

Contemporary Literature

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Good morning. So, today's topic is short story. We all know what is a short story. So, if you try to mention certain names in the area of short stories, for example, to begin from, let us look at some of the more prominent and contemporary writers. Today, we are going to do a short story by Salman Rushdie. The title of the story is *The Firebird's Nest*.

Now, what are the characteristics? Before we begin the story, what are the qualities or the features of a short story? So, short story is essentially noted for its lack of magnitude. It cannot have the length and breadth and depth of say Herman Melville's *Moby Dick* who wrote a short story *Billy Budd*. It is a novel not exactly a short story, but however, in a short story, the action is definitely compressed. We cannot afford any kind of digressions in a short story.

So, that brings us to the second feature that is plot. So, it has to be extremely focused, very concentrated on one single major event and it cannot afford any lack of detailing and descriptions. The whole idea of having, of writing a short story is to create a unique and single effect. You can, I was just talking about, we cannot afford to have too many digressions, too many, too much of detailing, too much of descriptions. A short story unlike a novel or a lengthy play is limited to very few characters.

You can compare it with Arthur Miller's play which we just did, *Clara*. You have only two major characters and Clara makes an appearance now and then, but the story is focused on two main characters. Likewise, a short story also has very limited number of characters and you cannot spend too much of time and effort on detailing those characters. So, you cannot expect the same depth of character as you would find in a novel by Charles Dickens or Thackeray. A short story writer just does not have the luxury to develop his characters that way.

Social milieu, it is constrained by a space, by a particular milieu. So, there cannot be a diversity. A short story writer has to focus his attention on one singular social milieu and we will look when we do Salman Rushdie's *Firebird's Nest*. We are going to look at what

milieu he is concentrating on. Spareness of setting, again you cannot have the narrative floating all over the place, but it has to be focused on one single set, on a single space.

The plot, again coming back to the plot, short story usually begins from the climax. Now, see we have all seen that standard plot development triangle. You have one exposition. Of course, it is in a drama, but if we stretch it further and look at any work of fiction, there is always an exposition where there is lot of detailing and you are introduced to the major characters, the sets, the tone of the novel or the fiction is established. You have a rising action and then you have a climax.

We have done all this. So, I do not want to go over that again, but in a short story, the plot starts unfurling from the climax onwards. That means, you have to, there is very little or almost negligible exposition and rising action. So, in a short story, you come to the climax. Soon, you begin from the climax.

You start with the falling action. You go on to the falling action and the denouement has to be achieved fast. So, then because a short story writer does not have the luxury of time, it has to be as Edgar Allan Poe defines it, a short story should not last beyond half an hour or to maximum of two hours of reading. It should not go. Therefore, these are the constraints within which the short story writer has to work.

I would also like to add Ernest Hemingway to it, who is a master storyteller and he has written so many wonderful short stories that most of us here are familiar with. So, we will begin with Salman Rushdie's *The Firebird's Nest* and we will see how this particular story fulfills all these parameters. We should also understand what is a firebird. The title of the story is *The Firebird's Nest*. The firebird becomes a metaphor or a symbol for something.

So, let us begin a reading and we will see what Rushdie is trying to tell us here. It begins with a quote by Ovid, the writer of *Metamorphosis*. "Now, I am ready to tell how bodies are changed into different bodies."

So, definitely this is a story about transformation, some kind of transformation that is about to happen. So, with the very opening quotation, the fact that Salman Rushdie chooses to start his story with this particular quotation about transformation, it tells us that it is a story about changes, about transformations.

It is a hot place, flat and sad. The rains have failed so often that now they say instead the drought succeeded. They are a plains man, livestock farmers, but their cattle are deserting them. The cattle staggering migrate south and east in search of water and rattle as they walk. Their skulls, horn mild posts, line the root of their vain exudates.

This water to the west, but it is salt. Soon, even these marshes will have given up the ghost. Stumbleweed blows across the leached gray flats. There are cracks big enough to swallow a man, an apt enough way for a farmer to die, to be eaten by his land. Women do not die in that way.

Women catch fire and burn. What does it tell us about the setting? Women do not die this way. Men get swallowed in by the earth, by the dryness of the earth, the lack of water. There is drought everywhere. Women do not die by that.

