

Ghulam Abbas' Short Stories a Paradigm Of Socio-Realistic Fiction

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BRIEF BIO:

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ABSTRACT: *Taking up the English translation of short stories written by the famous author, Ghulam Abbas, this paper investigates and debates the presence of socio-realism in his work. A detailed analysis is carried out to observe and explore the modeling of characters and situations by the author in the form of entertaining as well as educating stories. The presentation of South Asian culture, the writer's concern with and close observation of the life of a common man of a third world country, everyday concerns of food, clothing, shelter, religious obligations and relations are issues under the literary microscope here. The paper argues that the tone that is applied in this work is not dogmatic, philosophic, metaphoric, romantic or symbolic but is natural, realistic and simple, serving as a social comment, making his stories apt portrayal of socio-realism in both form and diction.*

Ghulam Abbas' Short Stories A Paradigm Of Socio-Realistic Fiction

Ghulam Abbas, a famous Urdu writer of sub-continent, displays his craft in the genre of short stories in a commendable manner. This paper explores whether his short stories given in "*The Women's Quarter and Other Stories from Pakistan*," which are a depiction of sub-continental cultural flavor, qualify as works of socio-realistic fiction or not. The presentation of reality and truth about life without the interference of one's personal opinion exhibits the essence of the vast phenomenon of socio-realism.

Social realism also referred to as socio-realism is defined in the Oxford dictionary in these words, "the realistic depiction in art of contemporary life, as a means of social or political comment." So any text can come within the jurisdiction of socio-realism if it presents contemporary life in a realistic manner and serves to expose the social condition of the time. Another description of socio-realism is given in Alison Lee's essay, "Realism and its Discontents," in these words that, it is to portray "things as they really are, in the sense of portraying objectively and concretely the observable details of actual life" (Lee, 1990). Hence, the main essence of socio-realism is present in these key words,

a) Real life

b) Details

c) Objectivity.

An attempt will be made in this paper to weigh Abbas' short stories in the scale of these fundamental aspects of socio-realism in order to ascertain that to what extent his texts qualify as works of socio-realistic fiction.

a) Beginning with the presentation of '**real life**', an in-depth reading of his stories, exhibits exact manifestation of 'real life' in them, whether it is a portrayal of village or city life. His stories are full of beautifully realistic descriptions, as in his story, "*The Red Rose*" the following description of sub-continental village is present, "It was a typical Punjabi village with mud houses, a surrounding wall plastered with dung cakes, and an uneven dirt road snaking through the middle and passing in front of practically every house" (Abbas, 2000).

The high level of intricate detail coupled with its pictorial quality delineated here, is an apt example of presentation of real life. The same observable details are there when it is a description of some city in the short story, "Bombay Wala,"

"Every house had a radio and at noon, when the listeners' request program got on the air, you could stand in front of any resident to listen without interruption to the latest popular song from the movies." (Abbas, 2000)

On close analysis one encounters a number of instances in Abbas' texts that can be quoted as examples where he draws a realistic picture in front of the reader's eye. The characteristic that renders his descriptions realistic is the presence of minute details, representative of actual life to the letter, in those descriptions. One can even visualize oneself in the position of the narrator of "Bombay Wala," actually listening to the 'latest popular song from the movies.'

A direct correspondence between, life and art is demanded from the work of art by Socio-realism. Abbas' ideas, as projected through his stories, are also found to assert and emphasize on this very point. Explaining the conception governing his art of writing short stories, Abbas says, "Write what you have observed or something you have seen. ... all you need to do is to write it out exactly as you have seen and felt it. That is all there is to the short story." (Hasan, 2000). He has not adopted any complex manner of diction and depiction; instead he has beautified his art by using the simplest way, i.e. simple diction, every day issues, characters in their everyday life. The topics under discussion in Abbas' fiction are neither sexual, political, psychological nor does he develop a prophetic style. His topics are from everyday life, as he himself says that he picks up his characters by closely observing them in their everyday life activities. He discusses these issues with minute details in a light manner. In the realm of realism many writers have made their name and won fame. Charles Dickens is a writer familiar to everyone having even the slightest interest and love for literature. Dickens is relevant here as his fame also rests, among other things, on his ability to portray real life. The famous critic, Leavis praises this ability of his, with reference to the novel *Hard Times*, in these words,

"...the astonishing and irresistible richness of life that characterizes the book everywhere. It meets us everywhere unstrained and natural, in the prose. Out of such prose a great variety of presentations can arise congenially with equal vividness. There they are unquestionably "real" (Bilan, 1979)

To say the same for Abbas would not be wrong. The 'unquestionably real' presentations arising from his short stories are quite obvious to the inquisitive mind, as has already been illustrated before.

