

Short Fiction as a Metaphor for the Avante-Garde

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● Frank Moorhouse: *The Writer as an Artist*
● by Pradeep Trikha
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Contemporary Australian literature, like any postcolonial literature written in English, has ties with European cultural traditions. Like the literatures of India, Africa, Canada and New Zealand, it has also developed its own distinctive literary style and leitmotifs which initially encompassed the writers' response to the new land. Of late, however, a growing awareness of the modern literary trends coupled with a peculiarly postcolonial fallout has led to an international interest in the works of these writers.

Frank Moorhouse belongs to the league of writers who brought a new popularity to the genre of short story which is one of the oldest forms of literature but which acquired the distinctness of a literary form only in the nineteenth century. To evaluate a genre in the absence of any classical canon is not an easy task. The great diversity of Australian short story makes it even harder to characterise it easily. Pradeep Trikha's book examines the short stories of Moorhouse spanning a period of about twenty years. Comparing the Australian short fiction writer with masters of the genre like Hemingway, Steinbeck, Maugham and Poe among others, the study seeks to project him as the 'master' of the short story.

The introductory chapter places him within the tradition of the short story in Australia, which the author divides into four phases: "the colonial phase" (1788-1890); the Lawsonian phase of 'bush realism' (1890-1950); the transitional phase of Australian society (1940-1970); and the fourth phase beginning in the 70s that brought the Australian short story to prominence. After a brief biographical reference, the chapter traces his literary career as a short fiction writer. An outline of the first two volumes of short stories, *Futility and Other Animals* and *The Americans, Baby* depicts the "inner suburban alternative society in general in Australia and

particularly in Sydney." The third collection, *The Electrical Experience*, is described as featuring "the first businessman hero in Australian literature who is fascinated by the newly introduced technology of electricity and telephone." The fourth volume, *Tales of Mystery and Romance*, is in no way a departure from Moorhouse's thematic approach in his earlier books. Referring to him as a social chronicler, the author observes that his stories are appreciated because "his audience could see reflections of their daily lives [in them]." The chapter also takes into account certain burning issues of contemporary Australian society, such as "the deep sense of discontentment among the Australian youth for their country's involvement in Vietnam war and the American alliance." The other themes, such as the self-delusion that common men and women suffer from and their sexual anxieties aggravated by a lack of harmony in their lives are mentioned in the chapter. Trikha also makes some succinct points about the style, technique and narrative skills of Moorhouse before concluding that his works have "a tantalising quality."

The second chapter, 'Discontinuous Narrative,' focuses on two collections of short stories, *Futility and Other Animals* and *The Americans, Baby*. Moorhouse defines his narrative as "discontinuous," which according to Trikha means "long flowing sentences, interrelated ... at the end." This chapter refers to *Futility* as "an interesting social history of contemporary Australian life," which deals with such issues as generation gap, family stability and social conventions. A detailed account of the three sections of the collection, "Confusion", "Sickness" and "Bravery" is provided. The stories reflect a decadent culture emphasising the themes of "hopelessness, disgust, loneliness, sterility, sexual perversion, alienation and spiritual and moral degradation.... The characters try

to break new grounds [sic] for emotional security such as walking out of home for a bohemian life style, establishing a hetero-homosexual family without marriage and giving birth to children outside marriage." Discussing the narratives of the collection, Trikha underscores the importance of themes, symbols and imagery in them. He also stresses that the basic human impulses and the "urge to live emotionally remains the same." The situations may vary but the emotions are universal. Moorhouse, claims the author, suggests that change in the attitudes and aspirations of people must be accepted as an inevitable consequence of modern alternative life styles which are ultimately "emanations of a perennial human dream."

