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BA English Honours | Semester I | Calicut University

Introducing Print and Digital Narratives

Course Code: ENG1FM105 • Module 3 Notes

MODULE III: STORIES

1. The Art of the Narrative: Parable, Flash Fiction, and the Graphic Form

The short story represents one of the most agile, versatile literary forms ever developed. Emerging from ancient oral fable traditions and honed into a rigorous modern aesthetic by masters such as Edgar Allan Poe, Anton Chekhov, and Guy de Maupassant, the short story excels at capturing brief, intense slices of human experience. In a world characterized by accelerating time and fragmented attention, narrative storytelling has expanded into novel formal territories—including hyper-condensed flash fiction and multimodal graphic narratives—while retaining its timeless power to disorient, interrogate, and illuminate human nature.

This module investigates four striking manifestations of narrative craft: Gracy's subversive Malayalam feminist parable of bodily autonomy, O. Henry's classic New York tale of urban irony and institutional entrapment, contemporary graphic narratives combining visual illustration with poetic vulnerability, and George Saunders's tragicomic American flash masterpiece of paternal alienation. Across diverse geographic and formal frontiers, these stories reveal how narrative technique directly mirrors the psychological and social complexities of modern existence.

2. Mythic Subversion and Female Autonomy: Gracy's *The Rock*

Gracy (born 1959) is one of the most fiercely independent, daring voices in modern Malayalam feminist literature. Translated into English with remarkable nuance by distinguished literary scholar V. C. Haris, her short story *The Rock* (*Paara*) operates as a radical feminist subversion of classical patriarchal myths regarding female sexuality, marital obedience, and bodily surrender.

The narrative centers upon a married woman who experiences her husband's physical intimacy not as an act of reciprocal love, but as an invasive, relentless domestic entitlement. Night after night, the husband demands marital access to her body, treating her as a passive, conquered possession whose personal desires and emotional consent are utterly irrelevant. The wife suffers in silent exhaustion, suffocated by the societal and religious dictates that mandate unquestioning wifely submission.

One night, during her husband's routine assault, the woman undergoes an astonishing psychological and physical transformation: she wills herself to become completely devoid of feeling, turning her body into an unyielding, cold, impenetrable slab of granite rock. When the husband attempts to touch her, his hands scrape against hard, unforgiving stone; his passionate demands shatter against absolute mineral silence. Gracy reverses the classical Hindu myth of Ahalya—who was cursed by her husband Gautama to become a stone until redeemed by the footstep of Rama. In Gracy's feminist revision, petrification is not a patriarchal curse; it is a conscious act of female rebellion. By becoming a rock, the woman removes her body forever from the economy of male ownership, finding sovereignty in cold, invincible stillness.

3. Urban Irony and the Institutional Trap: O. Henry's *The Cop and the Anthem* (1904)

O. Henry (William Sydney Porter, 1862–1910) defined the American short story of the early twentieth century through his warm humor, intimate knowledge of New York City's working-class and marginalized denizens, and his signature plot device: the "O. Henry twist" or surprise ending. Published in 1904, *The Cop and the Anthem* remains a timeless masterpiece of social irony.

The protagonist, Soapy, is a homeless resident of Madison Square Park who faces the existential dread of the impending New York winter. Lacking money, family, or shelter, Soapy views the municipal prison on

Blackwell's Island as his ideal winter resort: three months of guaranteed food, a clean bed, and protection from the freezing winds, free from the humiliating patronizing charity of philanthropic institutions. Soapy systematically executes a series of minor criminal acts designed to secure his arrest by the police:

- **Attempt 1 (High-end Dining Fraud):** He attempts to enter an upscale Broadway restaurant to consume an expensive meal without paying, but is immediately turned away at the door by the headwaiter who spots his frayed trousers and worn shoes.
- **Attempt 2 (Property Destruction):** He hurls a paving stone through a plate-glass shop window. However, when the police officer arrives, the cop refuses to believe Soapy is guilty because real criminals do not stand around calmly conversing with the police!
- **Attempt 3 (Diner Theft):** He eats a modest meal at a cheap diner and openly announces he has no money. Instead of calling a police officer, the disgusted waiters simply drag Soapy into the street and throw him onto the pavement.
- **Attempt 4 (Public Harassment & Disorderly Conduct):** He publicly harasses an undercover sex worker (who ironically agrees to accompany him!) and dances drunkenly in front of a theater, but the observing cop dismisses him as a harmless, rowdy college student celebrating a football victory.
- **Attempt 5 (Theft of an Umbrella):** He steals an umbrella from a man in a cigar store, but the owner refuses to pursue charges because the umbrella was itself stolen property found in a restaurant!

Exhausted and humiliated by his repeated failures to get arrested, Soapy wanders to the quiet outskirts of the city and stops before an ancient, quaint church. Through the stained-glass window, the solemn organist plays a sacred anthem that Soapy knew in his childhood. The transcendent music triggers a profound spiritual awakening: memories of mother, clean thoughts, and lost ambitions rush through his soul. Soapy resolves to transform his life—to find work, abandon vagrancy, and reclaim his manhood.

At that exact moment of supreme moral redemption, a police officer taps Soapy on the shoulder and asks what he is doing loitering outside the church. Soapy's faint, polite response is treated as suspicious; the next morning, the magistrate sentences Soapy to three months of hard labor on Blackwell's Island! O. Henry's cruel twist exposes the absurd indifference of institutional justice: society ignores Soapy's desperate cries for help when he seeks punishment, but savagely crushes him the precise moment he attempts moral rehabilitation.

4. Visual Poetry and Graphic Narratives

The intersection of visual art, sequential illustration, and literary text has emerged as one of the most dynamic storytelling mediums of the digital era. The syllabus highlights two distinct contemporary graphic works:

Sanjana's *Nahi Bol Payi, Bas Nahi Bol Payi* (Terribly Tiny Tales)

Composed as a visual-verbal micro-narrative for the popular digital storytelling platform *Terribly Tiny Tales* (TTT), Sanjana's *Nahi Bol Payi, Bas Nahi Bol Payi* ('Couldn't Say, Just Couldn't Say') confronts the pervasive culture of female silence surrounding sexual harassment, eve-teasing, and domestic intimidation in Indian society.

Through minimalist visual frames and sparse, emotionally suffocating prose, the narrative documents the countless everyday instances where a young woman is subjected to predatory male gazes, inappropriate physical touch in crowded public buses, and casual misogynistic comments. In each instance, the victim experiences the paralyzing physical sensation of throat constriction: she wants to scream, to confront, to expose the perpetrator, but the crushing social conditioning of female shame, fear of victim-blaming, and internalized vulnerability render her mute. The repeated refrain—*Nahi bol payi, bas nahi bol payi*—captures

the structural silence enforced upon women, transforming an individual trauma into a powerful collective indictment of societal complicity.

Naoko Fujimoto's *How to Choke Myself in the Ugly Kitchen*

Japanese-born visual poet Naoko Fujimoto has pioneered the unique genre of "graphic poetry," wherein hand-drawn illustrations, paper collages, and poetic verse are composed simultaneously on large surfaces. In *How to Choke Myself in the Ugly Kitchen*, Fujimoto explores the psychological claustrophobia, culinary labor, and generational domestic alienation experienced by women.

The domestic kitchen—traditionally idealized in patriarchal discourse as the warm heart of the home—is rendered as an "ugly," menacing space of entrapment. Through surrealist visual iconography (knives, cutting boards, boiling pots, fractured human limbs, and traditional Japanese ingredients like miso and daikon), Fujimoto illustrates how daily food preparation can become an act of self-erasure. The graphic layout forces the reader's eye to travel non-linearly across the page, mirroring the fragmented, anxious interiority of the speaker as she struggles to breathe beneath the weight of domestic expectations.