They do not get swallowed by the earth. They catch fire. They burn. So, this is the description, very telling description, setting the tone of the story. This is the theme of the story, women burn in this land.

Within living memory, a thick forest stood Mr. Maharaj. Now, again a representative character. He is an erstwhile prince of some princely state in India. Now, his name, we do not need to know his name.

Let us just call him Mr. Maharaj, tells his American bride as the limousine drives towards his palace. A rare breed of tiger lived in the forest, white as salt, wiry, small and song birds. A dozen, dozen varieties, their very nests were built of music. Half a century ago, his father riding through the forest would hum along with their areas, could hear the tigers joining in the choruses, but now his father is dead. The tigers are extinct and the birds have all gone except one, which never sings a note and in the absence of trees makes its nest in a secret place that has not been revealed.

The fire bird, he whispers and his bride, a child of a big city, a foreigner, no virgin, laughs at such exotic melodramatics tossing her long bright hair, which is yellow like a flame. Now, see this is a story of transformation. Once this land was prosperous, there were riches in that land. So, Mr. Maharaj's father, he would go on a hunting spree, but now the irony is that there is no, there are no tigers anymore left and all this is being told to his new bride, a foreigner, an American bride whose hair is compared to the sunlight also yellow like a flame.

So, imagery of fire as you know of a bright burning fire, it is true and throughout the narrative. There are no princes now. The government abolished them decades ago. So, now another dominant theme is that of the conflict between modernity and the old decadent times. The very idea of princess has become in our modern country a fiction, something from the time of feudalism or fairy tale.

So, the idea now you also have a the reference to fiction, fiction implicit within a story fable. So, our land now has been reduced or our history has been reduced to nothing but fiction, you know to a fable. This was once a fabulous land. This was once a legendary place where the overflowing with riches, overflowing with all kinds of bounties, but now there is a starvation, there is misery, there is drought. The titles, the privileges have been stripped from them.

They have no power over us. In this place, the prince has become plain Mr. Maharaj. So, the erstwhile prince now is Mr. Maharaj. The title has been, he has been stripped of his title, but still he is called a Maharaj.

He is a complex man. His palace in the city has become a casino. That is what he tells his American bride. This is all his story, his side of the story which he is telling to his American wife, to the bride, but he has a commission that seeks to extirpate the public corruption that is the country's name. In his youth, he was a mighty sports man, but since his retirement, he has had no time for games. He has an ecological institute studying and seeking remedies for the drought, but at his country residence at the great fortress palace to which this limousine is taking him, cascades of precious water flow ceaselessly for no other purpose than display.

His library of ancient texts is the wonder of the province, yet he controls the local satellite franchises and profits from every new dish. So, you look at the contradiction, the ironies implicit in the character of Mr. Maharaj. He claims to head a commission meant for preservation of the environment in his own house, in his own palace, water is wasted.

So, the contradiction, if Mr. Maharaj is just being very ironical, he is trying to draw our attention to the inherent conflict, to the inherent contradictions in the Indian society where there is a big deep dichotomy between the way the very rich actually live and what they preach, what they claim to be. Here is a query, the limousine halts, there are men with pickaxes and women bearing earth in metal bowls upon their heads. When they see Mr. Maharaj, they make gestures of respect, they genuflect, they bow, a typical scenario where royalty is still revered. The American bride watching, intudes that she has passed into a place in which that which was abolished is the truth.

So, although royalty is abolished by the government, by the decree of the central government, but still it is a reality for these poor villages. They have no connection with forces of modernity. They still are in the same old period that she has passed into a place in which that which was abolished is the truth and it is the government far away in the capital that is the fiction in which nobody believes. So, for the people of that place, royalty is the truth, not the government.

Government is fiction. Here, Mr. Maharaj is still the prince and she is new princess as though she had entered a fable. Again, the reference to the fabulous nature to the fictional aspect of her life, she feels as if now she has entered the pages of some story told long back in time and so, she was no more than words crawling along a dry page. She always already feels that she has become a part of some story of that place or as though she was becoming that page itself that surface on which her story would be written in a cross which there blew a hot and merciless wind turning her body to papyrus, her skin to parchment, her soul to paper. Suddenly, she feels starved, famished, enervated, absolutely bereft of all energies.

