



## Short Story Today : Kavana Sarma

When I set out to write this article three questions confronted me. 1. What period should be covered by today? 2. What are the special conditions relative to the short story in this period? 3. How and what stories did they portray? For the purpose of this article, I have taken 1990-2002 as the period answering to the call of today. Why did I do this?

1. With the spurt in the number of magazines and consequently short stories, the chance of those good stories that sporadically saw publication escaping the notice of discriminating readers has increased. Also, the chances of less known writers catching the eye of such readers shrank. Reacting to this, Vasireddi Naveen and Papineni Sivasankar began in 1990 publishing the *Katha* series of anthologies and ever since they continued to bring out collections of stories they considered good.

2. The birth of *Rachana* monthly in 1991 and *Aahvaanam* monthly in 1993 gave a new fillip to the short story. For a while, *Saahitya Netram* magazine published some very good stories.

3. *Rachana* hosted a conference of nearly 400 writers and readers in the February of 1994 in Hyderabad.

4. Vedagiri Rambabu brought out *Krotta Katha* and *Sarikrotta Katha* series.

5. The Central Sahitya Akademi held a two-day seminar in Hyderabad to bring out a volume entitled *Bangaru Katha*.

6. Telugu University started funding short story publications.

7. Several literary groups took the lead in endowing awards to encourage up and coming writers in the memory of eminent writers like Rachakonda Viswanatha Sastry, Madhurantakam Rajaram, Tripuraneni Gopichand, Pulupula Siviah and Kondepudi Srinivasa Rao. There were other awards like *Jyesta* literary award, *Chaso sphoorti*, and the one by Telugu University. For the first time, Kalipatnam Rama Rao won *Janame* award of one lakh rupees.

8. While Kalipatnam Rama Rao, Bhamidipati Ramagopalam, Kethu Viswanatha Reddi and Madhurantakam Rajaram won the Sahitya Akademi awards for their short stories, Vallampati Venkata Subbiah won the Akademi award for his commentative work *Katha Silpam*.

9. This period saw writers publishing anthologies on and of their own in great numbers. Several publishing houses too brought out many collections. There was also a project for decadal classification of *Rachapalem* stories.

10. Translators made it a mission to translate the Telugu story into other Indian languages and English. This provided an opportunity for non-Telugu readers to peek into not only the works of well-known authors but also good stories written by others. That was the beginning of the efforts to put the Telugu short story on the national scene.

11. For several years, Koduri Rama Murthy strived to select the best stories through *Rachana*. Vasundhara started a Literary Clinic for 'treating' short stories.

12. Under the auspices of Kalipatnam Rama Rao a unique reference library for short stories called *Katha Nilayam* started functioning.

Rama Rao said that every year around 1500-2000 short stories were published. This means that in the period between 1990 and 2002, around 20,000 short stories must have seen the light of the day, which again means that to read all the stories that were published one had to do at least five stories a day. Not every one had the time and patience to do this. Unless all the stories that come out are monitored at a central point or reach *Katha Nilayam*, an assessment of all the hundreds of published stories has to be based on a sample that is representative.

It must be possible to weed out at the very outset stories that merely sell, stories written with the sole aim of meeting readers' need for momentary gratification and stories that play to the gallery.

I accept and take it as a yardstick Vivina Murthy's view that good writers pulsate intensely to experiences related to their lives and those of people they regard as their own, that they want others not to undergo the crises they underwent, that others should be spared of the pain they suffered, that their expertise should be useful to others and that the joys that came their way should visit others too.

Living has become easy today but life has become hard to understand. Between the life that is visible and the guidelines that propel it are arcane figures. These figures have never been as imperceptible as they are today. Vallampati Venkata Subbiah says that it is the task of the writer to sniff around and unveil them. Whether our works influence others or not the thoughts that make us write are proof of the change in us, says Kaara maastaru.

Good writers, therefore, write with faith in what is good for everyone and without an eye on fame or money. They become great writers if they also supplement this quality by talent. Though all good writers and good works could not be mentioned in this article, I believe that this averment applies to also those that did not find mention.

