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A Comparative Study of O. Henry and Pannalal Patel's Selected Short Stories

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Abstract

It is known that the English language mostly becomes the way of communication and sometimes the only medium to deliver your ideas when the speaker and the listener do not speak and understand each other's native tongue. Hence understanding of it can be of great use. Realizing its importance, people have started learning the English language and the number of English language learners is increasing every day. Some find it to be a fun learning experience and easy and others think of it to be a complicated and difficult language. Learning English can become challenging because of its heterogeneous nature. Also when learners do not see any similarities or connection with their own language it becomes difficult to understand it. But teachers around the world have been bringing in innovative techniques to make the learning experience easy and interesting. The learning of any language or concept becomes easier when the learners feel the relevance and can connect to what is being taught and so is the case with English Language teaching. Learners appreciate and follow when recognizing the connection and similarities between their native language and English. The present research paper will study the similarities between the selected short stories of celebrated short story writer William Sydney Porter and a noted and acclaimed Gujarati writer Pannalal Patel. The paper will make note of the similarities in the themes, characters, and other aspects of the stories while bringing out the contrastive elements of them. It will

also try to study how this comparison helps to give a better understanding of the themes, cultures, and language.

Keywords: Heterogeneous, innovative, contrastive elements

Communication is a very important part of people's lives. Proper communication makes our lives easy and miscommunication leads to havoc sometimes. Mostly, when the speaker and the listener do not share a common tongue, they switch to English to communicate. According to statistics, 1.27 billion people in the world speak English, making it the most used language in the world (including native and non-native speakers.)

Realizing the need of the time, the non - English speakers have started taking interest in English and have begun learning it. Learning English gives exposure to the best of the literature in the world as those works are translated in English, keeping you informed and updated. It also provides better opportunities when it comes to working. This is not only helping the learners, but the teachers too have been minting money by teaching it. It perhaps is one of the major businesses today. The learners are provided their learning based on their requirements. Some learn only communicative English, some limit it only to business English. But gradually, people are trying to get acquainted with the language.

For years, English language experts and teachers have been trying innovative techniques for teaching English. They try teaching it with games, showing videos, asking questions, and so on. Some try to teach it using the English language only with the class probably with the logic that says the native language is learned by listening to it mostly. And this works. But all these techniques and tricks have to be applied according to the audience. The current paper is focusing on teaching the English language by comparing stories of English to Gujarati stories and bringing out similarities and other aspects. The comparison helps students to relate to the stories being taught and hence develop their interest.

People have always been interested in hearing the stories be it a child or a grown-up. A great fascination is found among people in listening to the stories. Chronologically, short stories were earlier narrated, transmitted orally which eventually became a part of the oral tradition i.e. *orature* but gradually with the passage of time, the art of story-telling took new forms and now the stories are told through books, radio, films, documentaries, podcasts, etc.

The short story was not recognized as a separate genre in English literature until the mid-nineteenth century but it existed in the ancient works. For example, *Mahabharat* the epic

has several short stories one leading to another. Similarly, many such huge novels or epics have some short stories woven within them. *“Before the 19th century, the short story was not generally regarded as a distinct literary form. But although in this sense it may seem to be a uniquely modern genre, the fact is that short prose fiction is nearly as old as language itself.”* (*Britannica*). Slowly and steadily short story as a form made its own place in literature. But as Ian Reid puts it, “Good books about novels are legion; good books about short stories are extremely scarce.” (*The Short Story*), short stories did not have much criticism on its way. So far the critics and the great minds have agreed and argued over the short story, its definition, and its origin. But the writers, combining reality, fantasy, and their imagination, developed it as a form. And with their style and techniques, they have amused and engaged people since then.

The current paper focuses on making a comparative study of the selected short stories of the noteworthy American writer William Sydney Porter (1862-1910), famously known by his pseudonym O. Henry and equally talented Gujarati writer Pannalal Patel (1912-1989). Although they belong to an entirely different age, culture, and region they have some similarities in the themes of their stories, characters, and techniques. The thesis will therefore try to bring out the similarities and discuss the contrast found between the authors and their works.

William Sydney Porter took the pen name O. Henry and wrote stories that probably made him synonymous with short stories. He acquired his recognition because of his unique way of ending stories. The plot-twisting endings became his trademark. He exactly knew how to hold the reader's interest and was consummate at leaving them inquisitive and curious till the end of the story. He mainly got ideas for his stories by talking to people and interacting with them which is clearly reflected in his works. He wrote in the language that people spoke. Discarding the idea of writing about the affairs of the gentry, he contrived his stories with the middle-class folks and their lives, problems, joys, and emotions. This perhaps was one of the reasons that he could connect to the people of all classes thereby becoming the most celebrated short-story writer. He was forever interested in people and his surroundings; managed to keep his stories unaffected by the problems of his personal life. His apt titles, easy language, not-so-complex characters, and use of irony at the end of the story made him immensely popular.

Henry never had a lack of subjects for his stories because of his splendid observation skills. His surroundings always provided him with a variety of ideas and themes which can

evidently be noticed in 'The Gift of the Magi' representing poverty-stricken people of New York who give up their prized possessions for what they call 'love'; 'Ransom of Red Chief' was his very successful attempt in writing and involving humor with a twist; 'Retrieved Reformation', a story of selfless love wherein a skilled safe-breaker uses his skill in front of the girl he loves in order to rescue a child locked in a safe; 'The Guilty Party' and 'Memento' have female characters in the spotlight and discuss their position in the society and mindset of people towards them.

