

# Cultural Debates in Recent Indian English Short Stories

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**Abstract:** It assumes that not only discursive writings but also creative ones engage in cultural debates and exchanges and that it is profitable to explore a literary culture through such oblique debates uncharted in literary histories. Of late such debates are gaining centrality in literary discourses under the overarching studies in intertextuality. One such debate in Indian English short Story concerning the large scale migration which characterizes the contemporary globalized world. It would be to juxtapose a few recent Indian English short stories by authors who have stayed back home to foreground the contours of the debate in the stories.

**Keywords:** cultural debates, Indian English short Story, literary histories.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

This paper assumes that not only discursive writings but also creative ones engage in cultural debates and exchanges and that it is profitable to explore a literary culture through such oblique debates uncharted in literary histories. Of late such debates are gaining certainty in literary discourses under the overarching studies in intertextuality. One such debate in Indian English short story concerning the large scale migration which characterizes the contemporary globalized world. It would be to juxtapose a few recent Indian English short stories written by immigrant writers along with the stories by authors who have stayed back home to foreground the contours of the debate in the stories.

The first of these stories is Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's 'the Bats'. "The Bats" is the story of the unending suffering of a woman who runs away from home, unable to withstand the torture at her husband's hands to a relatives place, but returns after a while as the pain of suffering gradually decreases. The child who narrates this story, as well as tries to figure out the nocturnal world of the elders, is a victim too. To achieve these two mutually interrelated purposes, two different images are used. The first one silver ring found inside the stomach of a *ruhi* fish. As grandpa hands it over to the narrator, he says that it belonged to a sorcerer. Her process of initiation comes to a close when, toward the end of the story, she loses this ring, a clear symbol of the fairy world of the childhood innocence. The other thread of the story – that of the tragedy of the woman who repeatedly offers herself to exploitation – is managed by the bats. Though grandpa, to prevent them ruining the mango orchard, poisons and kills them, they return to the same orchard repeatedly as though willing to die.

Now the question is why do bats return to the orchard where they are killed? The narrative voice gives this explanation: "They don't realize what's happening. They don't realize that by flying somewhere else they will be safe. Or may be they do, but there's something that's pulling them back here". This explanation hints at two possible reasons for the tragedy of the bats/ the protagonist: i) ignorance, ii) the mysterious power of attraction that the orchard has. By suggesting that the only way to avoid this tragedy is to flee to a "safe" place. The story upholds the second possibility. This means that the problem lies not in the nature of the bats but in the poisonous orchard. The story reminds us that it is in this "place" that the ring was found in the stomach of a fish. Perhaps this ring was the very one which had slipped from the finger of Kalidasa's heroine. For, the house of grandpa – ("a tiny house, almost a play house, with mud walls and straw on the

roof like in my story book pictures”) – is the ashram lifted straight out of the story book. Indeed, the entire story is a re-enactment of Kalidasa’s play. The purpose of the re-enactment, however is different, is to suggest that there is some problem in this very place and the only sensible way out is to go away somewhere afar. In other words, the story is well within the tradition of those who called this “place” a “Continent of Circe” or an “Area of Darkness” or even those who much earlier attempted to diagnose some problem in this very “climate”. If this is true, what is the propriety in restating, as if discovered right now, something which had been diagnosed by “the other” in the past? To find an answer to this we will have to note how writers like Shashi Deshpande, who have stayed back home, manage this very problem which “the Bats” attempted to manage. These writers do not find any problem in the “place” but in the system created by ourselves and suggest the possibility of protesting against it and even changing it. On the other hand, Divakaruni and most of the immigrants trace the problem to the “place” itself and suggest that the only sensible solution is to run away from it. The logic behind most stories by Bharati Mukherjee is the same. It is quite possible that the urgency behind the deep sadness of Parsis being politically marginalised in post-independence India, as seen in stories such as Farruk Dhondy’s *The Poona Company* is also the same. Such a representation of homeland perhaps gives these writers a moral justification for their immigration. Also, if one can hazard a speculation, problem like self definition, identity and cultural readjustment are perhaps more preferable for the immigrants in the new environs rather than amidst the filth and dirt that they have left behind.

Let me juxtapose another set of stories, written by writers who have chosen to stay back home, which can be viewed as an intervention in the debate concerning immigration and life on alien shores. Explain this with a cryptic remark made by a character in one of the inter-connected tales in ‘First Light in Colonepura’ (1994) by Manju Kak about another character who has migrated to Australia:

“Is that the way to live? Traipsing about the world looking  
for a home. She had a good one here. No dignity. Chi chi  
.....no dignity in that way of life”.

These words express the deep disgust of a character who considers Land, Space, Family Homes and Belonging as “pillars of life” has for someone who has migrated in search of employment and opportunities. The narrative voice of the story does not share this feeling of disgust. For it treats the immigrant character with utmost sympathy. However, the purpose of the narrator in the entire “cycle” is to find out, “what is it about land that binds us down to it? “Naturally, therefore, in the exploration, “the long geographical perspective” which Rushdie valorises as an advantage available only to “displace writers”, is not considered important.

Susan Viswanathan’s ‘something Barely Remembered’ is, similarly, a collection of ingeniously linked stories. The very first story of this book is of departure. In this story, a Christian youth Lukose, aspiring to become a priest, goes far away from his coastal village of Puthankavu in Kerala. But in the final story of the collection, Lukose’s niece, Lucose’s suggestion, returns to her village after twenty: “ I am going to make a new life for myself. Freedom is better than enslavement.” Between these two journeys there are several other departures and arrivals. Together, they explore what it is to belong to land and in returning to dust (this also happens to be the title of one of the stories) identify, freedom from enslavement and relying on an inner core, which is secure and stable.

In both these texts, at a crucial face of the narration, the symbol of a crow appears and in both the situations serves to make a profound statement regarding “ Family Homs and Belonging” Here is a piece of a dialogue in ‘Something Barely Remembered’:

What did you teach me? ‘Crow, crow, where’s your nest?’  
“That’s all you could say”  
“Well, you have a nest here with your mother and Father.  
“Why do you make a fuss?”

It is the fitting conclusion to the migration which characterizes the contemporary globalized world.

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