

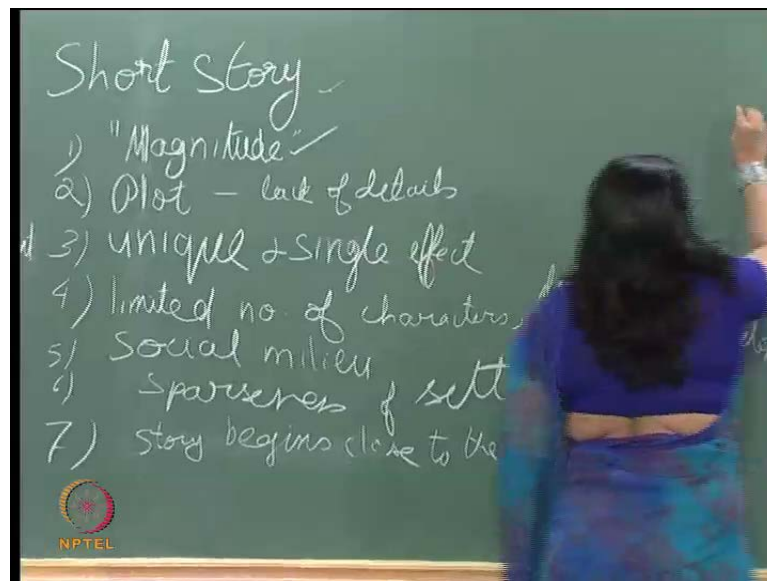
**Contemporary Literature**  
**Prof. Aysha**  
**Department of Humanities and Social Sciences**  
**Indian Institute of Technology, Madras**

**Module No. # 01**

**Lecture No. # 25**

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, what would you name? 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.

(Refer Slide Time: 00:59)



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, Hermann (C), who wrote a short story Billy Bud. 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 a plot. So, it has to be extremely focused, very concentrated on one single major event. So, and it cannot afford any lack

of detailing and descriptions. The whole idea of writing a short story is to create a unique and single effect. I was just talking about, we cannot afford to have too many digressions, too many of detailing, too much of descriptions.

A short story, unlike a novel or a lengthy play, is limited to very few characters. You 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 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 would you find in a novel by Charles Dickens or Thackeray. And a short story writer just does not have the luxury to develop his characters that way.

Social milieu, it is constraint 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 Salmon Rushdie's *Firebird's Nest* we are going to look at what milieu he is concentrating on. Sparseness 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 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 arising action and then you have a climax, we have done all these. 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, 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. 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 two maximum of two hours of reading, should not go. Therefore, these are the constraints which the short story

writer has to work. I would also like to add Ernest Hemingway to it who is a master story teller 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 the metamorphosis. Now, I am ready to tell how bodies are changed into different bodies. So, definitely this is story about transformation, some kind of transformation that is about to happens. So, with the very opening quotation, with 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 **sere**. The rains have failed so often that now this say instant the drought succeeded. There are plainsmen livestock farmers, but their cattle are deserting them. The cattle staggering migrates out and east in search of water and rattle as they walk. Their skulls horned mileposts line the route of their vein exodus. There is water to the west, but it is salt. Soon even these marshes will have given up the ghost. Tumble weed blows across the leached grey flats. There are cracks big enough to swallow a man. An apt enough way for a former 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 burnt. 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 here, Mr. Maharaj. Now, again a representative character. He is a an erstwhile prince of some princely state in India. And 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 weariness were built of music. Half a century ago, his father riding through the forest would hum along with their **arias** 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 it's nests in a secret place that has not been revealed.

The firebird, 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 Maharaja's father, he would go on hunting spree. But now, the irony is that 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 of a bright burning fire. It is **as throughout**, the narrative.

There are no princes now, the government abolish them decades ago. So, now another dominant theme is that of the conflict between modernity and the old decadent times. The very idea of princes has become in our modern country a fiction. Something from the time of feudalism, a fairy tale. So, now you also have the reference to a fiction. Fiction implicit within a story fable. So, a land now has been reduced or our history has been reduced to nothing, but fiction to a fable. This was once a fabulous land, this was once a legendary place, where 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 astripped from them, they have no power over us. In this place the prince has become plain Mr. Maharaja. So, the erstwhile prince now is Mr. Maharaj. He has been astripped 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 heads a commission that seeks to extirpate the public corruption that is the countries bane. In his youth he was a mighty sportsman, but since his retirement he has

had no time for games. He heads 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. Rushdie is just being very ironical, he is trying to draw our attention to the inherent conflict, to the inherent contradiction 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 **rewired**. The American bride watching, intuits that she has passed into a place in which, that which was abolished is the truth.