Pannalal Patel, a name that the entire populace of Gujarat would perhaps be familiar with, wrote almost after 50 years of O. Henry's time. Patel began to write in 1936 after his friend Umashankar Joshi, another literary genius of Gujarati literature, convinced him to write and then on he contributed to Gujarati literature with his novels and short stories. Coincidentally, he became the second Gujarati writer to receive *Jnanpith Award* for Manvini Bhavai following Umashankar Joshi. Along with receiving fame in the literary world, he received an abundance of love of people. Like O. Henry, he also wrote about people who belonged to the middle or lower class. His characters do not live in a huge mansion located in a developed city, nor do they speak the highly-polished language. They are ordinary people speaking colloquial vernacular. Although 'love' remains a recurring theme of his works, he dealt with a wide range of other subjects too. He portrayed people's hearts, emotions, intentions, and innocence flawlessly.

His stories are a depiction of a village, its people, their problems and difficulties, hopes and aspirations. He has written more than 20 short story collections, many social novels, and several mythological novels.

Retrieved Reformation & Ghadto Talati

One of the examples of selflessness, the story *Retrieved Reformation* is about Jimmy Valentine who just has come out of jail for his involvement in safecracking in a robbery. Once out, he recovers his safecracking tools and leaves the town. With his new identity by the name Ralph D. Spencer and new business, he plans to marry Annabel, a daughter whose family owns a bank. Spencer along with Anna's family goes to see the bank. Later they realized that Anna's two nieces trapped in the safe by accident. Anna asks Spencer to do something to get the girls out. That's when Spencer shows his kind side and decides to help while taking the risk of losing his beloved, risking his wedding and this new life. The girls could get out with the help of Spencer. Valentine reforms himself into a kind human being from a criminal and uses his safecracking skill to help somebody and not to commit crime

giving us a message that ultimately it is the gentle and helpful heart that matters and we all are capable of transforming into a kind human being.

Patel's *Ghadto Talati* shares the same kind of idea. The protagonist's job is to collect tax from the villagers. He felt sympathetic towards the poor villagers and was ready to make adjustments so that the villagers do not have to pay the tax. But at the same time, he has the fear of losing his job. The harsh language and the beating forced them to give in ultimately and they somehow managed the money that they had to give. A poor widow, with two children, could not manage any money. She pleaded to the talati. The talati and his assistant did not believe her. They wanted their share of money anyhow. But the tender heart that the talati has, he could not be very tough. And at the end, the talati pays for the lady, risking his job.

In both of these stories, it is evident that Valentine and Talati were rough from the outside but the core was gentle. When the situation demanded, they showed their kind hearts and helped people. The change of heart and the selflessness were extremely appealing. And that is when people realize the soft heart that they think they do not have.

The Ransom of Red Chief & Ek Raat Ma

Henry's *The Ransom of Red Chief* is an outstanding example of a combination of crime, laughter, and twist. Generally, kidnapping in the house brings with it worries, sadness, threatening and a huge ransom. The story has all these and an additional element that is laughter.

In the story, Bill and Sam kidnap Johnny, a young child of 10 and son of very rich Ebenzer Dorset with an intention of getting a huge ransom. But it is not Johnny who suffers and is being beaten by the kidnappers. Instead, the kidnappers suffer a great deal. They are the ones who tolerate the tantrums of the kidnapped child. This goes to an extent where the kidnappers decide to return the child to his parents without any ransom. But the major twist comes when Ebenzer Dorset, the father of the kid, asks for money to take his son back. Since the boy had become a terror for the duo, and as exhausted as they were, they paid 250\$ to his father and returned Johnny to him.

Ek Raat Ma by Patel is a story of four friends who get together in a secluded spot in a jungle to drink, smoke, and gamble. Their talk led them to an argument and ultimately, they end up with a bet wherein Vaghoji, one of the friends, has to go in the darkness of the jungle and has to kill the ghost that everyone believed existed. To prove his bravery, he goes. Under

the control of alcohol and smoking, he was unable to think and see clearly. He sees the ghost and kills it with his sword babbling something. Excited to announce his great deed, he went to his friends who were waiting and realized that he did not kill any ghost, but the one he killed was his other friend Dhulaji. To escape the crime and punishment, the three of them throw Dhulaji's body on the railway tracks.

These stories have crime as one of their themes. The only difference is the treatment of it and the outcome. In Henry's story, a crime that is committed caused much mirth. It is hilarious to see the kidnappers suffer the torture of the kid. On the other hand, in Patel's story, the killing was not intentional, it became a crime when they decided not to own up to their crimes but to throw away the dead body instead. Hence, the comparison of these two stories gives an idea that similar themes can be treated differently and can have different aspects.

Henry's *Elsie in New York* and *The Memento* have female protagonists and Patel has *Aruna* and *Chees* with the women-centric plots. Henry has *The Gift of the Magi* and Patel has *Sukh Dukh na Sathi* dealing with the theme of pure and unconditional love. Many stories of both authors have characters who are very ordinary and poor. The language spoken by these characters is unpolished with a rustic touch. Thus, it can be seen that both Patel and Henry have many similarities when it comes to their stories and these similarities in themes and characters can be used in the explanation of the story to make the understanding of students better.

As we all know, English plays a vital role today in the majority of the fields: education, business, or politics. If taught with a reference and comparison to the native language, the understanding of the concept increases. And this understanding and knowledge last longer. Hence, using comparative study while teaching English can prove to be helpful.

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