It is hot. She shivers. She feels as if she exists now in a state of nothingness. So, that is also while I am counting this whole new cultural set up and that somehow drains away all her energies. She is no longer what she used to be back in her own country.

It is no query. It is a reservoir. Farmers driven from their land by drought have been employed by Mr. Maharaj to dig this water hole against the day when the rain return. In this way, he can give them some employment. He tells his bride and more employment, more than employment, hope. So, it is like we have done the myth of Sisyphus rolling a stone up the hill and then when the stone comes down, rolling it back again to the top of the hill.

So, that is what digging up a hole just in order to generate some kind of an employment and earn their gratitude. That is what he does. He gives them some kind of a hope that all this digging would lead to something. At least, it gives them some kind of semblance of an employment, but she shakes her head seeing that this great hollow is already full of bitter irony. The women in the reservoir of irony are dressed in the colors of fire.

Only the foolish blinded by languages conventions think of fire as red or gold. Fire is blue at its melancholy realm. The colors of fire, now fire traditionally regarded as yellow, as gold and red is not so. That is what Rajdee tells us. It is blue in parts, it is green in its heart and when it is at its best, it reduces everything to ashes and then everything is white.

Sometimes, it also becomes black. You can look at all the imagery, the beautiful imagery that Rajdee employs here. Colors of fire, not the traditionally accepted colors red and gold, but also colors of envy, green, colors of life perhaps blue, water also is blue. You can also, you know the life giving force, but it could also be white turning everything to smithereens. It could also be black when everything is charred down. Yesterday, the men with pickaxes tell Maharaj, a woman in a red and gold saree, a fool

ignited in the amphitheater of the dry water hole.

The men stood along the high rim of the reservoir watching her burn, shouldering arms in a kind of salute, recognizing in the wisdom of their manhood the inevitability of women's fate. The women, their women screamed, the women when the woman finished burning, there was nothing there, not a scrap of flesh, not a bone. She burned as paper burns flying up to the sky and being blown into nothing by the wind. The entire construct of masculinity, what is it like being a man. So, in the wisdom of the manhood, they have accepted it as a part of their culture.

Women do burn and they, they revere a woman, they salute a woman who voluntarily goes, performs this ritual and this is the fact of life. Women burn easily. She burns as paper burns because there is nothing in them. They, they, you know, they are dispensable creatures.

They burn and there are no remains left behind. The combustibility of women is a source of resigned wonder to the men hereabouts. They just burn too easily. What is to be done about it? Turn your back and they are alight. Perhaps, it is a difference between the sexes the men see. Men are earth solid and enduring, but the ladies are capricious and unstable.

So, see, there is a dichotomy, there is a binary in the, in the essence of the two sexes in the, in the, in the makeup of the two creatures, men and women. Men endure, women cannot. So, that is their nature. That is what they feel, but the ladies are capricious, unstable.

They are not long for this world. They go off in a puff of smoke without leaving so much as a note of explanation and in this heat, if they should spend too long in the sun, we tell them to stay indoors, not to expose themselves to danger, but you know how women are. It is their fate, their nature. Even the demure ones have fiery hearts, perhaps the demure ones most of all.

Mr. Maharaj murmurs to his wife in the limousine. She is a woman of modern outlook and does not like it, she tells him. When he speaks this way, herding her sex into these crude corals, corals, groups, generalizations. He inclines his head in amused apology. A firebrand, he says, I see, I must mend my ways.

Gossip burns ahead of her. Now, see, even before this bride reaches her palace, her husband's home, there are all kinds of stories. So, you see, the idea of a story is very much a part of this story, stories within the main story. So, you have the story of the

firebird, you have the bride having a vision of turning into a paper, feeling as if she has already become a part of the legends and the stories that are floating in this arid region. Then, there are also stories about her background even before she has actually reached the place, the palace.

She is rich, as rich as the old obese Nizam of Daesh. Yes, filthy rich, the gossip sizzles. Her American father claims descent from the deposed royal family of an eastern European state and each year, he flies the elite employees of his commercial empire by private aircraft to his lost kingdom, where by the banks of the river of time itself, he stages a four day golf tournament. This is one idea about her. She is rich, she is fertile, she will bring sons and reigns to this land of hopelessness.