## **Sample**

This period of 1990-2002 saw a hundred or more collections of short stories that the writers themselves sponsored besides those published by lovers of literature or publishing houses. Even though some of those volumes and collections were published in this period, our reckoning does not include, partly or completely, some stories that were old or printed earlier. We happened to cover all volumes of Rachana and Aahvaanam and randomly examine Andhra Prabha, Andhra Patrika, Swati, Priyadutta, and Andhra Bhoomi. The dailies did not figure at all.

Whatever period these volumes and collections belong to, it cannot be said that the stories in them are representative of those times. For example, Sahitya Akademi selection of Bangaru Kathalu, the Kathasagar stories of Madras Kalasagar and the Visalandhra's 100 stories in Animutyaalu series are spread over a century beginning with Diddubatu of 1910 to Thirugubaatu today. If we examine these collections, it becomes easy to detect bias in selection. Editors of Katha 95 said that they had ruled out three good stories because they had already appeared in other anthologies but included another story though it had figured in two anthologies and two other stories could not be included due to resource crunch.

*Soorpanaka Sokam* of 1984 is an example of stories that escaped notice in the early days of magazines but won recognition after they had figured in anthologies or collections and considered worthy of translation into English. The story was noticed in 1995 and translated in 2001.

If stories are not to slip into limbo it becomes necessary to preserve them in book form. Good stories that have been recognized are becoming scarce due to some editors taking recourse to effortless shortcuts or publishing new collections with stories from old ones.

Some nondescript stories too have begun to appear in short story books due either to writers' love of their own stories or the regional partiality of lovers of literature or publishing houses. Even after overlooking these things, we could count only 300 stories of 150 writers among the best. There might still be 100 good stories from 50 good writers that have escaped our notice.

It is difficult in this article to name the authors and stories. I will try to mention the trends marking these stories

with a minimal naming of the authors.

## Writers

Coming to writers, we can find those of an earlier generation who have invested love and time for writing good stories continue to do that even today. Prominent among them are Kalipatnam Rama Rao, Madhurantakam Rajaram, Balivada Kanta Rao, Ghandikota Brahmaji Rao, Muddamsetti Hanumantha Rao, Srimati Bina Devi, Avasarala Ramakrishna Rao, Bharago and Vakati Panduranga Rao.

Sai of Rachana and Vedagiri Rambabu strove to get the older generation writers to wield the pen again. Maybe due to lack of interest in writing or the snapping of ties with the short story, good stories failed to come from them.

Today, there are writers who are active even after retirement and their sixtieth year. Among them are Allam Seshagiri Rao, Kethu Viswanatha Reddi, Abburi Chaya Devi, P. Satyavati, Kavana Sarma, Tulasi and Yagnyavalkya Sarma.

This period also saw third generation writers who graduated from writing good stories to writing best stories. They are Allam Rajiah, Vivina Murthy, Appala Naidu, Sri Ramana, V. Chandrasekhar, Olga and Sujatha. There is also Kesava Reddi who always wrote great stories. Among the fourth generation, Kuppili Padma transformed from a writer of ordinary stories to one of great stories. To this generation belong writers of great stories like Bammidi Jagadeeswara Rao, Tummeti Raghottama Reddi and Suvarnamukhi.

## Stories

Inequalities lead to conflict. This conflict originates in the desire of forces of power to subdue mentally or physically weaker sections of the society. Hegemony flows from wealth, politics, caste, geography and even gender. In Andhra Pradesh, at one end of the spectrum of inequalities are the Kamma-Reddi politicians of Hyderabad or industrialists who support them and are in turn supported by them and at the other end are the Dalit women who find work only for a few days in a year and work long hours for meager wages and Dalit child labour. After studying their lives, writers analyzed the conflict syndrome from different angles and wrote stories in a style and voice unique to them. I shall classify and elaborate them from my lights.