b) As far as **details of life** are concerned, Abbas' fiction abounds in explicit details of situation and characters and all these details combine to form a narration that qualifies as realistic representation of everyday life. In the preface of the book, "The Women's Quarter and Other Stories from Pakistan," Hasan quotes Abbas saying, "I always pay equal attention to details because they must remain true to life. Sometimes a minor detail which rings false can destroy the entire effect of a story, just as a false note can mar an otherwise perfect musical composition" (Hasan, 2000). His particularity regarding presentation of details is clear from the above words. Abbas' magic of socio realism is such that the events actually seem to happen before the reader's eye owing to the masterly skill used in their description and the use of minutest possible details. The following example from the story, "The Women's Quarter" supports this thesis, "The sound of huge cast-iron cooking pots being readied for the feast and the smell of clarified butter being heated for the curries had attracted beggars and stray dogs from miles around" (Abbas, 2000). The short stories contain scores of such descriptions where the attention to detail enlivens the auditory as well as visual senses of the reader, transporting him to the realm of the story, through the channel of active imagination.

Where the details of life are portrayed by Abbas in his stories there the minutest details concerning custom, habits and the psychology of people are also given in a simple and realistic way. Although such detail is present in the stories yet the art of the author never crosses the border of realism to fall into the genre of pedagogical cultural or psychological study. The story, "The Red Rose" also contains such details of customs and habits which show that the stories are imbued with socio realism,

"The women from villages in the area had come in groups. They were of all ages. There were new brides in red shalwars with silver-rimmed dupattas, hennaed hands, antimony-lined eyes and full lips which had turned orange because of the walnut bark with which they had cleaned their teeth white. There were women in their late thirties, tall and spare, wearing thick muslin shirts, light-blue coarse cotton shalwars, their heads and breasts covered with white cotton stoles, walking straight, looking neither left nor right, a habit that had become second nature to them because of the loads they carried on their heads, from sacks of grain to water pitchers". (Abbas, 2000)

The constant rebuking of the father by the son against the habit of drinking, in 'The Bottle' and finally the description of the son falling for the very thing at the slightest instigation with the awakening of his carnal desires by viewing a romantic scene of a couple at mid-night is the deepest insight into the psychology of human beings who have the hidden desires for the evils that they hate and debate about.

c) Merriam Webster dictionary defines **Objectivity** in these words, “expressing or dealing with facts or conditions as perceived without distortion by personal feelings, prejudices, or interpretations” (Merriam Webster) Objectivity and presentation of issues as they really are without authorial interjection and intervention is very important for any text to be considered realistic.

George Becker further explores the objectivity in realist texts as, “The Realists believed that perception could be pure, and that the facts in a novel should speak for themselves without authorial commentary” (Becker, 1985). Abbas relates the details in a completely detached manner. He does not lead the reader to a certain path, neither does he put forward any sermons preaching moral dogmas or present guidelines by passing judgments about characters. His characters are free as he does not set any framework for them to bind them according to his own choice as an omniscient narrator.

Active authorial intervention in a literary work of art was in vogue during the time of the famous writer Jane Austen. A brief comparison of the styles of Abbas and Austen will assist in clarifying Abbas' stance on objectivity. In spite of the fact that both authors give descriptions of the characters before setting them into the story, the difference is in the manner their characters are allowed to move in the story. Austen sets stringent boundaries and her characters are never allowed to break free. Abbas never imposes own ideas on his characters to restrict them. His characters are the figures found in everyday life, their dealing with others and the ongoing events of their lives are the factors that move the story freely. The characters are not restricted to fixed roles. Hasan quotes Abbas in the preface, “I have no control over this person, nor do I use him to express my own opinions. In fact, I listen to him without appearing to intrude. I watch what he does, hear what he says, which is how, gradually, I begin to understand his temperament. Only thus a short story writer portrays a character.” (Hasan, 2000)

For example Abbas doesn't criticize the behavior of people when the city was established around the prostitutes' quarter, in “*The Women's Quarter*.” Abbas neither comments upon the influence of such women on society nor satirizes the behavior of people but by telling the story as it really could be, he leaves the reader to decide for himself. Khalid Hasan speaks on this quality of his in his preface in these words, “He watches life closely, yet remains detached. He does not make overt moral judgments but leaves his readers with clear moral options”. (Hasan, 2000)

Abbas also does not directly comment upon the economic pressures on the common man of today's world himself but this is evident from the situation of the characters that how are they pressed under this economic slab. “*Marble Slab*” and “*A Place to Live*” are the stories where the circumstances in the character's lives, speak loudly about this issue. As a detached author, Abbas himself justifies his characterization, “I must have a living character in mind before I can start writing a story, a character made of flesh and blood. I do not create that character in my mind; I always find one in real life” (Abbas, 2000). His words speak strongly for his objectivity in characterization. The protagonist in “*A Man for All Seasons*” is a character, who has versatility but he maintains the sanctity and individuality of every mask he wears within this diversity, with great beauty. This is the art of the storyteller that in every role he takes up, he emerges successful in its get up, language, and environment coupled with a pinging indirect comment on society.