5. American Austerity and Paternal Silence: George Saunders's *Sticks* (1993)

George Saunders (born 1958), winner of the 2017 Booker Prize for *Lincoln in the Bardo*, is celebrated as America's greatest living master of the tragicomic short story. Originally published in 1993 in *Harper's Magazine*, *Sticks* is a celebrated masterpiece of flash fiction, spanning barely two pages yet delivering the emotional weight of an expansive family novel.

The narrative is recounted by an adult son who observes the eccentric, compulsive ritual of his father. Outside their suburban home stands a metal pole (an iron cross) planted in the front yard. The father, an emotionally repressed, intensely frugal man, decorates the pole for every seasonal holiday: a Santa suit for Christmas, Uncle Sam for the Fourth of July, a yellow ribbon for military veterans, and a bunny suit for Easter. The children view the decorated pole as a source of mild embarrassment and amusement, while the father tends to it with obsessive precision, measuring the string and collecting every discarded bit of wire.

As the narrative progresses with breathless temporal velocity, the family ages: the mother dies, the adult children move away, and the father is left alone in the silent house. Grief unhinges the father's defensive emotional armor. The decorations on the pole transform from festive public displays into bizarre, terrifying manifestations of raw psychological agony. He dresses the pole in his deceased wife's nightgowns, hangs painted signs pleading for forgiveness, attaches photographs of his children, and strings up dead birds and old socks. When the father dies, the children sell the house, and the new owner unceremoniously pulls the metal pole out of the ground with a backhoe and leaves it by the curb for trash collection.

In less than five hundred words, Saunders captures the tragedy of American post-war masculinity: the inability of a father to articulate love, grief, and mortal vulnerability through words, resorting instead to crude material objects. The metal pole becomes a grotesque monument to human loneliness—an agonizing symbol of love that could only express itself through silence and scrap metal.

Advanced Multimodal & Cultural Studies Synthesis

In contemporary cultural studies and multimodal narrative theory, mastering *Introducing Print and Digital Narratives* demands a critical synthesis of textual, visual, and socio-political methodologies. Contemporary narratives transcend the traditional boundaries of the printed codex; they operate within dynamic convergence cultures where oral traditions, cinematic moving images, digital streaming algorithms, and graphic illustrations constantly cross-pollinate. Critical inquiry into Short Fiction, Parable, Feminist

Subversion, and Flash Aesthetics requires examining how ideology, power, and identity are negotiated across diverse narrative media.

1. Contemporary Critical Dilemmas and Theoretical Frameworks

Scholars and cultural analysts interrogating Short Fiction, Parable, Feminist Subversion, and Flash Aesthetics navigate fundamental dialectics across multimodal forms:

- **Textual Purity versus Multimodal Convergence:** While traditional literary criticism privileged purely linguistic elements (syntax, metaphor, meter), contemporary digital and print culture mandates multimodal literacy. Theorists like Gunther Kress and Theo van Leeuwen demonstrate that visual layout, typography, soundtrack, color grading, and framing constitute semiotic modes that convey independent ideological meaning. Analyzing Short Fiction, Parable, Feminist Subversion, and Flash Aesthetics necessitates reading images, sounds, and texts as unified semiotic systems.
- **Subaltern Agency and Representation of the Peripheries:** The democratization of digital media has empowered marginalized communities—Dalit writers, queer creators, racial minorities, and colonized voices—to dismantle elite cultural hegemony. Spivak's query "Can the Subaltern Speak?" is answered through grassroots digital storytelling, protest poetry, and independent docu-fiction that bypass corporate and caste gatekeepers.
- **Commodification versus Counter-Hegemonic Dissent:** Late capitalism possesses a voracious ability to co-opt radical dissent into marketable consumer commodities (from commodified protest songs to commercialized fair-skin debates). Cultural critics must rigorously distinguish between superficial aesthetic tokenism and authentic, transformative counter-hegemonic critique.