1. **The Marxist perspective:** The story that deserves first mention is Kalipatnam Rama Rao's *Sankalpam*. His story is woven around the merry-go-round of leadership. After humanity began living as groups, families and communities and evolved concepts of seniority and leadership, youth began to challenge the older generations. This hegemony can be seen in politics, families and indeed in any other sector of public life. Used to the comforts and privileges this hegemony assures, an earlier generation does not and cannot give them up voluntarily. As enthusiasm and power begins to wane in the older generation, the new generation cannot wait to capture the helm. This struggle goes on whether the older leader is the father or teacher and the younger leader is the son or disciple. In this transition of power physical and mental violence is inevitable. If the new generation cannot achieve its goal, age and death will take care of the old generation. The doubt that the Naxalite leadership struggle is the background for this story is strengthened by the changes that followed. Allam Rajiah, Tummeti Raghottama Reddi and Appala Naidu have remarkably articulated the conflict between the industrialists and the workers, land

changing hands, and the tragedy of the farmer becoming a laborer.

**2. Feminism:** *Aasaaankuram* is a story that is about how the woman, who once became the sacrificial goat for *dharma* in the epic age, for kingdoms in the time of monarchies and for family under foreign rule, resists and checks feticide and thus sprouts hope. While Abburi Chaya Devi compared their lives to those of the Bonsai, the story *Divorce* shows woman as navigating the lanes connecting the three cages of home, office and bazaar. While Satyavati terms a woman's garment to a veil, Sujatha portrays her in agony as a three-in-one homemaker wearing and dirtying her coarse saree, attending office in a starched saree and entertaining the husband in a nightie like *Rambha*. Olga throws light on the frontiers of the Marxist perspective by contrasting the sympathy that a worker losing his limb at work gets with its denial to a woman who loses a limb in the act of delivering children. Two stories, *Payanam*, *Palayanam* and *Salabhanjika*, are about how impossible it is for voiceless women to live and show the slide of man using his woman as a tool for career building. *Neram* is the story of a woman who could withstand the assault of an illiterate tribal but could not bear it when her seemingly ideal, educated and progressive husband's image was shattered by his hollowness.

*Ame Illu* unveils the injustice of the husband appropriating a house that both he and his wife had built. Mrinalini has discussed feminism in the very first issue of Patrika under the title *Feminism: Past, Present and Future*. She argues that the care men are *now* taking in depicting women characters is due to feminist literature. Phrases like 'she is fallen,' 'she is ravished' are gradually disappearing from literature and literary seminars. One may still come across demeaning terms like Appalammalu.

**3. Dalit Literature:** Stories concerning issues affecting the lives of Dalits have begun to be written in numbers worthy of mention during this time. Still, the Dalit story has not become as popular as the Dalit song. While Vivina Murthy set his two stories *Dalit Dharmam* and *Dalit Satyam* against the background of mythology, Nagappa Sundarraaj did excellent job writing about the Dalit woman who is at the bottom of the caste chain in *Nadiminti Bodekke basili raayyeada*. I feel that the Dalits today are still searching for reasons for their today's oppression in the ruins of bygone ages. That may spark resentment and passions but no solutions. If either society or the constitution or religion has conferred privileges on some sections, they would never voluntarily surrender them. The beneficiaries ensure that those who have failed to garner these privileges would never get them. Higher castes is a term that frequently occurs in Dalit writing. Who are they? Can we classify Malas and Madigas as higher castes? Thinking sections among Dalit writers must debate these issues without ambiguity and hesitation and expose the 'real enemy.' Some of the good stories that touched on Dalit oppression and deprivation and the ways to understand and overcome them are *Aksharala Bangarayya*, *Malle Teeta*, *Avamanam*, *Prasantam*, *Lupeis Club*, *Kanneellu*, and *Jeeva Naadulu*. Two stories *Paridhulu-Prameyalu* and *Pandu Rogi* contain some self-examination. In *Telugu Short Story in This Decade*, Katyayini Vidmahe discusses a new trend of writers, in a bid to assert Dalit presence fired by agitational fervor, weaving stories depicting their caste traditions with respect and pride. She cited *Yakshaganam*, *Mahaveerulu* and *Malle Moggala Godugu* as examples.