George Eliot also admires this very concept of Realism and presents it as one of the devices used in her fiction, “...my strongest effort is to avoid any such arbitrary picture, and to give a faithful account of men and things as they have mirrored themselves in my mind. The mirror is doubtless defective; the outline will sometimes be disturbed, the reflection faint or confused; but I feel as much bound to tell you as precisely as I can what that reflection is, as if it were in the witness box narrating my experience on oath” (Eliot, 2010)

Carol Johnson quotes Flaubert in her book, “The artist ought to be in his work like God in creation, invisible and omnipotent. He should be felt everywhere (sic) but not seen. Art ought, moreover, to rise above personal feelings and nervous susceptibilities” (Johnson, 1980). His art certainly rises above his personal ideas, as it is evident from his own comments on his writing and by studying his characterization. His art is neither dogmatic nor is political or religious in fact it is a very projection of real social life. Abbas' characterization is realistic, as he doesn't stigmatize his characters as black or white; instead he keeps them in normal social environment as human beings in a society usually are having the tints of both good and bad within them.

Abbas' short story, “*The Girl with the Golden Hair*” is another example that can be quoted in this context. The failure in achieving one's ideals after working hard, condition of the people who are ready to sacrifice, to do social service and confront a situation where every one is trying to get one's own means, where all the hopes are crushed and finally the couple who came from a foreign country to serve the nation ends up by opening a dancing school, leaves the reader to ponder amazingly on the social reality portrayed in very simple and straight forward manner and without any authorial intervention. One such excerpt from the story is,

“Its rear wall had been disfigured by wet dung cakes slapped across the third floor, but it was so new that the paint hadn't quite dried yet. ‘London School of Ballroom Dancing’, it proclaimed in bold letters. Rosemary's face fell, but because of the poor light and his euphoric state of mind, Fazal did not notice anything. ‘To serve the arts is also to serve the nation, he said’”. (Abbas 143).

Summarizing this point, it can be said that the necessary elements of objectivity and impersonality which are hailed as the hallmarks of realistic fiction, are a part of Abbas' work. To quote Alison again "a correlative of objectivity and impersonality is the Realist concern with documentation and fact" (Lee, 1990).

True representation of the lower classes is another important aspect of socio-realism. The Goncourt brothers talk about this in the preface to *Germinie Lacerteux*, and they write there, "Living in the nineteenth century, in a time of universal suffrage, democracy and liberalism, we asked ourselves whether what we called 'the lower classes' did not have a right to the novel" (Goncourt, 1984). Alison herself says that Realism includes, "not only the drawing room, but also the ordinary, the ugly and the low" (Lee, 1990). Certainly Abbas never makes the issues of kings and queens, nor of political leaders or characters with deep psychological or emotional concerns, the material for his stories. The ground reality is that a common man in a third world country does not have time to think about that. He is so suppressed by his own circumstances that he revolves in the same circle of society, rituals, hopes and disillusionments and the deep-rooted theories cannot be applied on his character study. Khalid Hasan in the introduction of the book writes,

"Abbas as a writer was highly sensitive to the small every day concerns that make up so much of life. He wrote about ordinary people, making them come alive. He understood their fears, anxieties and frustrations, as well as the little joys, which constitute life for most of us" (Hasan, 2000).

The frustration of building a house in "*A Place to Live*" that becomes the greatest desire and desperation of a low paid government employ is an example that shows the genuine concerns of the common man. The deceit of the clever contractors, the problems that he had to face, the selling of the wife's gold jewelry and the weak structure of the house built and finally the hopes of living in that very house, are crushed, and the house is sold out, are the issues and problems highlighted in the story which are again not uncommon in the society for the lower and middle class strata. But Abbas shows that the magnitude of burdens and troubles, keep a tired and exhausted common man always prepared for action willy-nilly. These consoling words of the repenting protagonist are very telling in this regard, "I have gained enough experience now and will be careful next time. I will build a house, which will be fault-free and no matter how much money I am offered, I will not rent it out. We will live there ourselves. After all, the girls are growing up and they should have rooms of their own"(Abbas,2000).

