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Analyzing the Role of Literature in Human Making through Select Short Stories

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Abstract

Literature has long served as a vital force in shaping human consciousness, fostering ethical awareness, and cultivating empathy. This paper examines the concept of human making—the moral, emotional, and intellectual developments of individuals—through a humanist analysis of select Indian short stories. The stories examined include Premchand's Deliverance and The Holy Panchayat, Omprakash Valmiki's Joothan, Ismat Chughtai's Kallu, Bhisham Sahni's Dinner for the Boss, Rajinder Singh Bedi's Lajwanti, Mulk Raj Anand's Parrot in the Cage, and Saadat Hasan Manto's The Dog of Tetwal. These narratives, grounded in the lived realities of caste discrimination, gender marginalization, communal tension, and social hypocrisy, become powerful mediums for ethical reflection and social critique. Through their portrayal of suffering, injustice, resistance, and hope, the stories not only highlight the dehumanizing forces within society but also reveal literature's potential to restore dignity, agency, and compassion. This paper argues that such fiction serves as a transformative space, awakening readers to the shared humanity that binds us and contributing to the ongoing process of human making in a fractured world.

Keywords: Humanism, Human Making, Indian Short Stories, Ethics, Empathy, Social Justice, Caste, Gender, Literature and Society, Moral Development, Narrative Transformation.

The notion of human making involves the cultivation of moral, emotional, and social sensibilities that define what it means to be truly human. Rooted in the philosophy of humanism, this concept sees individuals as capable of empathy, justice, and transformation. Literature, especially socially engaged fiction, offers a unique space for such development by confronting readers with uncomfortable truths and inviting ethical introspection. In the Indian context, short stories by writers such as Premchand, Omprakash Valmiki, Ismat Chughtai, Bhisham Sahni, Saadat Hasan Manto, and Rajinder Singh Bedi explore themes of caste, gender, communalism, and social exclusion. These narratives do not merely entertain, but they also provoke, question, and humanize. Through literary analysis, this paper demonstrates how these stories serve as instruments of human making by revealing the mechanisms of dehumanization and imagining paths to dignity and justice. Literature serves as a significant tool of human making in society. Humanism, in both philosophical and literary terms, advocates for the inherent dignity of all individuals. Literature grounded in humanism encourages readers to reflect on their ethical responsibilities toward others, particularly the marginalized.

To begin with, Premchand's **Deliverance** offers a harrowing portrayal of caste-based oppression and an acceptance of oppressiveness by the oppressed or the lower caste. The story revolves around Dukhi, an untouchable who dies while waiting to meet the Brahmin priest. The priest's indifference to Dukhi's suffering and his eventual disposal of the corpse like garbage exposes the brutal dehumanization of Dalits in traditional society. Premchand writes about what happens when no one reaches to claim Dukhi's body and when it starts stinking:

> Somehow or other, they got through the night. But even in the morning, no tanner came. They could still hear the wailing of the women. The stench was beginning to spread quite a bit.
>
> Panditji got out a rope. He made a noose and managed to get it over the dead man's feet and drew it tight. Morning mist still clouded the air. Panditji grabbed the rope and began to drag it, and he dragged it until it was out the village. When he got back home he bathed immediately, read out prayers to Durga for purification and sprinkled Ganges water around the house.
>
> Out there in the field the jackals and kites, dogs and crows were picking at Dukhi's body. This was the reward of a whole life of devotion, service and faith. (Premchand 25)

Literature here acts as witness and moral judge. Dukhi is not portrayed as a passive victim but as a symbol of systemic injustice. The story invites the reader to confront the inhumanity embedded in caste ideology and questions the moral legitimacy of a society that normalises such cruelty.