*Eti Paata* is a story that substantiates the truth that feudalism that tolerates a landlord's wife appreciating a Dalit song, crushes and throws into water the Dalit song that seeks to subvert the concept of land ownership.

**4. Minorities stories:** Among the good stories from writers representing the minorities perspective are *Ammijaaan* by Rehmatullah, *Meher* by Salim and *New Bombay Tailors* from Mohammed Khadir Babu. L.R.Swami is a Malayalee but has learnt Telugu and writes good stories.

Chilukuri Devaputra is a writer who convincingly wrote a story showing that faith in religion was essential at the time of death though it is possible to live with faith in humanity.

5. **Konda stories:** Those who work for the development and good of others and are crushed and sacrificed in that process are the socially, politically and economically weaker sections. *Basilurandru* also belong to that section and the homeless too. The mention of Konda stories reminds us of Suvarnamukhi stories and Bhushanam's *Kondagali* and *Kottagali* stories that inspired them. Among them, Bhushanam wrote in the nineties decade only a few of which could be found in the second volume. While pointing to the impending revival of the tribals' revolutionary movement, Suvarnamukhi stories ably narrate contemporary plunder.

Gantedu Gowri Naidu wrote *Raktasruvu* and *Batukaku* stories. These stories throw light on how development projects intended to uplift tribal lives help pushing their lives into peril and penury, exposing them to exploitation and their women to sexual exploitation.

Just as some men write feminist stories and non-Dalits write Dalit stories, mention needs to be made of two stories written by city dwellers. First is Vadrevu Veeralakshmi Devi's *Kondaphalam* story. That story details how laws meant to protect tribal land worsen the crisis and instead of bringing justice to those deprived of it become more expensive for the tribals. When the story ends, it creates the feeling that these laws are designed to benefit the lawyers. The second story *Bachav* highlights the hollowness of the principle of sacrifice for the good of others and stretches it to its logical end. From the way it is told, the story creates the illusion of science fiction.

6. **Regional stories:** This period also saw the publication of several regional story collections like Seema kathalu, Singareni kathalu, Nagavali kathalu, Vamsadhara kathalu, America kathalu, Tana kathalu, America Bhetala kathalu and NRI kathalu. These stories derived their relevance from the regional diversities of language, culture and issues.

The subject matter for the Rayalaseema stories was failure of rains, the falling price of *cheeni* fruit and faction feuds. Prominent among those who wrote them are Singamaneni Narayana Swami, Madhurantakam trio, Chilukuri Devaputra, Santinarayana, Vivina Murthy and Kethu Viswanatha Reddi. The brevity of Rayalaseema life finds a portrayal more powerful in Pinakapani's novel *Nippula Vagu* than in short stories. In view of the size of the canvas for the stories, writers, limiting themselves to one or two issues, wrote some very good stories.

In Telangana kathalu, feudalism, caste, plunder, vestiges of Nizam's rule and Naxalism find place. Allam Rajaiah, Tummeti Raghottama Reddi and Chandrasekhar wrote revolutionary stories from women's perspective. Rago novel sparked a lot of debate. In the driver's seat of North Andhra story is the Naidu trio: Appala Naidu, Gouru Naidu and Bangaru Naidu (Suvarnamukhi). The struggle of the tribals, deprivation of land and injustices in the name of development provide the content for their stories.

American story collections discuss problems unique to the NRIs, pain of immigration and comforts. In this period came *Ee Maata* from Australia, web magazines like *e-Patrika* and debating forums like *Ratchabanda*. While Satyam Mandapati, Cherukuri Rama Devi, Phani Dokka, K. V. S. Rama Rao, Kalasapudi Srinivasa Rao, M.S.Prakasa Rao and Vanguri Chittan Raju write short stories, seniors like Nidadavolu Malathi and Velcheru Narayana Rao have taken up translations and critique.

7. **Middle Class stories:** Some important attributes of middle classes are nostalgia, anxiety to amass wealth, respect for values, mocking at their own inability to change, bristling at the smallest discomfort, sympathy with others' suffering and pioneering reform even while respecting tradition. Middle class stories mirror these realities.

