

But when the Reader-Friend persists in pointing out yet another glaring anachronism-inconsistency in the chapter, the Author- Narrator ends by saying/writing:

'All stories are true! All stories are true!' I screamed after a moment's silence, and then began to sob uncontrollably.

When I began writing the story, I was only aware of my intention to recapture the dream. Since the dream had no proper conclusion, I invented an ending and some details to make the story internally coherent. When I finished the story, I found that I had encapsulated in it my fundamental belief about fictions: All fictions, after they are created, assume a life and a truth of their own. That's why we always use the present indefinite tense while summarizing a story. The author demands and obtains from us an allegiance which, once given, can't be broken.<sup>3</sup> Perhaps it wasn't coincidence, or an instance of my absentmindedness, that I made my story a sort of commentary on Ghalib's verse so as to make the Author-Narrator the real culprit, and also implicated Baudelaire's Reader, who is also the Author's *semblable* or Double or Namesake, to suggest that once we pay our fealty to the Author-Narrator, we also extract the author from her work and absorb her into our self and to that extent we ourselves become the Author-Narrator.

I intensely dislike some stories of the great Urdu fiction writer Rajinder Singh Bedi (1915-1984) in which he seems to imply that the ideal Indian Woman is one who pushes her own self entirely aside and who gladly suffers pain and distress and even humiliation and the hands of her menfolk. In spite of being fully aware that these are beautifully crafted stories, and in most cases are a miracle of economy and compactness of narration, I can't accept those stories. This response, I submit, can never arise, and in fact is not possible at all with regard to a non-story text like a lyric poem or a ghazal. This is because there is no real Author-Narrator in a non-story poem. I can cheerfully accept or not accept the ideas and the emotions contained in such texts and I may still like them as literary texts. But to accept a story whose implied or articulate postulates go against my human beliefs would imply that I approve of those postulates, at least on the intellectual level. That would in turn imply that I have thus extracted the Author-Narrator from the stories and absorbed him into my self or have myself become the holder of the view about Indian Womanhood as embodied in those stories of Rajinder Singh Bedi.

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<sup>3</sup> Sikandar Ahmed has studied this story from the perspective of author-narrator-implied author-implied reader. See his paper in "The Annual of Urdu Studies", no. 24, ed. M.U.Memon, and issued by the University of Wisconsin-Madison.

This brings me back to the question of what makes an event a story. It would now perhaps be clear that an event becomes a story when it engages our human interest, and such engagement is only possible when we are able to discern a result, a conclusion, a consequence which may be meaningful for us. This is entirely different from Premchand's idea that a story should possess some "some philosophical or emotional truth." It is also different from Ian Watt's "criticality and anti-traditionality" in the representation of reality. In fact, it is different from all formulations which tend to encourage us to receive or derive "messages" from stories. A meaningful consequence means something which persuades us to think, something which doesn't decide for us, but encourages us, or rather compels us to make our own decisions.

We handle the events in a story in much the same way as we handle any narrative, any report from real life and know that it makes no real difference even if the events in the narrative are not "real" or are against the "laws of nature". In fact, it would not be too much to say that we wouldn't much like it if the story tried to be something other than a story. A story is something which we can treat simultaneously as both "real" and "not real". The greater and wider the implications of this simultaneity, the better the story. By the term "greater and wider simultaneity " I mean the extent and the number of things in the story about which we can be sure that their "realism" or "unrealism" doesn't matter. It seems to me that Gopinath Mohanty's stories, like all good stories, achieve this duality again and again with greater force than most other stories which claim to represent " true life". As Sitakant Mahapatra has said, Gopinath Mohanty "demanded more of everything from life: agony, ecstasy, sunshine, gloom."

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Allahabad, 11 April 2009.