

Identity politics and the conditions of production: reflections on writing short stories

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This paper is based on elements of my own professional, and to a large extent, personal and political identity. As such, it's drawn from my practice as a writer and teacher of creative fiction as well as research and teaching endeavours which are grounded in the world of sociology and social policy.

I'll start with something of a preamble as a means of situating the short story as an efficient and effective means of communicating every day life, including experiences and voices that may otherwise go unnoticed, hidden, or, as the literature would have it, remain marginal and perhaps marginalized. Of course, we all know that the short story presents writers with an opportunity to be heard, to leave a calling card that may elicit further engagement with their work; for some, a short story is more than an advert but the fact remains, it can serve as an invitation for our reader to discover more of the authorial same. Additionally, the shape, duration and, of course, the nature of the stories themselves – including questions of theme, genre and the audiences they aim to serve – are all part of the larger equation of what a short story is. As Susan Lohafer notes:

‘Whatever a story *is*, how it *behaves*, the important thing is what it *reveals*. It's a magnifying glass for examining the techniques of impressionism, say, or the assumptions of postmodernism, or the social data caught in its prism. Famously associated with “submerged populations” and the “lonely voice” of the individual, the short story is the window on marginalized identities.’ (Lohafer, 2003: 1-2)

Through exploring the intersections between who the writer is and what the writer produces and, to an extent, why, my aim is to promote the view that the short story form is an ideal mechanism through which identity politics can be carried, serviced and transmitted. At the same time, I'll touch on how Britain's changing demography and attitudes toward multiculturalism impact theme, voice and audience.

Creative writing of all types can function as protest while also feeding into an expanding reservoir holding political ideologies, countercultures or modalities of resistance: the long and well charted field of post colonial literature, part of which took an explicitly anti colonialist, reactionary stance certainly says something about the connections between identity, voice, literature and, indeed, border whether we take it to be physical, cultural or political. Similarly, the politics of gender, sexuality as well as social class have not escaped the attention of writers in their work. According to Paul Mills, a poet and lecturer specializing in creative writing,

‘All writing is influenced by the conditions of its production. These conditions might be political or personal, close at hand, far in the background, almost invisible, unknowable, or very much in the foreground and invasive.’ (Mills, 2006: 7).

In a sense, this is an extension of the *write what you know* mantra but I like the detail, the optionality and the inherent reference to context; the fact that the conditions – no matter what they are – make a difference to the writer. Meanwhile, in an essay called ‘Why I Write’, George Orwell talks about motives. For him, one reason why we write as opposed to what we write, is about,

‘Sheer egoism. Desire to seem clever, to be talked about, to be remembered after death, to get your own back on the grown-ups who snubbed you in childhood, etc. etc.’ (Davison, 1996: 7).

Both quotes and the ideas they hold help define my own approach to writing and especially some of my own work, in particular the short stories I’ve written over the years. Preamble now over, I guess I’ll start, unlike some of my stories, at the beginning.

Getting Laced. That’s the name of the first short story I ever wrote. Of course, it wasn’t called a short story back then. In those days the teacher would tell us to do some ‘composition’ work or prose, maybe. So I produced a few badly handwritten sides in an exercise book: a couple of friends and me hitting the local pub instead of the school canteen one lunchtime. We were fifteen years old but the pub landlord, he turned a blind eye to under age boozers all the time. Wasn’t such a big deal in those days, but then, nothing was: cigarettes wouldn’t kill you as much and neither would the world, no such thing as global warming let alone jihad. That story of mine, it

started off good and mellow; three friends on an urban adventure but it moved into violence easy enough: a bunch of Nazi bikers rolled into the pub; mean looks followed by spilt pints, our apologies offered but dismissed before their skulls landed on ours. In the story, we got the shit kicked out of us. In the story, I mentally cursed the pub landlord but prayed for him to reach for the phone, or under the counter for a double barrel shot gun. In the story, I watched him, typically, still looking the other way until I blacked out.

It wasn't really such a story, though. I remember feeling guilty after I turned it in for the teacher to mark. I felt even worse when she handed it back a couple of days later, all full of praise and surprise that someone like me could produce something like that: she went on and on about feeling, pace, tone and all the rest of that happy horseshit English teachers cream themselves over. I felt bad about it, like I conned her and everyone else in the class. How could you call reality a story? Worse still, it wasn't even reality: in the process of writing, I embellished. I lied. They weren't greasy Nazi bikers at all but a handful of well dressed, neatly turned out Mods. I lied more, of course. I cursed one with a harelip, afflicted another with a squint, another too many missing teeth. In my telling of the story, I made grunts as they beat me. In reality, I screamed like a little girl. My telling of the story, it was neither one thing nor the other. Not real, not made up either. And that bugged the hell out of me.

