

ACCOUNTS OF AN UPHEAVAL

For well over a fortnight, from mid-February when war chillingly hovered over us, I was reading the short stories that had come in from different parts of the subcontinent. Well, ‘subcontinent’ does not quite explain our situation. Actually, it’s a country, one whole geographical and cultural entity that, at different points in history, got splintered into pieces – three at the last count. To be more specific, three different countries. Of course, in the post-war era, the birth of a nation has really not been a big deal. In 1944-45 alone, six states gained their sovereignty from Nazi Germany. Another eighteen states earned their sovereignty from the Soviet Union in 1991-92. The post-colonial journey of the subcontinent began under two banners – India and Pakistan; almost a quarter century later, a third one was hoisted – Bangladesh. The stories I was poring over, in those unusually cold February days, had come from all over the region.

The rich crop of short fiction opened my eyes to a reality I had never felt so acutely. The sufferings and celebrations of humdrum life are so unmistakably similar across the region that the political divisions and the harshness of borders seem unreal. The always-war being waged by ordinary people to make life a little more liveable – in Karachi, Lahore, Delhi, Chennai, Dhaka – is so unerringly uniform and identical that to differentiate or draw lines between them is difficult. Life, playing out in the narrow lanes of Karachi, Lahore’s elite milieu, small-town India, and the cyclone-swept coastal Bangladesh, has a single focal point – simple men and women struggling hard to make an unjust arrangement a little more bearable.

A university student in Karachi, happy in her pursuit of a degree and the little money she earned from a part-time job until the other day, suddenly sees her world change with the forced disappearance of a cousin on his way home from work. She fights with the police to get a report registered, organizes the women from homes waiting for their missing men, writes posters, leads demonstrations, protests outside courts against an insensitive judiciary. She notices with dismay how her life has been transformed by a single incident.

A young woman in an Indian village, who has so far been forced to abort every child she conceived on the basis of its gender, finally stands up to her tyrannical matriarch and gives birth to a baby girl. And in a Bangladesh village, a woman looking for her husband and daughter in the aftermath of a devastating cyclone, gets ready to fight off two men prowling around to devour her.

Each one of the situations is so familiar, the concerns so common, it seems they could have happened somewhere on our street as well. Indeed, the human situation gets replicated but rarely alters. It is one whole narrative being spun all across the subcontinent to absorb a long range of emotions and aspirations typifying the region. Given the cultural commonality of the subcontinent, the identical emotive experiences are not surprising. What really comes as a

surprise is the empathy you feel for the women in these stories no matter where they are. You share a common cause with them, feeling their predicament and *émoi*.

In a moment like this, borders fade away, political divisions seem an artificial construct. The violence unleashed by men, both in and without uniform, appears completely irrational when the images of the beleaguered but gutsy women come into view. With their courage and suffering, the women wipe out the imposed and unreal divisions. The collective epic of their struggle dwarfs into insignificance the villainy of insensate killings by both state and non-state actors.

Where the short story as a genre stands out from the novel is in its poignancy, in capturing a single situation – just a day instead of a large canvas of events and time. Because of its brevity and minimalism, short fiction leaves an adorable dissatisfaction as an aftereffect. You feel like reading more, wanting to know more, though the author has already stopped with a mischievous glee

– leaving the reader in their sublime dissatisfaction. Handled by masters of the calibre of Maupassant, Chekhov and O. Henry, the literary form has acquired remarkable maturity and an awesome stature. Another writer, though nowhere near the giants, who absorbed me in my twenties, was Alan Sillitoe. The rawness of working-class life in Nottingham in his short stories gave you a sense of outrage, filled you with disgust at an effete society nestling in capitalist values. *The Loneliness of the Long-Distance Runner* makes you angry, prompts you to rail against an unjust social arrangement. Another Sillitoe story that troubled me is about a young boy who lives with the uneasy knowledge that his mother earns her living as a prostitute.

The young writers coming to explore the genre further in the context of their times and cultures are an acknowledgement of its effervescence. If these stories tell us anything, it's about the new mutiny in the making. They're about the change in the air. Nowhere, neither in a city nor in the rural remoteness, can women any longer be gunny-bagged into submission, subjected to the unjust diktats of patriarchy or institutionalized inequity. A young woman, bogged down by her underprivileged upbringing, chooses her body as a means of rebellion. She uses cheap whitening cream to give herself a fairer skin tone. She defies the injunctions of religion by making changes to her body she is not supposed to. Another young woman fights off the advances of a predatory relative to expose the hypocrisy of home's 'sanctity'. All of them have absorbing stories around them. Their work, more importantly, is a barometer of change happening around us. It is just a coincidence that we stepped out of the routine to put together the fascinating accounts of an upheaval that is going to surprise every corner of the subcontinent sooner than we know. ■

Bhaskar Roy