2. Comparative Analytical Assessment

A structured comparative assessment delineates the aesthetic, structural, and political dimensions across conventional print and contemporary multimodal narratives in Introducing Print and Digital Narratives:

Evaluation Dimension	Traditional Print Paradigm	Contemporary Multimodal / Digital Paradigm	Strategic Scholarly Impact
Sensory Engagement	Monolithic linguistic decoding relying entirely on typographical symbols.	Multi-sensory orchestration combining voice, music, cinematography, graphic art, and text.	Deepens affective immersion and cognitive retention across diverse learning demographics.
Narrative Speed & Span	Linear temporal progression unfolding across chapters and extended book formats.	Non-linear compression (flash fiction, micro-memoirs, lyrical shorts, multi-layered visual montage).	Cultivates intense hermeneutic focus, demanding active inferential decoding from audiences.
Cultural Inclusivity	Metropolitan, elite literary circles defining canonical acceptability.	Decentralized grassroots expression celebrating indigenous dialects, queer narratives, and subaltern histories.	Democratizes knowledge production and dismantles institutional exclusionary barriers.
Societal Intervention	Reflective aesthetic distance often divorced from immediate public activism.	Immediate real-time intervention in human rights, environmental justice, and anti-caste movements.	Converts literature into an actionable catalyst for civic mobilization and legislative awareness.

3. Glossary of Multimodal and Cultural Theory Terms

Theoretical Term	Origin / Scholar	Comprehensive Definition & Media Application
Multimodality	Kress & van Leeuwen	The integration of multiple semiotic modes (visual, verbal, gestural, auditory) within a single communicative event or artifact to generate holistic meaning.
Convergence Culture	Henry Jenkins	The cultural paradigm where old and new media collide, grassroots and corporate media intersect, and the power of media producers and consumers interacts in unpredictable ways.
Counter-Hegemony	Antonio Gramsci	Cultural and intellectual resistance designed to critique and dismantle the pervasive, normative common-sense ideologies of the ruling class.
Transmedia Storytelling	Jenkins / Scolari	A narrative technique where distinct elements of a fictional universe are dispersed across multiple delivery channels (books, web, games) for a unified entertainment experience.
Affective Labor	Hardt & Negri	Labor that produces or manipulates affects, feelings of ease, well-being, satisfaction, excitement, or passion, increasingly central to digital media economies.
Defamiliarization	Viktor Shklovsky	The artistic technique of presenting common things in an unfamiliar or strange way to enhance the perception of the familiar.

4. Methodological Roadmap for Cultural Analysis

Conducting scholarly analysis of Short Fiction, Parable, Feminist Subversion, and Flash Aesthetics follows an organized four-phase critical protocol:

- **Phase 1: Semiotic Decoding:** Systematically identifying signifiers, visual symbols, musical motifs, and linguistic registers employed in the text or media work.
- **Phase 2: Historical and Ideological Contextualization:** Situate the work within its specific socio-economic milieu—analyzing caste hierarchies, postcolonial borders, gender expectations, or corporate media environments.
- **Phase 3: Intertextual Dialogism:** Juxtapose the primary work with related global cultural artifacts, examining how local traditions dialogue with international artistic currents.
- **Phase 4: Critical Reception and Ethical Evaluation:** Assessing the impact of the narrative upon public consciousness, ethical responsibility, and the cultivation of human empathy.

Advanced Multimodal & Cultural Studies Synthesis

In contemporary cultural studies and multimodal narrative theory, mastering *Introducing Print and Digital Narratives* demands a critical synthesis of textual, visual, and socio-political methodologies. Contemporary narratives transcend the traditional boundaries of the printed codex; they operate within dynamic convergence cultures where oral traditions, cinematic moving images, digital streaming algorithms, and graphic illustrations constantly cross-pollinate. Critical inquiry into Module 3 Extended Cultural and Media Commentary requires examining how ideology, power, and identity are negotiated across diverse narrative media.

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