But that, I started to believe some fifteen years later, is how it is with writing. The world makes you write what you write – but how you write, that's down to your own neuroses and biases. I'm pretty sure most people realize this, or have a view of this kind of position. But this is especially relevant when it comes to writing that takes place in – and is of – political minorities. I use this term as a catch all means of referring to groups who may be in the numerical minority but also possess, significantly, less political power than those who belong to mainstream, centred and neutral positions. I guess I'm talking about what some would call 'Others' whether referring to sexuality, ethnicity or culture. In the British context, these deviants have often been foreign but not necessarily distant – the Irish, for example, were and arguably still are one of the most demonized of all 'ethnic' and religious groups. Throughout the course of the twentieth century, and even up to the present day, race has figured heavily in the British social imaginary and consciousness. Actually, race, ethnicity, culture or indeed those markers of identity which are more closely linked to faith and religion, appear to be significant throughout the contemporary global landscape. However, the British experience of Empire continues to permeate

contemporary life for so called indigenous populations and for those who are of former migrant, former colonial, heritage. It is against this evolving backdrop that the utility of literature, and art in general – and the short story form in particular – is rendered a useful means through which issues pertaining identity politics are presented, explored and offered to readers. As a way of adding some depth to the points I'm making, it's perhaps useful to locate them within something concrete.

Alan Paton's 'The Waste Land', published in a collection entitled 'Tales from a Troubled Land' (1961), for example, is a short story that on the surface is fairly straight forward: a man ends up unwittingly killing his own son who was part of a gang wanting to rob him. The story has an inherent quality of sadness reflecting the situation of the ordinary impoverished, those mired in and subject to oppression, injustice and inhumanity. However, underlying the detail of the story is the author whose social data informs the work. It's more than sad that a son is killed by his own father but beyond that, the story evokes desolation, desperation and perhaps even betrayal. This, Paton is telling us, is what happens when the 'world is dead,' or perhaps when it's been left for dead. The last time I read that story was a while before I produced 'Getting Laced' and it's stuck in my mind ever since. I'm fairly sure the word Apartheid is not mentioned even once. Doesn't have to be because what Paton shows us are the consequences of oppression. No preaching, no polemic – just life as he sees it. Of course, there is a whole industry devoted to analyzing such texts and I'm fully aware that my précis here is very limited. The point I'm keen to underline is that such stories have a duality at the very least: the obvious and keenly overt story in which things happen alongside a layer of social commentary, the author's subtle or not so subtle imposition upon the reader of what is right but more usually what is wrong with the space she or he inhabits. Although there's a world of difference between 'Getting Laced' and 'The Waste Land', both have a political pulse running through them. In Paton's case, inequality, injustice and all the dehumanizing elements that he saw around him fed – and fed into – his work. In my case, sure, it might have been about casual racism and the casual violence it results in but it didn't explicitly convey a politics of identity, marginality or oppression and nor, for that matter, did it aim to: mine was mostly an act of Orwell's quasi therapeutic voodoo; of rewriting reality so that you can move on and live with yourself. Any political dimensions that appeared in my work at that point were accidental, unintentional. It was only later, much later, that a sense of politics and, more importantly, aspects important to my identity, started to figure in whatever I wrote.

Within the traditional tranche of work which is somehow embedded in the discourse of post colonial literature, no matter where in the world it springs from, there are some obvious and familiar themes, many of which directly or otherwise service identity politics. I'm not saying, by the way, that all minority writers (however you want to define minority) are fixated with righting present and past injustices and nor am I of the view that post colonial literature has solely been about the condition or memory of the colonial or post colonial subject. However, more often than not, this tradition – if we can call it that – does operate within a political and historical context. So while I've touched on race as well as oppression, there are often references to diaspora, migration, place and belonging. Instead of Paton, I could have talked about Saadat Hasan Manto, Ismat Chughtai and Rajinder Singh Bedi – all of whom wrote before, during and after the Partition of India. No prizes for guessing the themes they pursued in their work.

Quite naturally, for a newer generation of post post colonial writers, things are different; themes have become modified or have disappeared altogether. Past oppressions, injustices and events may figure in a collective memory or consciousness, but more pressing and immediate conditions filter through into our writing. So, instead of writing about or around British Colonialism and The Raj, it's more necessary and more natural to explore and at times counter normative but often simplistic understandings of the present social world.

In the British context, especially post 9/11, questions of and around identity politics have resurfaced in very distinct ways. Citizenship, belonging, rights and loyalty to the state, to the idea of democracy, decency and a certain morality have all been thrust upon Muslims by politicians, academics, writers and journalists. I thought about going on some protest march but I couldn't see the point. So I moaned, got pissed off then moaned some more. Then something happened. No, I didn't become radicalized and I didn't invest in a new back pack, either. What did I do? Well, I wrote a short story called 'Taxi Driver'. I'm not sure if it started out as a reaction to what I perceived to be flawed about the Islam-as-a-threat discourse but that's what it ended up becoming.