Other side of the story, no, she is poor, the gossip flashes. Her father hanged himself when she was born, her mother was a whore. She is also a creature of wilderness and rocky ground. The draught is in her body like a curse she is barren. So, two sides, two binaries again exist. She, people do not even know her, but there are already, she has already been turned into a story, to a legend.

She has given, there is enough orders for the gossip mills around. She is rich, on the other hand, she is stark poor. She is fertile, she will bring a son as well as reign. She is auspicious, on the other hand, she is barren, she is too thin, she is infertile, she will bring curses on that land. Mr. Maharaj has served the world for its treasures and brought back a magic jewel whose light will change their lives.

That is how gossip goes around in those lands. Mr. Maharaj has fallen into inequity and brought despair into his palace, has succumbed to the yellow haired dome. The two sides, two kinds of stories running parallel to each other. So, she is becoming a story the people tell and argue over. Traveling towards the palace, she too is aware of entering a story, a group of stories about women such as herself, fair and yellow, and the dark men they loved. She was warned by friends at home in her tall city, do not go with him, they cautioned her.

Your otherness excites him, your freedom, he will break your heart. A ruined gateway stands in the wilderness, an entrance to nowhere, a single tree, the last of all the local trees to fall, lies rotting beside it. The exposed roots grabbing at air like a dead giant's hand. Look at the frequent references to death, to barrenness, to lifelessness, to the hopelessness of that land. You have a dead tree, you have a rotting place, you have wilderness, an entrance to nowhere. All these expressions and words leading to focusing on the despair, the situation of the life of despair which is prevalent in that place.

There is no hope for that place. America, once upon a time in America, again it is like a fairy tale, once upon a time in America, they had shared an Indian lunch 300 feet above the street level at a table with a view of the vernal lushness of the park, feasting their eyes upon an opulence of vegetation which now, as she remembers it in this desiccated landscape, feels obscene. My country is just like yours, he had said flirting, big turbulent and full of gods. We speak our kind of bad English and you speak yours. And before you became Romans, when you were just Colonials, our masters were the same.

You defeated them before we did. So, now, you have more money than we do, otherwise we are the same. On our street corners, the same bustle of differences, the same litter, the same everything at one'sness. She guessed immediately what he was telling her, that he came from a place unlike anything she had ever experienced, whose languages she would struggle to master, whose codes she might never break and whose immensity and mystery would provoke and fulfill her greatest passion and her deepest need. So, that the binary, the deep rift between the two cultures, no matter what Mr. Maharaj tells her, she knows that there are certain codes, certain conventions which she will never be able to comprehend, yet she marries him because she loves him.

When she was an American, he spoke to her of money. She is a cliché. She is American. Therefore, she must be extremely materialistic. She has to be wooed with money. The old protectionist legislation, the outdated socialism that had hobbled the economy for so long has been replaced and there were fortunes to be made, if you had the ideas.

Even a prince had to be on the ball, one step ahead of the game. He was bursting with projects and she had a reputation in financial circles as a person who could bring together capital and ideas, who could conjure up for her favorite projects, the monetary nourishment they required, a rainmaker. So, you see, he needed the money. She is the proverbial rainmaker, a person who can bring bounties to a famished land, a person who can bring money to an impoverished prince. She took him to the opera and was aroused by the power of great matters of in the words she could not understand, whose meaning had to be inferred from the performer's deeds.

It was her city, her stage and she was confident and young. Her palace unfortunately, sorry, his palace unfortunately is abominable. So, we are told, we are just given slight backdrop of their romance, the whirlwind romance, how they get married. She is strongly attracted to this man and then she decides to marry him.

She comes to his palace now. So, Rush becomes straight to the point. Now, she sees, now she feels the palace is abominable. It crumbles, stinks in her rooms, the curtain are tattered. So, this entire idea of decadence, you know, poverty, even a prince can be,

prince can be poor. So, he is not one of the princes from fairy tales and fables.