On the other hand, Premchand's **The Holy Panchayat** exemplifies the process of human making by foregrounding the ethical transformation of individuals when confronted with the responsibility of justice. The narrative, centered on Algu Choudhary and Jumman Sheikh, dramatizes the tension between personal loyalty and moral obligation. When Jumman's aunt approaches the village panchayat after being wronged, Algu, despite being Jumman's closest friend, delivers an impartial verdict in her favour, thereby asserting the primacy of justice over personal ties. Later, when Alagu himself becomes embroiled in a dispute, Jumman, placed in the position of panch, transcends resentment and pronounces a fair judgment. Premchand underscores this transformation through the dictum "Panch Parmeshwar hai" (the panch is equivalent to God, Premchand 59), suggesting that the act of judgment elevates the individual beyond subjective interests into the realm of universal ethics. Once Jumman Shekh's Aunt also briefs the role of a punch as she says before her case before the Punchayat, 'No one will turn his back to justice for the sake of a friendship. God resides in the heart of a punch. They speak in God's voice' (Premchand 59). Through this moral trajectory, Holy Panchayat illustrates how literature functions as a medium of human making: it shapes the reader's understanding of justice, fairness, and moral responsibility as foundational principles of social life.

While Premchand's Deliverance exposes the structural inhumanity of caste through the tragic figure of Dukhi, Omprakash Valmiki's **Joothan** extends this critique by shifting the focus from fictional representation to lived experience, thereby revealing how caste humiliation permeates everyday life and identity formation. Omprakash Valmiki's Joothan is an autobiographical narrative that blurs the line between fiction and personal testimony. It recounts

Valmiki's lived experience of untouchability, poverty, humiliation and caste based exploitation of a student in an educational institution. The opening of the narrative provides a clear description of the geographical landscape and the environment where Valmiki spent his childhood:

> Our house was adjacent to Chandrabhan Taga's gher or cowshed. Next to it lived the families of Muslim weavers. Right in front of Chandrabhan Taga's gher was a little johri, a pond, which had created a sort of partition between the Chuhra's dwellings and the village. The name of the johri was Dabbowali. It is hard to say how it got the name of Dabbowali. Perhaps because its shape was that of a big pit. On one side of the pit were the high walls of the brick homes of the Tagas. At a right angle to these were the clay walls of the two or three homes of the Jhinwars. After these there were more homes of the Tagas.
>
> On the edges of the pond were the homes of the Chuhras. All the women of the village, young girls, older women, even newly-married brides, would sit in the open space behind these homes at the edges of the pond to take a shit. Not just under the cover of darkness but even in daylight. The purdah-observing Tyagi women, their faces covered with their saris, shawls around their shoulders, found relief in this open-air latrine. They sat on Dabbowali's shores without worrying about decency, exposing their private parts. All the quarrels of the village would be discussed in the shape of a Round Table conference at this same spot. There was muck strewn everywhere. The stench was so overpowering that one would choke within a minute. The pigs wandering in narrow lanes, naked children, dogs, daily fights, this was the environment of my childhood. If the people who call the caste system an ideal social arrangement had to live in this environment for a day or two, they would change their mind. (Valmiki 28)

The title i.e. Joothan, refers to leftover food from upper castes that symbolizes the deep internalization of caste hierarchy. Valmiki presents the casteist bent of mind of a headmaster through the character of Kaliram, who asks for his caste as he had been called to the headmaster's room and assigns a task accordingly:

> 'All right… See that teak tree there? Go. Climb that tree. Break some twigs and make a broom. And sweep the whole school clean as mirror. It is after all, your family occupation. Go… go get to it.'
>
> Obeying Headmaster's orders, I cleaned all the rooms and the verandahs. Just as I was about to finish, he came to me and said, 'After you have swept the rooms, go and sweep the playground.'
>
> The playground was way larger than my small physique could handle and in cleaning it my back began to ache. My face was covered with dust. Dust had gone inside my mouth. The other children in my class were studying and I was sweeping. Headmaster was sitting in his room and watching me. I was not even allowed to get a drink of water. I swept the whole day. I had never done so much work, being the pampered one among my brothers. (Valmiki 32)

This continued not only on the second and third day but to the fourth day also as he screamed after searching him in the class 'Go sweep the whole playground… otherwise I will shove chillies up your arse and you out of the school' (Valmiki 32) Being scared Valmiki is forced to sweep where he was supposed to read. By sharing these lived realities, Valmiki compels the reader to recognise the prejudice, fear, and violence that caste inflicts in educational institutions that were supposed to uphold the constitutional spirit of equality and fraternity. Unlike Deliverance, which adopts a third-person voice, Joothan is direct, angry, and resistant. It demands not pity but recognition and change. Both texts show literature as a process of reclaiming voice and dignity—key to human making.