So, all the royalty is abolished by the government by the decree of the central government, but still it is a reality for these poor villagers, they have no connection with forces of modernity, they still are in the same old period. That she has passed into the place in which, that which was abolished is the truth. And it is the government far away in the fiction, that is 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, his 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.

As though she were 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 were becoming that page itself, that surface on which her story would be written and across 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, innovated, 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 this whole while I encountering, this whole new cultural setup. 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 quarry, 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 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 of 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 these 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 language's conventions think of fire as red or gold. Fire is blue at its melancholy rim. So, colors of fire. Now, fire traditionally regarded as yellow, as golden red is not so. That is what Rushdie tells us. Its 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 beautiful imagery that Rushdie employs here. Colors of fire, not the traditionally accepted colors red and gold, but also the colors of envy, green. Colors of life, perhaps blue. Water also is blue, the life giving force. But it could also be white, turning everything to its 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 sari, 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. 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 concept of masculinity, what is it like being a man, so in the wisdom of manhood. They have accepted it as a part their culture. Women do burn and they revere a women, they salute a women who voluntarily goes or performs this ritual. And this is the fact of life. Women burns easily. She burn as paper burns. Because there is nothing in them. 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 say. Men are earth; solid, enduring. But the ladies are capricious unstable. So, see there is a dichotomy, there is a binary in the essence of the two sexes, 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 have spent 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 corrals. Corrals, 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 and there are all kinds of stories. So, you see the idea of a story is very much a part of this story. Story is within the mean 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 dash. 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 suns and rains to this land of hopelessness, other side of their story. No she is poor, the gossip flashes. Her father hanged himself when she was born, her mother was a whore. She also is a creature of wilderness and rocky ground. The drought is in her body, like a curse she is barren.

So, two sides, two binaries again exist. People do not even know her, but she has already been turned into to a story to a legend. There is enough orders or the gossip mills around. She is rich, on the other hand, she is stock poor. She is fertile, she will bring a sun as well as rain, 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 searched 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 iniquity and brought despair into his palace has succumbed to yellow-haired doom. So, 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 and entrance to nowhere. So, all these expressions and words leading 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 fable, it is like a fairy tale. Once upon a time in America, they had shared an Indian lunch. Three hundred feet above 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, yet said flirty, 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 oneness. 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, 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.

Because she was an American he spoke to her of money. She is a cliché, she is an American so therefore, she must be extremely materialistic. She has to be wowed with money. The old protectionist legislation, the outdated socialism that had hobbled the economy for so long has been replaced. Then 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 favored projects the monetary nourishment they required.

A rain maker. So, you see he needed the money. She is the proverbial rain maker, a person who can bring bounties to a famish 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 performers deeds. It was her city, her state and she was confident and young. His palace unfortunately is abominable. So, we have told, we are just given slight backdrop of their romance, the world wine 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, let becomes straight to the point. Now, she sees, now she feels the palace is abominable. It crumbles, strings. In her rooms the curtain are tattered. So, this entire idea of decadence, a poverty, even a prince can be poor. So, he is not one of the princess from fairy tales and fables. This is the reality. He is a prince just in name. He does not have much offer. His palace crumbles, stings. So, like everything the king around her, around that place, that his palace also stings and crumbles. In her room the curtains are tattered. The bed precarious, the pictures on the wall phonographic representations of **arabesque** couplings at some petty princeling's court.

Loud music plays in ill-lit corridors, but she cannot find its sources. Shadow is scurry from her sight, 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 bent outward, their splay-fingered hands semaphoring 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 court yard is in shadow. The sun has yet not lent the stone its fire. At the dancers head, tallest of them all fiercely erect, showing them how. Is Mr. Maharaj's sister over sixty years old? But still the greatest dancer in the state. Miss Maharaja has seen the new comer, but makes no acknowledgment. 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 sixty year old sister and his young American bride.

What are you doing? A dance against the firebird, a propitiatory dance **to ward** it off. The firebird she thinks of *Stravinsky* of Lincoln's center. See, she is not aware of the ancient customs and the cultural references here. Firebird immediately she makes reference or she associates with a an opera stravinsky's lincoln theater famous opera, but she does not really know what is the exact metaphor for so called firebird.