He, this is the, this is reality. He is a prince just in name. He does not have much to offer. His palace crumbles, stinks. So, like everything decaying around her, around that place, that his palace also stinks and crumbles. In her room, the curtains are tattered, the bed precarious, the pictures on the wall, pornographic representations of arabesque couplings at some petty princelings court.

Loud music plays in ill-lit corridors, but she cannot find its sources. Shadows scurry from her sight. He installs her, vanishes without an explanation. She is left to make herself at home.

She has never found it easy to weep, but her body convulses. She cries dry tears and sleeps. When she awakes, there is the sound of drum and dancers. In a courtyard, the women and girls are gathered, young and old. The drummer beats out at a rhythm and the ladies respond in unison. Their knees bend outward, their splay fingered hands, semaphore at the ends of peremptory arms, their necks making impossible lateral shifts, eyes ablaze.

They advance across cool stones like an army. Still early and the courtyard is in shadow. The sun has not yet lent the stone its fire. At the dancers head, tallest of them all fiercely erect, showing them how is Mr. Maharaj's sister over 60 years old, but still the greatest dancer in the state. Miss Maharaj has seen the newcomer, but makes no acknowledgement.

She is the mistress of the dance. Movement is all. When it is finished, they face each other. Mr. Maharaj's women, the sister, the American, he has two women in his life to contend with, his 60 year old sister and his young American bride. What are you doing? A dance against the firebird, a proficiary dance to ward it off. The firebird, she thinks of Stravinsky of Lincoln center. See, she is not aware of the, of the ancient customs and the cultural references here. Firebird immediately reference, she makes the reference or she associates it with an opera, Stravinsky's opera, Lincoln theater famous opera, but she does not really know what, what is the exact metaphor for the so called firebird.

So, a dance against firebird, they are trying to ward off the curse of the firebird. This is the dance all about. Mr. Maharaj, Miss Maharaj inclines her head. The bird, which never sings, she says, whose nest is secret, whose malevolent wings brush women's bodies and we burn, but surely there is no such bird.

It is just an old wife's tale. Now, there is a word play. Old wife's tale is a proverb. It is a

story, which you know, just a myth, an unsubstantiated story, but here there are no old wives tales. Alas, there are no old wives. They do not live that long.

There are no old wives. So, how can there be old wives tales? It is a word play. Enter Mr. Maharaj, turban with an embroidery cloth flung about his broad shoulders. She finds herself behaving petulantly.

He woos and cajoles. He went to prepare her welcome. He hopes she will approve. In the semi-desert beyond his stinging palace, Mr. Maharaj has prepared an extravaganza. By moonlight, beneath hot stars on great carpets, the bird is singing a gathering of dignitaries and nobles welcomes her. The finest musicians play the mournful, mournful haunting flutes, their ecstatic strings and sing the most ancient and precious love songs ever heard.

The most succulent delicacies of the region are offered for her delight. She is already famous in the neighborhood, a great celebrity. I invited your husband to visit us. The governor of an adjacent state guffaws, but I told him if you do not bring your beautiful lady, do not bother to show him. A neighboring ex-prince offers to show her the art treasures locked in his palace walls.

I take them out for nobody, he says, except Mrs. Onassis, of course, for you. I will spread them in my garden as I did for Jackie O. So, she is being treated like the American royalty and all the ex-princes and the bureaucrats, the monied class, they are invited there to welcome her in her honor. She feels him stiffened, smells this bitterness leaking from his words.

It is you who have made this happen, he replies. In this ruined place, you have conjured this illusion. The camels, the horses, even the food has been brought from far away. We empower ourselves to make you happy. How can you imagine that we are able to live like this now begins the conflict between Mr.

Maharaj and his new bride. She just jokes, is this the way you live? Almost like a fairy tale and he is offended. We are impoverished.

This is a land which is suffering. We want, in you, we seek our hope. You will bring money. You are the rain maker. You will bring the rains. We dream only of survival. This Arabian night is an American dream. So, look at the juxtaposition of two very contradictory worlds. Arabian night, a total setting of decadence, luxury, American dream, we all know where hard work and industriousness can yield great dividends.

There is a marriage between the Arabian night and the American dream we brought you so that you can give us, you can bring our days of the Arabian nights back. I ask for nothing, she said. This conspicuous consumption is not my fault.

