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ORCID <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7381-0384>



Fragmented Memory and Foreign Space: A Comparative Analysis of the “Same Experiment Again” of Tanuj Solanki and Anjum Hasan’s “The Big Picture”

Shajar Uddin

Corresponding Author: Shajar Uddin, Assistant Professor, Department of English, Shri Varshney College Aligarh, shsdsn@gmail.com

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Abstract

A short story is an expressive medium through which a writer conveys his or her feelings to readers. It is not so that the short story has its roots in modern times; it has roots in ancient times, though it was not known as it is today. The short story began its journey from prose extracts of big works and continued to the realm of Somerset Maugham, Anton Chekhov, R.K. Narayan and other modern writers, including Tanuj Solanki and Anjum Hasan. Anjum Hasan, a writer of more than three novels and two short story collections, received several literary awards and was shortlisted for the Sahitya Akademi Award. Tanuj Solanki is a Sahitya Akademi Yuva Puraskar Awardee, novelist and short story writer whose novel *The Machine is Learning* was longlisted for the JCB Prize. The researcher adopted a qualitative method, comparative literary analysis and close reading of the texts. The study examines the fragmented life of the narrator in *The Same Experiment Again* and the irony of contemporary life, whereas Mrs Ali in *The Big Picture* struggles with identity, isolation and cultural displacement despite her love for art and painting on foreign land. The research presents these different situations of contemporary characters. The comparative examination highlights Tanuj Solanki's challenge to traditional storytelling through his fragmented contemporary character, an experimental writer frustrated with his lonely life in Bombay. In contrast, Mrs Ali's life is centred at home and her private art. The research opens the scope for further psychological study of Tanuj Solanki and Anjum Hasan.

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In contemporary literary society, the common and the most effective way of expressing the new ideas and the feelings to the readers of the literature is writing short stories. This genre is not only being used by popular Indian writers of this time but by the classical writers of ancient time also (The Achievers Journal). Found as an anecdote and the short fiction of Geoffrey Chaucer, Boccaccio, and Goethe who contributed to the development of this genre. But the genre of short stories cannot be completed without naming the greatest short story writers including Anton Chekhov, Somerset Maugham, Ravindra Nath Tagore, R.K. Narayan. Contemporary short stories as observed by Jon Mc Gregor while judging short stories for BBC National short story prize said the new writers set challenges for their competitors, they chose a variety of themes which open up the new horizon of storytelling. Among contemporary new writers, short stories of George Saunders, Rachel B Glaser, Sarah Hall, Kevin Barry, Pettina Gappah, Megan Mc Dowell, Jonathan Wright, Nicole Flattery, Claire-Louise Bennet, and Donald Antrim, are best picked pieces for the BBC National short story prize (Mc Gregor).

Tanuj Solanki is the distinctive voice of contemporary Indian fiction; he is known for his introspective and experimental narratives in Indian English writing. Though this research focuses on his short story *The Same Experiment Again*, one must know more about him. His novel *The Machine is Learning* was long listed for JCB prize in 2020 for English literature. He is one of the most talented writers who was awarded Sahitya Akademi Yuva Puraskar in 2019, for his short story collection *Diwali in Muzaffarnagar* (Penguin). Some of his short stories appeared in online magazine, *Out of Print* and he also runs a magazine named the *Bombay Literary Magazine* (The Caravan). His short story 'Muzaffarpurnagar Diwali', deals with the life of a young man Tarun, a new member of India's vast urban professional class who came to Muzaffarpurnagar, his hometown on Diwali, the city is notorious for communal violence (Caravan). His short story 'Appropriation', is the title short story of his new collection (Granta), the story is a serious conversation between Bharat and Jyoti about the writing about the marginalized section of society. Tanuj Solanki is the author of the four books, *Neon Noon* was his debut novel, which was shortlisted for Tata Lit Live first book award 2016. His *Manjhi's Mayhen* was longlisted for JCB Prize 2023

(Goodreads). Tanuj Solanki shared his experiences as an editor of Bombay Literary Magazine in his article on scroll.in, he added that editing is an exhaustive work; reading more than forty thousand words a week, is like finishing a novella and shared the long process of selecting stories for publication (Scroll.in).