Building on Valmiki's personal testimony of social exclusion and caste oppression, Ismat Chughtai's **Kallu** explores how hierarchies of class and gender intertwine with caste oppression, emphasizing how systemic exploitation sustains inequality while simultaneously calling for empathy and recognition of human dignity. Kallu is a powerful narrative that interrogates issues of class, gender, servitude, and the fragile boundaries of morality in everyday life. The story revolves around Kallu, a servant boy who is brought into the household as a domestic helper and grows up within the family's sphere. His relationship with the family's women—particularly their contradictory mixture of affection, control, and exploitation—reveals the unequal dynamics between masters and servants. On one hand, Kallu is treated like a dependent child, receiving care, food, and shelter. (Chugtai 39) On the other hand, he is always marked by his position as an outsider, a servant whose loyalty is taken for granted and whose dignity can be easily compromised.

From the perspective of human making, Kallu illuminates several moral lessons. First, it critiques the hypocrisy of a society where empathy coexists with domination—showing how benevolence can still be tainted by hierarchy and power. This duality forces readers to confront the uncomfortable truth that care without equality is incomplete, and that true humanity requires recognition of dignity irrespective of class or position. Second, Kallu's story foregrounds the ethical dilemma of dependency: his identity is shaped not on his terms, but through the household that both nurtures and exploits him. In this way, Chughtai compels readers to question the structures of servitude and the conditions under which people are denied autonomy. Finally, by giving voice and presence to a servant figure who would ordinarily remain invisible in literature, Chughtai restores subjectivity to the marginalized, reinforcing the humanist ideal that every life deserves acknowledgement and respect. Thus, Kallu contributes to human making by sensitizing readers to the moral contradictions of social relations, challenging them to move beyond token care or hierarchical sympathy, and urging the recognition of equality and dignity as the true markers of humanity.

In a similar vein, Bhisham Sahni's **Dinner for the Boss** interrogates class and power relations within an urban, modern setting, where characters such as Shyamnath and his old mother dramatize the tension between ambition and moral responsibility, thus underlining that human worth cannot be reduced to social status or material gain. It exemplifies the process of humanisation by exposing the moral compromises and loss of dignity that accompany middle-class aspirations for status. The protagonist, Mr. Shyamnath, anxiously prepares to host a dinner for his English superior, hoping to gain favour and professional advancement. In this pursuit, he compels his old mother, who embodies simplicity, tradition, and cultural authenticity remain

hidden, as her rustic manners and speech do not fit the image of sophistication he wishes to project. (Sahni 55) The mother's quiet presence in the background contrasts with the artificial pretensions of her son, revealing a tension between genuine humanity rooted in dignity and affection, and a shallow desire for approval from authority. The boss, for whom the elaborate performance is staged, remains largely indifferent, underscoring the futility of such servile efforts. Through this ironic dynamic, Sahni critiques not only the colonial hangover and class anxiety of urban society but also the erosion of human values when self-respect is sacrificed for prestige. From the perspective of human making, the story asserts that true humanity does not lie in mimicry or servility but in affirming dignity, authenticity, and cultural integrity. By juxtaposing Shyamnath's vanity with the mother's silent resilience and the boss's indifference, Dinner for the Boss illustrates how literature reshapes ethical consciousness, teaching that the foundations of human life rest on respect, sincerity, and equality rather than empty social performance.

Extending this concern with social morality, Rajinder Singh Bedi's **Lajwanti** turns to the Partition to reveal the hypocrisies of a patriarchal society that preaches compassion and rehabilitation but fails to honour the dignity of women like Lajwanti, thereby questioning the very foundations of human values in times of crisis. Lajwanti is one of the most poignant Partition narratives in Indian literature, and its central concern is the gendered dimension of violence during Partition and the hypocrisy of a society that publicly advocates for women's rehabilitation but privately denies them dignity. The story revolves around Lajwanti, a woman abducted during the communal violence of 1947, and her husband Sunder Lal, who actively participates in a campaign aimed at restoring abducted women to their families. In public forums, Sunder Lal speaks passionately about compassion, forgiveness, and the necessity of embracing the women who return, but when his wife Lajwanti is restored to him, he falters. His inability to reconcile his ideals with his prejudices captures the essence of Bedi's critique: that the rhetoric of honour, morality, and community often fails when tested against deep-rooted patriarchal attitudes. (Bedi 69)

The central concern of the story is therefore not merely the physical violence of Partition, but the social violence perpetuated afterwards, where women like Lajwanti are further victimized through stigma and rejection. Bedi lays bare the paradox of Indian society in the aftermath of Partition: while the state and community leaders encouraged families to welcome back abducted women, many men continued to see them as "tainted" and unworthy of full acceptance. In this way, Lajwanti questions the patriarchal construction of a woman's worth in terms of purity and chastity, exposing how honour is tied not to individual dignity but to collective male pride.