He has had too much to drink and it has made him truthful. It is our obeisance, he tells, at the feet of power. Rain maker, bring us rain. Money, you mean. What else? Is there anything else? I thought there was love, she says.

The full moon has never looked more beautiful. No music has ever sounded lovelier. No night has ever felt so cruel. So, there is a juxtaposition. It was such a beautiful night, beautiful music, beautiful setting. Still, his words were the cruelest of all because no night has ever felt so cruel.

It is his words that have caused this pain, this enormous pain. She says, I have something to tell you. She is pregnant. She dreams of burning bridges or burning boards. So, again the imagery of fire and things getting burnt. She dreams of a movie she has always loved in which a man returns to his ancestral village and somehow slips through time to the time of his father's youth when he tries to flee the village and returns to the railway station.

The tracks have disappeared. There is no way home. This is where the film ends. When she awakes from her dream in her sweltering room, the sheets are soaked and there is a woman sitting at her bedside. She gathers a wet sheet around her.

Miss Maharaj smiles. You have a strong body, she says, younger, but in other ways not so unlike mine. I would have left him now. I just do not know. Miss Maharaj shakes her head. In the village, they say, it will be a boy, she explains and then the draught will break.

Just superstition, but he cannot let you leave and afterwards, if you go, he will keep the child. We will see about that. She blasts. When she is agitated, her tones become nasal, unattractive even to herself. In her mind's eye, the story is closing around her. The story in which she is trapped and in which she must, if she can, find the path of action, preferably of right action.

She will not fall into some tame and heat days soon. Romance had led her into errors enough. Now, she will use her head. Slowly, as the weeks unfold, she begins to see he does not own the casino in his palace in the city. A sign, a foolish contract, letting it to a consortium of alarming men. The rent they pay him is absurd and it is stipulated in the small print that on certain high days, each year, he must hang around the gaming tables,

grinning ingratiatingly at the guests, lending a tone.

So, he has been reduced to a performer, a former prince. Now, just a cheap entertainer. So, just by exhibiting himself, he is supposed to attract more customers at the casino, at the gambling then. The satellite dish franchises are more lucrative, but this greedy old wreck of a country residence needs to eat of far richer platters, if it is to be properly fed. So, the house, in order to maintain that house, the money that comes from satellite dishes is just not enough.

Therefore, the need for the American bride. This rural palace is ageless, perhaps 600 years. Most of it lacks electricity, windows, furniture. Cold in the cold season, hot in the heat and if the rains should come, many of its staterooms would flood. All they have here is water, their inexhaustible palace spring. At the back of the palace, past the ruined zones, where the bats hole sway, she picks her way through accumulated guano and sees a line before dawn.

Great treasures were lost when it burnt, also lives. When did this happen? In before time. She begins to understand his bitterness. Another princess, miss Maharaj tells her, a dowager even more destitute than we, recently ended her life by drinking fire.

This is the situation. This is the predicament of the royalty. They are not what they appear to be. Their fabulous wealth is just a fable. It is just a fable. It is just a fable. It is just an illusion. They have these delusions of grandeur.

They are not able to let go of the past and therefore, so much of misery in their lives and in the lives of those around them. So, Mr. Maharaj visiting America had turned himself into an illusion of sophistication and innovation, had won her with a desperate performance. He has learned to talk like a modern man, but in truth is helpless in the face of the present. The drought, his unworldliness, the decision of history to turn away her face, these things are his undoing.

In Greece, the athlete who won the Olympic race became a person of high rank in his home state. Mr. Maharaj, however, rots as does his house. Her own room begins to look like luxuries, acne, glass in the windows, the slow turning electric fan, a telephone with sometimes a dialing tone, a socket for her laptops power line, the intermittent possibility of forging a modern link with that other planet, her earlier life. He has not taken her to his own room because he is ashamed of it. Again and again, she awakes sweating with Miss Maharaj, mumbling at her side. Yes, a fine body, it could have been a dancers, it will burn well.

She is alarmed, all brights in these parts are brought from far afield and once the men have spent their dowries, then the firebird comes. Do not threaten me, perplexed. Do you know how many brights he had, he has had? Now, there is another idea planted in her head. You never know how many times Mr. Maharaj has been married before, married earlier and once the dowry is over, the brights have no other fate, but burn.