The second part of the same chapter analyses *The Americans, Baby*, the second collection of Moorhouse's short stories. Elaborating as to how the first five stories deal with the "trendy nature" of the American influence on Australian society, this part of the chapter examines its ill effects on young urban adults. The other two sections of the collection, comprising first and second interludes provide comic relief while the 'End of the Second Interlude' highlights the positive aspects of American civilisation which the Australians have failed to perceive. The last section is termed as an appropriate ending to *The Americans, Baby*, because it reveals the innocence of the Australian mind which falls prey to the crafty American outlook. A critique of stories is offered, taking into account the conflict between tradition and so-called modernity. There are many ideas that clearly evoke an aura of the eastern mystique of spirituality and our very own Gandhian non-violence. These ideas stand in sharp contrast to the materialistic, violent, dehumanised world holding a mirror to the young urban elite. The metaphors of rain, electricity, the wall and the

machine gun are appropriately discussed, indicating a keen textual insight. One, however, wishes that the author had referred to the ideal of the American dream and the American success myth in detail for the sake of lucidity.

The third chapter 'Isolation and Loneliness,' is a detailed study of *The Electrical Experience*, a book dealing with the total failure of an average Australian, T. George McDowell. Electricity is the dominant metaphor here and so is the telephone – symbolising the mindless pursuit of an alien culture in the name of modernisation and progress. This part of the book takes into account different aspects of McDowell's personality – an unsuccessful husband and father, a failed businessman, a degenerate human being incapable of appreciating objects of art or beauty. The "fourteen narratives dispersed in twenty-two fragments ... printed white on black paper," furnish a comprehensive account of McDowell's frantic chase of the success myth which Trikha examines, albeit without naming it and with no reference to its connection with American literature. The chapter, however, makes an interesting reading largely owing to the portrayal of McDowell's character, which is one of its highlights.

The inadequacy of the ordinary idiom to express the complexity of human condition is a vital concern preoccupying "the writer as an artist." The fourth chapter 'Author's Search for Medium'

focuses on *Conference Ville*, which is described as "different from the earlier books," primarily because of its journalistic stance. Trikha compares Moorhouse to Norman Mailer and Irwing Shaw because, like them, he excels as a descriptive writer. The author also touches on those parts of the book where Moorhouse identifies with the narrator who finds it difficult to get recognition in the conference because the atmosphere there is highly politicised and there is hardly any difference between politicians and intellectuals. Trikha tersely states that the problem of the writer is universal, and substantiates his point by referring to Pound, W.C. Williams and Faulkner.

'Tales of Mystery and Romance' is the title of the fifth chapter as well as the book that it scrutinises. These stories are about the norms and patterns of behaviour in communes and other alternative life styles. The author observes that they "revolve around interpersonal and impersonal relationships of hippies, motorcyclists and homosexuals." The chapter elucidates the existential stance of the short stories and also comments upon the themes of absurdity, alienation, schizophrenia and "nothingness." A parallel is drawn between the thematic and stylistic principles underlying Moorhouse's short fiction and those of Kafka, Mark Twain, Pound and D.H. Lawrence. The psychological and symbolic import of the collection is tackled deftly in this

chapter.

The book concludes with a reassertion of Moorhouse's brilliance as a 'new wave' short fiction writer. A comparative viewpoint of themes, characters and narrative in different volumes of short stories is offered. While his 'discontinuous narrative' is mentioned as a distinctive feature of his eminence as a writer, the use of modified non-fictional material like sketches, photographs and diagrams is referred to as another remarkable feature. The author, however, does not handle the summing-up with the dexterity evident in the previous chapter.

The subject matter treated in the present study obviously entails an in-depth analysis of the predicament of man caught in the vortex of modern society. Certain sections in the book live up to this precondition. A thorough textual knowledge coupled with an extensive background reading is evinced in the analysis. A major flaw in the study is a number of linguistic, stylistic and spelling errors which could have been avoided by a careful proof-reading. Trikha, however, deserves appreciation for probing a relatively lesser known writer of the 'new land' and a genre which has begun to make its presence felt.

Dr. Girija Sharma teaches English at Himachal Pradesh University, Shimla.

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