"*The Marble Slab*" is another such story that takes up the tale of a low paid clerk. His desires, meager entertainment throughout his life, and the final culmination in the form of his death is an apt representation of the life of a common man living in the sub-continent. Abbas not only describes the physique, clothing and style of his characters but also focuses on their desires, hopes and frustrations with give realistic touch to his work. An excerpt from the story is given here for better comprehension of this point,

"Groups of clerks of all kind and descriptions had begun to emerge from the other offices: typists, record keepers, dispatchers, head clerks, superintendents, some more important and better paid than others. Their clothes reflected their particular station in life, but certain types stood out. There were the cyclists in short-sleeved shirts and khaki shorts, wearing sandals on their bare feet, sun-hats, dark glasses and cheap watches. Or rotund babus, their umbrellas open to protect them from the sun, Indian cheroots dangling from their lips, thick wads of files under their arms which they were taking home in the hope that what they had failed to untangle at work would be revealed to them in more private surroundings. It was another matter that once they were at home, they got so caught up in family chores that the files had to be brought back next day, unread and untangled". (Abbas 103)

Hasan comments on Abbas' temperament that, "He had a special empathy for the small man, the underpaid clerk who dreams of becoming the head of his section but is overlooked, and retires and dies as quietly as he had lived, unnoticed, unremembered" (Hasan, 2000). "*The Over Coat*" is another good example of the very fact that realistic narration takes up the concerns of a common man. How the over coat hides the poverty and depravity of the poor man and how necessary it is, for a man to keep up appearances in front of the society and how easily the society gets impressed with outward show without ever trying to look into the heart of man are all the issues that are addressed in this highly acclaimed work of fiction. The story, '*The Moviegoer*' aptly displays a deep-rooted psychology of the pretentious upper class of an underdeveloped country where these people are not moved by the every day exhibition of poverty around them, but love to make a show of charity, sensitivity and kind-heartedness in front of their company.

Realist theorists are found insist that the aim of art is to instruct. "The morality of the author is, therefore, highly important, and it is for this reason that the realists often wrote, and still write, biographical criticism as well as rules for, and criticism of, authors' moral virtues. The essential equation is that "good" men will produce "good" art." (Lee 13). Therefore, it is established through this criticism that the morality of the author and his art is really important as far as Realism is concerned. Realist artists talk about good men producing good art but that attitude is neither propagandist nor dogmatic. Although, the aim of a realist artist is not to preach but his art can be a medium of instruction. Abbas is not a moralistic yet his characterization has a move towards goodness and his art never burdens the reader by opening up the wounds of the society. Dealing

with the lower strata of society and taking up the themes regarding the place and identity of prostitutes, he never lays bare the unethical, immoral and evil face of the society. However, the conflict between good and evil, the misdeeds done under the misconception of the very deeds as being moral, is frequently targeted. This is also a very important factor in less educated societies, where religious myths are needed to support self-created beliefs. *'The Red Rose'* highlights the religious beliefs, not unfamiliar to the sub-continental culture, attributing the success of every day phenomenon and fulfillment of desires to the blessings of saints. The 'urs' (death anniversary) of the 'pir' (the religious preacher) is an important ceremonious occasion in the village life. The underlying irony, in the portrayal of the event, reveals itself where under the very shadow of this religious activity, some unethical and immoral activities take shape.

The same irony lies in the image of the group of people having 'Marijuana' and the ironical rendering of the song by these so-called 'Men of God' in the very story. This realistic portrayal of the subversion of moral standards under the disguise of religion is an important element in the sub-continental psychology which is an outcome of ignorance, illiteracy and fanaticism and which manifests itself in the worst form. But in the portrayal of these subverted moralities, Abbas' tone is not dogmatic, he mentions all this in a light mood.

The ribbons tied to the trees of the shrine, festivity, gathering of people, and all its relevant images are also mentioned in a realistic fashion. Ironically inauguration by an event associated with the religious passions, of a vicinity that is being constructed for immoral activities of the prostitutes in *'The Women's Quarter'* which finally becomes the center of activity of the society which shunned this community earlier, tells about the weak moral standards of the society. The so-called moralistic society ironically establishes the hub of its very business of life, around the locality of exiled prostitutes, which, they thought, will corrupt the decent class. And the 'center' emerges around the 'marginalized' class.