That is, that is what their fate is, that is what they are destined for. The heat is maddening, skeletal bullocks die on the brown lawn. Some days there are mustard yellow clouds filling the sky, hanging over the evaporating marshes to the west. Even this hideous yellow rain would be welcome, but it does not fall. Everyone has bad breath, all exhale, serpents, dead cats, insects, frogs, everyone's perspiration is thick and stinks.

In spite of all her resolutions, the heat hypnotizes her, the child grows. Miss Maharaj's dancers become careless about closing doors and windows. They are to be glimpsed here and there, painting one another's bodies in hot colors and wild designs, making love, sleeping with limbs and wine. Mr. Maharaj does not come to her, will not while she is scaring, but each night Miss Maharaj comes. Since her brother's descent upon her dance class, Miss Maharaj has barely spoken.

At night she asks only to sit at the bedside, sometimes almost primly to touch. Her health fails, she begins to sweat, to shiver from a, to shiver from a fever during those long sick nights quietly, absently the dancer talks. Something frightful has happened here, some irreversible transformation without our noticing its beginning, so that we did not resist until it was too late, until the new way of things was fixed. There has occurred a terrible terminal rupture between our men and women. When men say they fear the absence of rain, when women say we fear the presence of fire, this is what we mean.

So, there is an unbridgeable dichotomy between them, between men and women. Men crave for rain, women fear the fire. So, there is something, you know, there is some kind of an elemental fear that exists between them, a kind of basic distress which exists between these men and women. Something has been unleashed in us, some kind of an animal is there between us that, and there is absolutely no hope for any kind of reconciliation because basically we are so different. It is too late to tame it now. Once upon a time there was a great prince here, again the fairy tale structure, but Rushdie is actually subverting the fairy tale narrative once upon a time, but then what? There was a prince, a handsome prince somewhere who would brought home a beautiful girl, but then there is no, there are no happily ever afters as we have seen even in Girishkarnad.

Rushdie is somehow reinforcing the same idea. There are no happily ever afters. The

last prince one could say, everything about him was mythological, the most handsome prince in the world. He married the most beautiful bride, a legendary dancer and temptress and they had two children, a boy and a girl. As he aged, his strength ebbed, his eyes dimmed, but she, the dancer refused to fail. At the age of 50, she had the look of a young woman of 21.

As the princesses force faded, as that glamour which had been the heart of his power ceased to work its magic, so his jealousy increased. The fortress burned, they both died. He had suspected his wife of taking lovers, but there had been none. The children who had been left in the care of servants lived. The daughter became a dancer and the son a sportsman and so on and the villages said that the old prince consumed by rage has been transformed into a giant bird, a bird composed entirely of flames and that was the bird that burned the princess and returns these days to turn other women to ashes at their husband's cruel command and you ask the ill woman on the bed, what do you say? So, see, it is a land with unlimited number of stories, all kinds of, as we were seeing Aristotle's, the possible, the probable impossibilities. So, there was once a prince and his princess died, sorry, whose princess refused to get old while he aged and what happens at the end that he consumed by jealousy, he burns his beautiful wife and since then the fire bird, the prince who has taken now a form of the fire bird, he comes periodically and avenges upon the women of that land.

So, fire bird is nothing but metaphor for those forces which consume women by burning them. Do not condescend to us in your heart, Miss Maharaj replies. Do not mistake the abnormal for the untrue, just because it sounds fantastic, it does not mean that it is not true. We are caught in metaphors, they transfigure us and reveal the meaning of our lives.

The illness recedes and the baby seems also to be well. The return of health is like a curtain being lifted. She is thinking like herself again. She will keep the child, but will no longer be trapped in this place of fantasies with a man she finds she does not know. She will go to the city, fly back to America and after the child is born, what will be, will be. A quick divorce, of course, she has no desire to prevent the father from seeing his child.

Extremely free access including trips east will be granted. She wants that, wants the child to know both cultures enough time to behave like an adult. She may even continue to advise Mr.