Sri Ramana's *Mithunam* and *Bangaru Murugu* reflect a loving devotion to what are old and reformist values of tradition. Toleti Jagannathan Rao's *Lakshmi Kataksham* and other stories mirror middle class achievement.

8. **Psychological stories:** Stories that consider man not as a constituent of the system but as an individual and stories that converge on his thoughts and behavior came primarily from Jalandhara, Kasibhotla Venugopal, Yellapragada and V.Chandrasekhara Rao. They appear to be heirs to Buchibabu and Gopichand.

9. **Stories of Destruction:** These stories come with alternative insights into forms of destruction, asserting that besides bombing police stations and railway stations, the exploitation of successful individuals from the backward sections by wealthy sections for self-aggrandizement and for making them irrelevant to their own people also should be regarded as destruction. Allam Rajiah and Appala Naidu have written stories around this theme.

10. **Children's literature:** We do not have Enid Blytons and R. K. Narayans in Telugu. Stories must be written for and about children. Budugu is a children's story written for adults. I have also tried to emulate it by writing Vinayakudi Eluka.

11. **Vocational stories-stories of courts:** Rachakonda Viswanatha Sastry won literary acclaim for court stories. At present, Nandigam Krishna Rao is one of those who successfully tried to continue that trend. There are some very good stories in his collection *Nalugu Kalla Nyayamu*.

12. **Management and Industry:** This period has also been witness to a new genre of stories in Telugu. Worthy of mention among them are stories about management of small industries and management of lower rung employees in the public sector. *Small Industries And Big Problems* is a story related by Somaraju Susheela Devi, a middle class woman entrepreneur, based on her experience of setting up a small industrial unit. To be a member of the Railway Board is not cake walk. One has to get past the general manager hurdle. Vedula Chinna Venkata Chainulu is one such person who began writing short stories after retirement and who carved a niche for himself through *Hanumantha Rao Kathalu*. Hanumantha Rao is a player in the serpents and ladders game. He was manager of the Hindustan Shipping Company.

13. **Journalism:** Thirty years ago, Nanduri Parthasarathi created the character of a unique and budding editor who does not keep step with times and continues to be the same and yet happy with himself and making others too happy. He comes off as a blood relation of Barrister Parvateesam. He does not know Telugu or English. He is not worldly-wise. But he and his others believe that these are no bar to be a journalist.

14. **Science stories:** There is a feeling in the Telugu literary scene that science stories are those written by persons with a little knowledge of the English language and are plagiarized from English journals. Both Issac Asimov and Douglas Adams possess a deep knowledge of science and combined it with fancy to write science stories. Asimov sparked the birth of a branch of engineering called Robotics. Though he did not write such stories, Vemuri Venkateswara Rao is one who has such deep knowledge of science. He is a mixture of the academe and fiction. His trauma stories belong to this category. *Midatambhotlu* story is about space-time curve bar. Though by qualification he is an electrical engineer he is more than familiar with chemistry, computer sciences and medicine, not to speak of his mastery over English and Telugu languages. It is our misfortune that our critics have failed to notice his stories so far. Maybe, our readers and critics do not relish science. Electron is another writer whose science stories have appeared in *Rachana*. He has a command over science. Since he is a scientist by profession we may expect more stories from him with greater imagination.

15. **Stories about Education sector:** Education today is a heavy industry. The buyer of this consumer education is a gentleman who does not challenge its quality in any consumer court. Passing an examination is more important than acquiring knowledge. Everyone, from the worker who carried loads of earth and made it good to pan shop owners to liquor vendors to jailers, is eligible to start residential schools. They then graduate to run user-friendly professional colleges. *A School Without Bell* is a story about a Singh who opens a school next to a jail and uses the jail bell as school bell and also runs it like a jail. No wonder, suicides take place in such schools. Portraying this tragedy is *Medha Vidhvamsam* by Emvi Rami Reddi. *Vidyaramalu* written by Rentala Venkateswara Rao demonstrates that anyone is eligible to open such schools. Another story from his pen *Constable Gopalam* is about not only poor teaching but also about punishing parents. He is the principal of a college.