Through the figure of Lajwanti, Bedi emphasizes the silenced suffering of women, who bore the double burden of Partition's violence—first through abduction and assault, and then through exclusion and suspicion in their own homes. Lajwanti's character does not voice anger or bitterness; her silence itself becomes symbolic of the countless women whose trauma remained unacknowledged in the public memory of Partition. Her story highlights the deeper tragedy that even when women were "recovered," they were rarely restored to equal status or genuine belonging.

At the same time, Sunder Lal's character embodies the contradictions of post-Partition masculinity. His public activism portrays him as a progressive man, but his private hesitation reveals the limitations of rhetoric when tested against ingrained patriarchal norms. This contradiction underscores the hypocrisy at the heart of society's rehabilitation campaigns, where compassion often remained an abstract slogan rather than a lived moral principle. By exposing this gap, Bedi calls into question the sincerity of social reform and emphasizes the need for a genuine transformation in attitudes toward women.

Ultimately, the central concern of Lajwanti lies in its critique of patriarchal hypocrisy and the denial of women's dignity in the aftermath of Partition. The story shifts the discourse of Partition away from political borders and nationalist narratives, centring instead on the intimate, personal costs borne disproportionately by women. Bedi suggests that the true measure of humanity lies not in speeches or campaigns but in the everyday ability to accept, respect, and restore dignity to those who have suffered. In doing so, Lajwanti becomes not only a Partition story but also a timeless commentary on gender, morality, and the failure of society to uphold its ideals.

In contrast to Bedi's focus on human hypocrisy during Partition, Mulk Raj Anand's **The Parrot in the Cage** employs allegory to dramatize displacement and survival, as Rukmani's journey from Lahore to Amritsar with her caged parrot reflects both the vulnerability and resilience of human beings caught in communal violence. The Parrot in the Cage offers a deeply moving account of Partition's human cost through the story of Rukmani, an old Hindu woman who flees Lahore during the communal riots of 1947 with nothing but a caged parrot as her companion (Anand 43). The parrot is not only a pet but also a potent metaphor for Rukmani herself-fragile, displaced, and vulnerable, yet clinging to life and memory amidst chaos. Anand uses this symbolic parallel to foreground the themes of captivity, survival, and resilience in times of violence and uprooting. Rukmani's escape is enabled by the humanity of others: her Muslim friend Fatto, who risks her own safety by giving Rukmani a burqah to disguise herself and cross the border (Anand 44), and a kind gram stall keeper, who offers help to both the exhausted old woman and her pet bird outside Deputy Commissioner's Office in Amritsar (Anand 49). These acts of kindness amidst destruction illuminate the enduring capacity for compassion across religious and communal lines, suggesting that Partition, while marked by brutal violence, also bore witness to gestures of solidarity and friendship that defied the dominant narrative of hatred.

In terms of human making, Anand's story underscores that true humanity is revealed in acts of care for the vulnerable-whether for an elderly woman displaced by violence or a helpless bird dependent on human kindness. Rukmani's parrot symbolizes not only her precarious existence but also the broader plight of refugees who carried fragments of home with them across hostile borders. The intervention of Fatto emphasizes that compassion can transcend communal divides, challenging the rigid binaries of Hindu versus Muslim that Partition politics created. Similarly, the gram stall keeper's assistance highlights how ordinary individuals-those outside the corridors of power-often upheld the ethical responsibility to aid the suffering, embodying a quiet heroism that countered the cruelty of the times. In weaving together Rukmani's trauma with these humane gestures, Anand demonstrates how literature functions as a process of human making: it sharpens moral awareness, fosters empathy, and urges readers to value dignity, solidarity, and care as the foundation of ethical life.