Maharaj on his financial needs. Why not? It is a job. She tells Miss Maharaj her decision and the old dancer winces as if from a blow. This is not possible. This extremely American liberal way of parting, you know, we will still remain friends even after we part. This is not culturally acceptable in those parts of the world and this, the mere

suggestion comes as a blow. In the dead of night, the American is awakened by the hubbub in the palace, in its corridors and courtyard. She dresses, goes outside.

A scratch, a matter of motor vehicles has assembled, a rusty bus, several motor scooters, a newish Japanese people carrier, an open truck, a jeep in camouflage. Miss Maharaj's women are piling into the vehicles angry, singing. They have taken weapons, kitchen knives, garden implements, etcetera at their head, revving the jeep, shouting impatiently at her troops is Miss Maharaj.

What is going on? None of your business. You do not believe in fairies. You are going home. I am coming with you. Miss Maharaj treats the jeep roughly, driving it at speed over broken ground without lights. The motley convoy jolts along behind.

They drive by the night of a molten full moon. Ahead of them stands a ruined stone arch, an entrance to nothing beside a fallen tree. The Amedda halls turns on its lights. The dance class pours through the archway as if it were the only possible entrance to the open waste ground beyond, as if it were the portal to another world. When she, the American, does likewise, she has that feeling again of passing through an invisible membrane, a looking glass into another kind of truth, into fiction. This is a reference, clear reference to Alice in Wonderland.

Through the looking glass, almost everything that is happening cannot be probable. You see, the entire impossibility of something happening like this is just not acceptable. A tableau illuminated by the lights of motor vehicles. Remember the old bridegroom on his way to meet his young bride. Here, he is again guilty, murderous and his young wife uncomprehending at his side.

In the background, silhouetted are the figures of male villages. Facing the unhappy couple is Mr. Maharaj. The women burst shrieking upon the charmless scene, then come to a halt, intimidated by Mr.

Maharaj's presence. The sister faces the brother. Somebody has left their lights flashing. The siblings faces glow, white, yellow, red, all the colors, the fire. They speak in a language the American cannot understand. It is an opera without over titles. She must infer what they are saying from their actions, from their thoughts, made deeds.

So, as clearly as if comprehended every syllable, she hears Mr. Maharaj command her brother. What started between our parents stops now and his response, a response that has no meaning in the world beyond the ruined archway, which he speaks as his body turns to fire, as the wings burst out of him, as the eyes blaze. His words hang in the air

as the firebirds breath scorches Ms.

Maharaj, burns her to a cinder and then turns upon the dotard shrieking bride. I am the firebirds nest. Something loosens within the American as she sees Ms. Maharaj burn. Some shackle is broken, some limit of possibility passed. Only she crashes upon Mr. Maharaj like a wave and the angry dancers pour behind her seething irresistible. They feel the frontiers of their bodies burst and the water pour out, the immense crushing weight of their rain drowning the firebird and its nest flowing over the drought hardened land that no longer knows how to absorb the flood with bears away the old dotard and his murderous fellows cleansing the region of its horrors, of its archaic tragedies, of its men.

The flood waters ab ebb like anger, the women become themselves again and the universe too resumes its familiar shape. The women huddle patiently under the old stone arch listening for helicopters waiting to be rescued from the deluge of themselves freed from fear. As for the American, her own shape will continue to change.

Mr. Maharaj's child will be born not here, but in her own country to which she will soon return increasing. She caresses her swelling womb. The new life growing within her will be both fire and rain. What? There has to be a balance of fire and rain between the two sexes. What Rajdee suggests is there was too much of fire in those lands. It is only through the combined efforts of women like Miss Maharaj that the land would be cleansed of its curses and of its the so called draughts.

They do not need a rain maker from anywhere. The rain makers will come from within that is in empowerment of the women. So, we will continue by looking at more such short stories and you can see there is a twist in the tale. There is an ending. We expect something else, but then perhaps the American would meet a sad end. We expect perhaps Miss Maharaj would be burnt alive or something, but you know like in any traditional traditionally structured short story, there is a twist.

The twist is how women finally gain a voice and through that they are able to overcome their situation, their tragedies. So, that is one of the major features of any short story with a complete unexpected twist at the end. So, we will continue with the genre short stories in the next class. Thank you.