GLOBALIZATION AND THE SHORT STORY

by Cyril Dabydeen

It was more than serendipity that brought me to the 7th International Conference on the Short Story in English (ICSS) in New Orleans, Louisiana, a few years ago with the theme of globalization. And with other Conferences hosted by the ICSS I still dwell on the notion of a greater sense of internationalism captured by the short story--as recently emphasized to me by a writerly colleague. Indeed the idea of globalization forces me to confront or confirm my own assumptions about the short story genre.

About the term "globalization" itself. In novelist Bharati Mukherjee's words it's because of how widespread the form is, and a story is interpreted differently by readers of different backgrounds. Indeed, the New Orleans Conference featured writers such as Clark Blaise, Margaret Atwood, and Robert Olen Butler among others from Europe, though it was mostly Americans who attended the three-day event.

A panel on Canadian literature I participated in was a highlight, as I was able to see Margaret Atwood close up in steamy New Orleans with the crescent-shaped southern Mississippi River and the distinctive French Quarter. This city is also known for stellar writers like Mark Twain, Anne Rice, Truman Capote, William Faulkner, and Tennessee Williams: "Don't you love those long rainy afternoons in New Orleans when an hour isn't an hour but a little piece of eternity dropped into your hand-and who knows what to do with it?" (*A Streetcar Named Desire*).

Inevitably I reflected on my own beginnings in the short story form—my reading of G.K Chesterton, Somerset Maugham, H.E. Bates, James Joyce; and West Indian writers like Sam Selvon and V.S. Naipaul closer to home. Later would come Malamud, Cheever, Faulkner, and a panoply of others like Chekhov and Guy de Maupassant (in translation). I also read Hugh Garner, Mavis Gallant, Alice Munro, Atwood--and Norman Levine and John Metcalf closer to Ottawa.

But how multifarious is the form when considering its morphology? Views focussed on sub-genres tied to narrative techniques. What emerged was that there are no constraints on form, but only endless possibilities. The term "slippage" suggested "enrichment" for one like Clark Blaise, a key figure in ICSS. Mexican-American Sandra Cisneros spoke about her own technique being analogous to the making of "a quilt....I begin with something personal." Other descriptions of the story like "metaphoric" and "a dream verbalized" came to me.

I've sometimes evoked Proust's sense of the ubiquitous unconscious in reading my own short story. And the short story is unlike a novella, which is "one continuous kind of breath" (Phillip Roth). Indeed, the story consists of short, artful narratives composed of images, tropes, figurations. Prose-poems and the story-cycle are also in the picture, as well as the long story's narrative being without boundaries; and that a genre is formal, but fiction is reality, if viewed as "something apocalyptic in a small cup" as I recall Pulitzer-Prize author Robert Olen Butler put it.

Cyril Dabydeen -- "a noted Canadian poet" (House of Commons, Ottawa), short story writer, novelist, and anthologist. Author of 20 books, he was a Pushcart Prize nominee via Prairie Schooner (USA). He won the Okanagan Fiction Prize, and the Canute A. Brodhurst Prize for fiction. His work has appeared in Oxford, Penguin, and Heinemann anthologies. He has done over 300 readings internationally. An Ottawa Poet Laureate Emeritus, he taught Writing at the University of Ottawa for many years.

Bharati Mukherjee (now passed on) reminded us of the rise in minority discourse without fancy image-making relevant to the subaltern critic's stance. Canadian scholar-writer W.H. New asked about whose reality matters, and about the authority of space; and, he noted that epic cycles are really integral to the genre. As for technique per se, focus is often put on the story's beginning, point of view, character and plot (life is "full of plots and no plots at all"). Interiority, closure, contexts of post-modernism, and the cyclical nature of the form are all relevant, and, as noted, "in the story's beginning is its end."

In context I heard about the "dark premonition of our own death" as echoed by one writer about the 9/11 tragedy in America a few years earlier. Ground zero symbolizes many things for and about Americans. Afro-American Professor Maurice Lee, long-serving ICSS Director, suggested that "creativity comes out of chaos." Others pointed to the failure of the imagination among those in the military bureaucracy…"to imagine other people's suffering."

My own take: the good short story combines the poet's sense of style and the novelist's sense of drama--with Margaret Atwood's words as a backdrop: "Poetry and fiction are the most complete forms of human consciousness on how we live on earth." I figured writing the short story gives me my own utterance, and narrative form I will continue to wrestle with.

Faulkner suggested that a novelist is a frustrated short story writer (who is also a frustrated poet)--as I note the remarkable contradiction in his characters and place in the American south. Hemingway, too, with his unadorned writing style--the so-called iceberg theory—comes to mind. Note: John Steinbeck was asked about his favorite authors. "Hemingway for his short stories and nearly everything Faulkner wrote," he replied.

Hemingway's story, "Indian Camp" I sometimes taught to young students--comparing it to V.S. Naipaul's story "B. Wordsworth" by focussing on each story's tonality and temperament with cross-cultural elements at play. Caribbean context is organic in Naipaul's story published in his book, *Miguel Street;* whereas Hemingway's American manner with Native imagery is closely observed. Different voices inform each story's metier in embracing globalization.

"Voice" matters most of all in the story I have suggested. Virginia Woolf describes it as "all rhythm." Character and the quality of the emotion is key, especially as the writer extends the language with cadence and style (Chekhov: "A comma correctly placed can break the heart"). Woolf's key story, "Kew Gardens," comes to mind. Plot re complication, climax and resolution is recognized. But Chekhov says it best: "Plot is what makes people bang the door. What comes after"; or, with Dorothy Parker it is "the silent artillery of the heart."

Hemingway's classic six-word story I've focussed upon: "For sale. Baby Shoes. Never worn." Sub-genres inevitably come into the picture, e.g., flash fiction, or threshold fiction, now popular with liminality as its raison d'etre.

We suspend disbelief when the story is viewed as "a bird in a cage, not a man in house"-with a window to look out on from to the outside world. The novel has many windows; but the short story will achieve its particular effects in what Katherine Mansfield calls the "artifice of a bird singing." ***(An earlier version of this essay appeared in* Books in Canada: 9/2002.)**