Tanuj Solanki besides creative writing often post his book reviews on the online platforms like frontline, the hindu.com. He contributed his reviews on George, Ammu, and I by Jeet Thayyil, learning to Remember, a title of his review on Amitabh Bagchi's 'Unknown City'. Review on The Sentence by Gautam Bhatia and more, his reviews are deep and speculative which give to the reader a hint of all aspects of the novel in a single review (Frontline). Responding to the criticism of a Girish Shukla who is the author of many novels, Tanuj Solanki answers to his comment in his article 'Playing in the Minors' and 'The problems with measuring Indian writers by global fame alone', Tanuj admit that he hadn't heard his name before he writes this article (Indian Express).

Anjum Hasan (b.1972) is the author of three novels and two collections of short stories and is regarded as the author of characters of everyday life who face the minor problems every day and represents the common man of Indian fiction. He has been shortlisted for Sahitya Akademi Award, The Hindu Best Fiction Award and Crossword Fiction Award for her works. Shiva Priya credited her as one of the best Indian writers of this time. Anjum Hasan praised Bloomsbury and Jacaranda for having faith in her work (anjumhasan.com). She published a collection of poems Street On the Hill (2006), her novel Lunatic in my Head (2007), was shortlisted for the Crossword Book Award and the novel Neki Neki was shortlisted (2008) won Man Asian Literary prize, it is the story of Sophie Das. Her novel History' Angel tells the story of a history teacher who works at a school in Delhi, is an angelic teacher who keeps away from his realistic situation and hostilities around him and loves his job (Tanuj Solanki). Difficult Pleasures is a short story collection by Anjum Hasan. It is short listed for The Hindu Literary prize and her novel Cosmopolitans, is a fiction that questions the place of art in modern life filled with ideas and emotions (Literature Across Frontiers). Her, A Book the Life, is a short story collection which glimpses different characters such as a newly-weds couple, a retired person and a father trying to reconnect with his son. Gulfam is a character in her story 'Yellow Rose' (The Caravan). Shalini

Vineeth, in her article covering the short story 'The Big Picture' of Anjum Hasan present the different roles of Mrs Ali as a wife, as a mother and artist and she explore the fear of Mrs Ali, her withdrawal from the outer world, out of her limited space and her love for painting. Whatever she likes and sees, paints and she never tries to make a big deal out of her paintings. The story turns when Mrs Ali decided to challenge her own limited space, her living around and decided to travel a solo trip to Europe for an exhibition. She feels alienated at the airport and she feels that everyone is watching her. For the first time in her life, this new city surprises her. For the first time she gets the broader perspective of life in a new environment and this helps her to see the big picture of life (Salini).

The narrator in the short story 'The Same Experiment Again' is a self-doubting young man of twenty-eight, struggling writer who called himself experimental. He failed as a creative writer. The author pictures the disillusionment of contemporary life through this character, he introspects his psyche and try to prove that he is a modern man. The story begins with his self-doubt and philosophical contemplation of his own art (Out of Print: The Same Experiment Again). Mocking on his own physics, the narrator compared his ex-beloved and himself and he says, "she is a rock-climber today, today I am a pot-bellied writer". His lady love lived in Interlaken and he lived in Bombay. The situation interprets his disconnection, his sense of lost and alienated life.

The story became more complex when he muttered words out of his scattered pieces of thoughts, maybe his previous conversation through emails, his meeting with girls, his experience of writing and his thoughts of his past lover in Interlaken, he muttered, "you are a terrific writer. Give a Buzz when you come this side of the town" (The Same Experiment Again: 3). These fragmented pieces indicate the fragmented mental condition of contemporary human beings who are forced to live with fragmented lives. He recalls fragmented emails and conversations such as, "I have a job in Interlaken now", or "my one true love" (The Same Experiment Again).

It is the irony of contemporary life is that the narrator wants a complete life and he is longing for his past experience is as well, the narrator tries to prove that he is better with his lonely life, once he recalls the incident of scooter accident belonging to his former beloved, detailed his younger brother and scooter

and compare his own life in Bombay with this. It is an empty one and the past memories trigger him, he said, “she wants crashed her scooter on an empty morning road and almost died. Now She is a rock climber in Interlaken and the scooter is in Muzaffarnagar”. (The Same Experiment Again:5)

What is the nature of creative experiment? The narrator searched for it. The creators lose their purpose often while doing experiments with art and fall in the trap of repetitive patterns, “which means that an experiment can possess a personality borne out of the peculiarity of its history. This is a good thing (The Same Experiment Again: 6). The story produces a nostalgic tone; in the frustration of his present lonely life, the narrator reflects his vivid memories with his lady love on trekking in Nepal; he loves her as he loves the mountains and the clouds, he said, “actually I love you so much, as much as the Himalayas (The Same Experiment Again: 7).