Government sets up inspection committees to oversee these colleges. We have to believe that these are protectors of educational values. That they are centers of immorality is known to everyone. Kavana Sarma wrote a story *Chetta Kundi* showing how those in office use these colleges for selfish ends and as garbage dumps. A story that exposes the lies of operators who deceived people into believing that sandal and teak grow faster and that a few thousands of investment would bring returns in lakhs is *Meda Gantala Govu Peda Katha*, a story about research in the education sector.

16. **Cricket stories:** In 1996 came a story *Sharja* on match fixing in cricket. The writer is S. S. V. Ramana Rao who played cricket at the district level. Well-known India and Pakistan players enter the story as characters. This fiction flows nobly without a trace of treason. Telugu readers who patronized C. Ramachandra Rao's tennis stories failed to show the same interest in this story. At the end of the article I will refer to the reason I suspected for this failure.

17. **Police-State violence:** It is a truth that given unlimited powers, protectors become predators. Chilukuri Devaputra ends his story *Rendu Railla Aruguri Katha* with how a person suspected to be an Ulfa terrorist comes out alive after deadly police torture but meets with death at the hands of a colleague and is declared a terrorist, thus showing that the innocent can escape sometimes but not always. Bammidi Jagadeeswara Rao is on the side of optimism in *Aasa* where a mother-in-law offers protection to a woman who was victim of gender discrimination and sexual exploitation but he gives in to despair in *Himsapaadu*, a story about police violence. The story is set against the context of post mortem of a woman's body. She is a police wife and a police mother. The police not viewing the mother and daughter as human beings, the police ravaging the daughter who commits suicide, the father and son duo cleverly burning her body and finally the mother unable to absorb the shock, killing herself are the main components of the story *Kotha*.

## Criticism

The modern age became the Industrial Age and life became mechanical. The modern age started when Newton proposed the Laws of Motion. Physical motion was defined with certainty in a logical manner by these laws. Determinism paved the way to the theory of mechanics. The idea that there is a distinction between the observed and the observable led to the dichotomy of classifying concepts as objective and subjective. Western scientific trends like Freud's psychoanalysis, Darwin's theory of evolution and the economic principles of Marx were all influenced by Newtonian physics. However, with the advent of the 20th century, "new quantum physics" surpassed Newtonian physics started developing rapidly.

Notions such as the nature of the subject, the condition of the observed object, inferring the past from the current experiment, existence of different outcomes prior to the experiment, the transience of the experimental outcome, became popular. Literature too, saw the birth of postmodernism. Newton's theories that the motion of an object



depends on its mass and external forces acting on it, are now considered axiomatic. Probability theory on the other hand states that a particular outcome is only approximate and cannot be predicted with certainty. I would like to point out to those critics with leftist leanings that Marxist philosophy is the same as Newtonian physics.

Science tries to clarify within the constraints of available information by eliminating as much noise as possible. But mysticism is intentionally vague. That is why I find that the ambiguous style of storytelling adopted by Chandrasekhara Rao, Bammidi Jagadeeswara Rao while attractive is not commendable. It has the same merit as the gimmicky wordplay of traditional poetry. One cannot criticize or praise one without according the same treatment to the other.

Till the eighties, reading short stories was a desirable pastime. Later, time became scarce. While the fast pace of life and competition account for this, the TV medium has led to the birth of a concept that regards viewing as easier than listening. TV, of course, is more effective in popularizing science than the print medium. But people today, unwilling to tax the brain, are inclined to watch meaningless serials and film miscellany. Newspapers too are publishing such features.

That section for which writers are writing short stories do not read them and cannot due to illiteracy. Today's story is starved of readership. Very good anthologies and collections are coming into the market but the takers are few.

It looks as though stories of the future will reach listeners through CDs. Are we returning to the oral tradition?

### **Glossary**

**Rambha** is a dancer in Indra's court and a metaphor for beauty.

(Courtesy: **Rachana**, June 2006).

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