

THE LOST JEWEL

Short stories are traditionally considered to be brief tales representing a sense of limited action. Therefore, they become synonymous of thematic unity and concentration of effect. Contemporary short stories, however, tend to reject these ideas of order and highlight author's deliberate maintenance of distance from the characters. This authorial stance of detachment results in ambiguity and paradox. Ambiguous effects, in turn, emphasize that the short story, a consciously created artifice, highlights this very feature of the contemporary world. This invites us to analyse construction of contemporary short stories as expressions of the fragmented, alienating postmodern world.

In 'The Lost Jewels' (1898), the story opens with the narrator stopping by a village *ghat* (river shore) with his big boat and being accosted by a local schoolmaster with such an *unnatural brightness in his large eyes* that the narrator is compelled to comment: *He made me think of the Ancient Mariner of the English poet Coleridge* (Rabindranath Tagore: An Anthology, 303). The reference to Coleridge's Ancient Mariner establishes the narrator in this story in the milieu of middle class Bengali *bhadralok* with their love of English literature. It also portrays the schoolmaster as an anonymous storyteller possibly with as unusual a story to relate as the Ancient Mariner did. His style anticipates the postmodern discourses regarding inter-textuality, cutting across linguistic, racial and cultural differences, way back in 1898. The schoolmaster then tells the story of Phani Bhushan Saha, an educated, enlightened businessman and his barren wife Mani Mallika — the story of their life presumably at the backdrop of the dilapidated mansion behind them, and their unnatural, mysterious death by drowning in the river in front. The mystery thickens and it turns out to be a story about Mani Malika's ghost. However, as the schoolmaster finishes telling the story, there is darkness and silence all around and then he says that the gentleman apparently does not believe his story. When asked back whether he himself believed in the story just concluded, the schoolmaster replies that he does not because Dame Nature does not have the leisure to write stories.....

The narrative reaches its crescendo during one stormy night, when the servants of the house are out absent; Phanibhushan lies dormant in his bed, engulfed in sleep and is woken by the sound of footsteps approaching the bedroom. The uneasiness jolts him into life and the apparition vanishes. Nights after night he awaits the ghostly appearance of Mani. He sends the servant on forced leave for the night instructing him to keep the main door open. His awkward conduct amazes the servant. At the final night, the sound seems to come from the front door of the bungalow and slowly grows in magnitude. The approaching footsteps seem adorned with the metallic clinks of the anklet. The resolute steps come and halt in front of the open bedroom door, inside which Phanibhushan lies

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