According to Lee, "Art develops, then, the status of religion, and the artist becomes a moral guide. This is certainly one of the several aspects of realism which has intruded into the twentieth century" (Lee, 1990) In "*A Gentleman of the Old School*" where Haji Sahib after many attempts, finally succeeds to preach the famous prostitute Gul to abandon the bad ways and after some years her sister too wishes the same, tells about the never failing attempts of goodness to show signs of light to the consciences that are alive. 'My daughters think about the lives you are leading. Day and night you are shoved about and used by lecherous men of all descriptions....My daughters, this house of sin where you are, is not for you; you belong to the four walls of the room'(Abbas 85).

The issue of ethical world being constantly hampered by the unethical also emerges not as a dogmatic but as an issue that is confronted by man every day which makes these short stories not only a historical document of only sub-continental culture but also a realistic fictional representation of universal human concerns. The unethical beating of the *'Bombay Wala'* to reserve and maintain the left over of the ethical world relates the same issue. The constant attempts of the society to dismay the protagonist from the right path in *'A Gentleman of the Old School'* and the pressures of 'the powerful of the society,' being ironically aggrandized by the same strong ones on Bilqis, to test her moral scruples is, its blatant example. Lee speaks about Leavis that, "Leavis believes in the transcendental value of literature as a moral teacher and therefore, in a common sense of what life, value, and morality mean" (Lee, 2000).

These stories never show the war of good and evil as a backdrop, finally achieving poetic justice, rewarding the good and punishing the evil, as Elizabethan tragedy does. Neither does the plot has a beginning, middle and an end, describing the fall as a consequence of Hamartia, a moral error and end up with catharsis as Greek tragedy does. Here, the issue of good and bad does not take up the story of a single life, yet it takes a transcendental value as a fact encompassing the whole life of human beings, overshadowing their whole self. The final request of Gul's sister from Haji Sahib in *A Gentleman of the Old School* to give her protection from the evil world and lead her towards righteousness, shows the victory of good but with it, the difficulties faced by Haji Sahib to marry Bilqis and provide her a healthy and clean life meet failure again and again, which shows that this conflict of good and evil is not for a single story extracted from life, instead it is a faithful representation of life itself having this conflict as its inherent, on going factor.

Another factor required to justify any text as a socio-realist one is the unhampered **Linking up of the episodes and essential interdependence of the characters**. The novel should not be a manipulated chain of events. It cannot take up detached characters or present far fetched fairy tale like stories, away from life. It is important to note here that non of Abbas' character is a separate individual aloof from society and maintaining its own space, yet they have an essential role in society their spaces somehow intermingle with the spaces of other characters i.e. every character directly or indirectly has some role or influence in the life or story of others they are interdependent and consequently develop a homogenous group. This homogeneity is an important factor in Realism. Abbas' fiction doesn't tell the story of one or two clearly designed, well-made characters, instead it takes up the activity of a whole society as a living entity. We never meet Abbas as an omniscient narrator in his fiction rather events take shape in front of us in a linked chain as naturally, as it happens in life.

Taking into account, Abbas' fiction, one can see the interplay of connections and continuities. All of the society is shown as a connected entity. As it has been said before, none of his characters is a separate individual, self-sufficient without depending on any one. Instead, every one depends on others. In the room with the blue light, the man depends on the prostitute, for sharing his emotions, his strong feelings for his wife, and finally giving vent to his feelings of love even after realizing that she was not faithful to him. The prostitute on the other hand gets inspired by the warmth and protection that a loving husband can give. She is also illuminated by the homely feeling; she gets by sharing with him the moments of being fictitious husband and wife just for two days.

W.L.Courtney writes in a chapter on "Realist Drama," "Realism means above all else a devotion to the bare and explicit truth of human life and human character, and the avoidance of all romantic or poetic devices for obscuring the main issues" (Courtney, 1918). In the story "Act of Charity", the widow, instead of making a dramatic and sentimental speech on the character of woman and her forbearance and patience on the question of second marriage, simply lowers her head, thus showing the reality, the difficulties of a widow in a realistic way instead of making her stand on a high pedestal of sacrifice and making her a character far from real life.

The portrayal of wife, by the loving husband is not like that of a romantic poet, making the beloved an ideal, yet he accepts the fact that she cooked bad 'rotis'. *The Room with the Blue Light*. The feminine characters are not painted with romantic details of an ideal world. The setting, characters, and diction are close to reality and are not metaphoric or flowery.

Summarizing the paper it can be concluded that Abbas primarily deals with the reality of common man and the issues of his life. His own comment in this regard is very telling as he says, "I borrow all my raw material from life." (Hasan, 2000) His art neither matches the larger than life image of the Greek heroes nor does it takes up the details of the beauties of a romantic beloved of the ideal world. It is close to life, society and common man. The language also as it deals with the common concerns, is filled with every day expressions without the artificiality and thus fits completely into the framework of a socio-realistic text.

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