I have a disproportionate amount of friends who are taxi drivers. How do I know it's disproportionate? Well, nearly all my friends are or have been taxi drivers. Me, I could never be a taxi driver: hate driving for one thing and for another, I'm not always so keen on people. But after years of listening to my friends talk about their lives on the road, I started to write this story about a taxi driver and a typical, or not so typical

night on the job. This was soon after a bunch of young Muslim men killed themselves and a load of other people in London. I hated the things these men did but I resented the shit out of the subsequent media fallout and political rhetoric. The conditions of my production, my neurotic fixations – including concerns around integration, citizenship, race relations, human rights and representation, found their way into the story. Here's one abridged extract that I think illustrates some of this.

Some news programme by the looks of it. A few people sat on designer chairs and one guy – the presenter most likely – sat separately, asking some shit or other. The camera cuts to an Asian looking guy. Beard, glasses, smock covering him up to the neck – some kind of cleric or holy man, maybe. Not exactly what the integration mafia would dig, but it's still a free country; free enough for folks to wear what the hell they want. Hell, Friday nights you got all these damned students wearing all manner of creepy garb; flares and platforms and other bright and psychedelic bullshit. No one seems to mind about them let alone the ones with painted pallor and black everything else including fishnet stockings, stacked heels, super-straight hair, shiny lipstick, and shinier nail polish – and that's just the blokes.

The holy man opens his mouth and starts talking even more shit than the presenter. This guy seems pissed off – firing on more cylinders than he's got. Within a few seconds, he's got himself real worked up. Ranting. Unhinged. Maybe, I'm thinking, maybe he's one of us. Then again, maybe not – maybe he's one of those crazy Arabs you keep hearing about. Either way, there's no relief because he's there as a Muslim – to present his point of view which is ready to be taken as a widely held one. Could be I'm wrong but his performance looks bad and sounds a hell of a lot worse. Just what we need, another loony tunes pissing oil all over the flames.

'It's shit,' says Tab. 'This is so fucking shit, you know that.'

Ten, one of a few older drivers that I don't know too well, seems just as annoyed:

'Typical,' he says. 'But what do you expect? These fools, they find them, give them a platform and make us all look bad.'

The presenter asks someone else to come in and respond. It's a middle-aged looking guy but he seems okay: grey suit, a greying beard and a nice pair of cufflinks occasionally sparkling off the studio lights. He seems moderate. Calm, rational and peaceful. Hell, when he starts to speak, the man seems intelligent. As one, we breath a mental sigh of relief.

'This is more like it,' says Tab. 'This guy's alright.'

As the man with the mind gets into his flow, the holier than thou loony tunes pipes in and starts having a go, calling him a sell-out, a hypocrite and not a proper Muslim. The presenter asks Loony Tunes to shut up but he's not listening. Keeps going on and on. For the next few minutes, the other people on the panel try getting in their tuppence worth but Loony Tunes won't let them. Some young Muslim woman, scarf on her head, Oxbridge education under her belt and middle-class upbringing coming out of her mouth tries speaking over him but he's not having it for a second.

'Fuckinell,' says Tab. 'This is a joke, man.'

Sitting opposite the mad and not so mad Muslims is a local MP woman. Skinny, tall, grey haired and more self righteous than a reformed smoker, she tells him off, rude motherfucker that he is.

'She's a right racist bitch, this one,' says Tab. 'Always moaning on about thick pakis and that.'

I never figured Tab for anything other than what he looks to be: young punk wallowing in the fact that he's had little or no schooling to speak of. Should be doing something else – a proper job, maybe studying even – but not whiling the nights away as a pissant taxi operator. Only things I ever seen him express an interest in are his ten year-old Bimmer, his growing collection of bling and biatches. Seems I was wrong but that's okay. Hell, wish I was wrong about all the other Tabs I see kicking around, too.

Although the short story can attempt to do the work of representation, a baseline utility is one where audiences can be engaged with themes, ideas as well as voices that are often operant outside mainstream literature. Minority populations are by definition marginal. What the short story can do is offer insights into those worlds and worldviews that are often obscured or simply not available as visible and extant options. Why is the short story form ideal? It is often a confined form, at least in terms of length and thus is a window into that world rather than a fully fledged exploration. It can evoke emotions and responses from our reader without developing longer, more in depth and richer relationships. Ultimately, in a world where the construction and representation of the other remains a one sided and self evidently political practice, even the fragments and moments that build a short story are a vital means through which the self is recited while the other is reimagined and, perhaps, redefined.

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