A dance against firebird they are trying to ward off the curse of the firebird. This is the dance all about. 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 right. It is a story which just a myth, unsubstantiated story. But here there are no old wife's tales, alas there are no old wives. They do not live that long, there are no old wives, how can be there old wife's 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 stinking palace Mr. Maharaja has prepared an extravaganza. By moonlight we need hot stars on great carpets. A gathering of degenerates and nobles welcomes her. The finest musicians played the 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 her 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 logged in his palace vaults. I take them out for nobody he says, expect misses Onassis of course. For you, I will spread them in my garden as I did for Jackie o

So, she is been treated like the American royalty and all the ex-princes and the bureaucrats, the moneyed class they have invited there to welcome her in 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 impoverish 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 empowered, this is a land which is suffering. 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 jester position of two very contradictory worlds, Arabian night, a total setting of decadences, luxury, American dream, we all know where hard work and industriousness can yield great dividends. Some marriage between the Arabian nights 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 it 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 jester position. 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 cruelous. His words that have caused this pain, this enormous pain. She says I have something to tell you, she is pregnant, she dreams a burning bridges, of burning boot. So, again the imagery of fire and thinks 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 and 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 drought 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 head-dazed swoon. Romance has 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. Has signed 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 achieve entertainer. So, just by exhibiting by himself, he is supposed to attract more customers at the casino, at the gambling den.

The satellite dish franchises are more lucrative, but this greedy old wreck of a country residence needs to eat off far richer platters if it is to be properly fed. In order to maintain that house, the money that comes from satellite dishes is just not enough. Therefore, the need for American bride This rural palace is ageless, perhaps six hundred 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 state rooms 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 hold 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 an illusion. And they have these delusions of (( )), 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. An 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 unwieldiness, 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 luxury's acme. Glass in the windows, the slow turning electric fan, a telephone with sometimes a dialing tone, a socket for her laptop's 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 murmuring at a side. Yes a fine body, it could have been a dancer's, it will burn well. She is alarmed. All brides in these parts are brought home from far a feel and where is the men have spend their dowries, then the fire bird comes. Do not threaten me , perplexed. Do you know how many brides 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 brides have no other fate, but burn that is what the fate is, that is what they are 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, fox. Everyone's perspiration is thick and stinks. In spite of all her resolutions, the heat hypnotizes 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 body in hot colors and wild designs, making loves and sleeping with limbs and wines. Mr. Maharaj does not come to her, will not while she is carrying. But each night Miss Maharaj comes. Since her brother's descent upon her dance class, Miss Maharaj has barely spoke. 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 fever.

During these 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 fire. So, there is some kind of element till 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 animal is their between us 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, 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 beautiful girl, but then there are no happily ever afters, as we seen even in **garish kerned**. Rushdie somehow the reinforcing the same ideal, 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 eye dimmed, but she the dancer refused to fade. At the age of fifty, she had the look of a young woman to twenty one. 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 burnt, they both died. He had suspected his wife of talking 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 villagers 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 husbands 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 you were seeing Aristotle's the possible, the probable impossibility. So, there was once a prince and his princess died, oh 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 form of a firebird, he comes periodically and avenges upon the women of that land. The firebird is nothing, but metaphors 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 her job. She tells Miss Maharaja her decision and the old dancer **winces** as if from a blow. This is not possible,

this extremely American liberal way of partying, you know, we will still remain friends even after we part. This is not culturally acceptable in those parts of the world and the mere suggestions comes as a blow.

In the dead of night, the American is awakened by the hubbub in the palace. In his corridors and courtyard, she dresses goes outside as scratch **are made** 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 driving the jeep shouting impatiently at her troops is Miss Maharaja.

What's 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 armada halts, 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 clear reference to Alice in Wonderland, through looking glass almost everything that is happening cannot be probable. 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 villagers. Facing the unhappy couple is Mr. Maharaj. The women burst shrieking upon the charmless scene, then come raggedly to a halt, intimidated by Mr. Maharaj's presence. The sister faces the brother. Somebody has left their lights flashing, the siblings face glow white, yellow, red, all the colors in 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. And so as clearly as if she comprehended every syllable she hears Miss 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 Miss Maharaj burns her to a cinder and then turns upon the dotards shrieking bride. I am the firebird's nest.

Something loosens within the American as she sees Miss Maharaj burn. Some shackle is broken, some limit of possibility passed. Unleashed, 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 which 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 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.

There has to be a balance of fire and rain between the two sexes. What is Rushdie 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 empowerment of the women.

So, we will continue by looking at most of the 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 sad end, we expect perhaps Miss Maharaj would be burnt alive or

something. But like in any 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 situations, their tragedies. So, that is one of the major features of any short story with complete unexpected twist at the end. We will continue with the genre of short stories in the next class. Thank you.