The modern man's life is an isolated one in a metropolis. The story shifts to Bombay, it depicts over crowded Trains and urban chaos, the suffocating nature of city life and narrators struggle with it; deliver a serious concern on modern man's surroundings. The narrator's taste for foreign films represents the modern man's interest in foreign language and visual arts. The narrator watching a Chinese film, ‘Still Life’, with a Bombay girl resonates with his own situation, he says, “I saw Still Life, the Chinese film set in a town about to be submerged by the three gorges dam with a Bombay girl, sitting on the coach in her living room. She touched me ten times after the movie began”, (The Same Experiment Again: 10). Quoting Elena Ferrante’s ‘Days of Abandonment’, the narrator says that relationships never truly die, it affects people continuously in different ways. The story ends with an anti-climactic conclusion: the narrator being late on his work and his boss scolding him, all the contrast between his inner turmoil and outer world reality, the narrator says, “I am late to work today and my boss gives me shit. He thinks that I party too much.” (The Same Experiment Again: 13). The narrator's isolation in the story The Same Experiment Again is caused by his over indulgence in the life of metropolitan city, is contrary to the journey of Mrs Ali in the story The Big Picture by Anjum Hassan. The story is focused on Mrs Ali's own small space and comfort zone and ultimately her decision to travel to Europe that marked her cultural and physical alienation.

The story showcases the limited space of an individual through the incidents of Mrs Ali's life. She reached for a lemon slice without using tongs; the embarrassing moment, the incident reminds us that if an individual leaves their own small space and travels to a world which is totally unfamiliar to him or her, they get nervous and do strange things. The narrator here introspects the psychological condition of Mrs Ali at the airplane incident when the steward said, 'tongs please, tongs please' (Out of Print: The Big Picture). The story, unlike The Same Experiment Again, highlights the past as an attachment, not disconnection like the life of an experimental writer. Mrs Ali is a widow who loved to remain at home, use her time in painting and love to meet her old friends. In spite of insisting on living with her children, she is satisfied only in receiving gifts from them from time to time. This shows deep love for her home and her unwillingness to change.

Art is not a business for her; she paints for stability rather than recognition. She establishes herself as a private artist rather than a commercial artist, her art remains personal rather than a public domain. At one point of the story, the narrator depicts her mental disturbance and unpredictability of human life. The story turns to her state of mind when she felt menstrual bleeding. The narrator pictures the unpredictability of life which can occur anytime and anyplace. She is unable to find any assistance and chooses to remain lonely in an unfamiliar environment. She says, "I am going to Europe to see the paintings of Vincent van Gogh," this motivates her to continue her journey despite personal difficulties. (The Big Picture)

The story is a fine example of cultural displacement at one point, her paintings are already in the gallery, but on the other side, she herself is struggling to reach the destination. The unfamiliar place made her uncomfortable and the displacement is the key factor of what happens in the story. Anjum Hasan succeeded in portraying the anxiety of a local woman. She feels alienated when she is away from her rooted home. This common problem is beautifully portrayed by Anjum Hassan. Mrs Ali is a free artist; who paints only everyday life instead of commercial paintings. She is a teenager for professional painters. Still she continues her growth and her journey as an artist. As a saviour of art, Frida inspires Mrs Ali to put her paintings to an exhibition. First, Mrs Ali was reluctant

to come out of her comfort zone; later she was invited to fly to Europe to witness her painting exhibition. Though she faced cultural and language barriers, she reached the foreign land. At the cafe two men were busy drinking wine and having a conversation. This made a quiet connection between Mrs Ali's isolation and her companionship with the outer world. (Anjum Hasan). By closing the analysis, the researcher finds out that the story, *The Same Experiment Again*, challenges the traditional way of storytelling and presents the existential dilemma of a modern man which shows how an experimental artist is free from a recursive loop of memory. Contrary to this, *The Big Picture*, motivates for the stability of art, connection of life, selfhood in spite of cultural unfamiliarity. The story interrogates the role of artists in society.

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Shajar Uddin

Dr. Shajar Uddin is an Assistant Professor in the Department of English at Shri Varshney College, Aligarh. His academic interests include poetry, literary criticism and theory, Indian English literature, postcolonial studies, and contemporary cultural issues. His research and publications engage with themes such as identity, loneliness, Indian landscapes, women's writing, youth culture, and literary representation.

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