Thus, the central force of The Parrot in the Cage lies not only in its depiction of Partition trauma but in its insistence that humanity endures through small but profound acts of kindness. By juxtaposing Rukmani's fragility with the resilience offered by Fatto, the gram stall keeper, and even the symbolic presence of the parrot, Anand crafts a story that affirms compassion and solidarity as essential to the making of a humane society.

This idea of Partition's dehumanizing consequences finds further resonance in Saadat Hasan Manto's **The Dog of Tetwal**, where the tragic fate of a stray dog caught between two hostile armies satirizes the futility of nationalistic hatred, ultimately exposing the fragility of human compassion in the face of political enmity. The Dog of Tetwal presents the absurdity and futility of human conflict through the lens of Partition violence and border disputes between India and Pakistan. Set in the border village of Tetwal in Kashmir, the story revolves around Indian and Pakistani soldiers who, rather than confronting each other directly, direct their aggression toward a stray dog that roams between their camps. Initially treated with curiosity, the dog becomes a site of projection for the soldiers' hostility: each side names the animal after its national leader and interprets its movements as a political allegiance. Eventually, the soldiers' rivalry culminates in the shooting of the innocent dog (Manto 179), a moment that crystallizes Manto's critique of nationalism, militarism, and the inhumanity bred by Partition.

In terms of human making, the story functions as a cautionary narrative, exposing how easily human beings can surrender moral responsibility under the sway of political ideology and blind hatred. The dog, an innocent creature without a national identity, becomes a mirror that reflects the absurdity of human divisions. His death highlights the dehumanization that arises when violence and nationalism replace compassion and ethical reasoning. Through this allegory, Manto compels readers to recognize the dangers of reducing life of humans or animals to symbols of political contest.

Moreover, the soldiers' treatment of the dog underscores the fragile line between humanity and cruelty. Their capacity for playfulness quickly degenerates into violence, illustrating how ordinary men, caught in a divisive political climate, may participate in inhuman acts without fully confronting their moral implications. The dog's lack of voice and helplessness parallels the condition of countless Partition victims: innocent, voiceless, and sacrificed to a conflict they neither created nor understood. In this sense, the narrative is not simply about a dog but about the erosion of empathy and the silencing of humanity in times of war.

Manto's story thus becomes central to the project of human making because it urges readers to confront the irrationality of hatred and the ethical necessity of compassion. By portraying the tragic death of a dog as more poignant than the political battle itself, Manto subverts dominant narratives of glory and nationalism. Instead, he emphasizes the moral bankruptcy of violence and insists that true humanity can only emerge when life, in all its forms, is valued above ideology. In doing so, The Dog of Tetwal becomes a powerful text of moral instruction, reminding readers that the preservation of empathy and dignity is essential to resisting the inhumanity of political and communal conflict.

These short stories by Premchand, Omprakash Valmiki, Ismat Chughtai, Bhisham Sahni, Rajinder Singh Bedi, Mulk Raj Anand, and Saadat Hasan Manto collectively illuminate

literature's role in the making of humanity by cultivating empathy, moral reflection, and social awareness. Premchand's Deliverance and Holy Panchayat expose the inhumanity of caste and class, while Valmiki's Joothan deepens this critique through the lived humiliation of Dalits, insisting on dignity as the foundation of human worth. Chughtai's Kallu and Sahni's Dinner for the Boss extend this moral inquiry to gender and class oppression, foregrounding integrity and ethical responsibility in both private and public life. Partition narratives such as Bedi's Lajwanti and Anand's The Parrot in the Cage highlight the human cost of violence and displacement, where figures like Lajwanti and Rukmani embody both trauma and resilience, with moments of solidarity, such as the kindness of Fatto and the gram stall keeper, restoring faith in shared humanity. Finally, Manto's The Dog of Tetwal starkly allegorizes the dehumanization of war, showing how blind hatred erases compassion even for a helpless creature. Taken together, these works affirm that being human is not a fixed condition but an ongoing ethical project of resisting injustice, recognizing vulnerability, and nurturing compassion. By confronting readers with the brutal realities of caste, class, gender, and communal violence, they simultaneously teach the values of empathy, justice, and solidarity that sustain the very idea of humanity. Ultimately, these stories remind us that literature does not merely mirror human frailty but actively participates in the unfinished task of becoming human.

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