



# Stories as a Window into Different Cultures: Exploring Language, Literature, and Culture

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## Abstract

*Stories are more than entertainment—they are a mirror reflecting the beliefs, traditions, and Values of the people who create them. Across the world, from Indian folk tales like Panchatantra and Akbar-Birbal stories to global classics like Aesop’s Fables and The Arabian Nights, literature has been a way to preserve language and pass on cultural wisdom. This Paper explores how stories act as a “window” into different cultures, showing how language shapes meaning and how literature reflects identity. By comparing narratives from India and other parts of the world, it reveals the shared human emotions that connect cultures, as well as the unique expressions that make them distinct. The study also highlights how storytelling, whether in ancient oral traditions or modern written works, continues to bridge differences and promote cultural understanding in today’s interconnected world.*

**Keywords: storytelling, culture, language, literature**

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## Introduction

Stories are one of humanity’s oldest ways of understanding the world. Beyond entertainment, they teach values, preserve language, pass on history, and express identity. Studying stories across cultures shows that while people share common emotions like love, fear, and kindness, each culture expresses them uniquely, shaped by history, religion, and environment. India’s storytelling is not limited to the well-known Panchatantra or Akbar-Birbal tales. The

country has thousands of regional, tribal, and folk narratives that show how culture, religion, and daily life are connected.

### **Indian Stories as Cultural Mirrors**

*Munshi Premchand –*

*“Idgah” Year: 1938 Book: Idgah aur Anya Kahaniyan*

➤ On the day of Eid, poor Hamid has only three paise in his pocket. While other children buy toys



and sweets, he chooses to buy a pair of tongs for his grandmother's burnt hands. He sacrifices his own joy and childhood desires to ease her pain. Reflection: Shows poverty, sacrifice, and moral strength in rural India, where family duty outweighs personal pleasure.

*"Kafan" Book: Kafan aur Anya Kahaniyan 1936*

➤ A poor farmer Ghisu and his son Madhav watch Madhav's wife die during childbirth. Instead of helping her, they remain passive, hardened by hunger and misery. When villagers give them money to buy a shroud, they spend it on food and drink.

Reflection: Premchand critiques both the insensitivity of the poor as a result of extreme poverty, who lose their humanity under misery, and the social hypocrisy of the wealthy, who perform rituals without addressing suffering.

*Rabindranath Tagore – Kabuliwala Book: Galpaguchchha (1892)*

➤ Kabuliwala, a fruit seller from Afghanistan, befriends a little Bengali girl, Mini. Their innocent friendship bridges the cultural and emotional gap between two very different worlds. He is later imprisoned for a crime, and on release years later, finds Mini grown up and distant. Reflection: Tagore uses a simple relationship to portray the human bond beyond religion, class, or nationality, showing both the tenderness and fragility of cross-cultural ties.

*R.K. Narayan – An Astrologer's Day and Other Stories (1947)*

➤ A street astrologer sets up shop in a busy Indian marketplace, pretending to predict people's futures. One day, a stranger arrives, and through conversation, the astrologer realizes he is the man he once tried to kill. Using clever words, he convinces the stranger to leave town, thereby escaping his own past.

Reflection: It captures small-town Indian culture, where superstition, tradition, and modernity

intertwine, while also highlighting how fate and chance shape human destiny.

*Arundhati Roy – The God of Small Things (1997)*

➤ The novel follows twins Estha and Rahel, whose childhood is shaped by family tensions and societal rules. Their mother, Ammu, enters a forbidden relationship with Velutha, a man from a lower caste. Tragedy unfolds when love collides with rigid social barriers, leading to loss and suffering. Reflection: *The God of Small Things* mirrors Kerala's society by exposing how caste, gender, and political structures control individual lives.

*Jhumpa Lahiri – Interpreter of Maladies (1999)*

➤ Mr. Kapasi, an Indian tour guide, works as an interpreter for a doctor. During a trip with an Indian-American family, he listens to their personal struggles and silent tensions. He imagines a deeper connection with Mrs. Das, but it quickly fades when she withdraws. The story ends in disillusionment, reflecting loneliness, miscommunication, and cultural distance.

Reflection:

It shows how loneliness, displacement, and unspoken emotions shape modern lives, and how cross-cultural encounters reveal both intimacy and alienation.

*Vikram Seth – A Suitable Boy (1993)*

➤ Set in 1950s India, the novel follows Lata, a young woman pressured by her family to find a "suitable boy" for marriage. Her journey intertwines with India's broader struggles—partition memories, caste tensions, land reforms, and political upheavals. Lata faces suitors from different backgrounds, balancing love, tradition, and social expectations. Her eventual choice reflects the compromises between personal desire and family duty.

Reflection:

*A Suitable Boy* mirrors Indian society during its formative years after independence, where



marriage, caste, religion, and politics were deeply interwoven.

how rituals often perpetuate inequality instead of justice.

*Khushwant Singh – Train to Pakistan (1956)*

➤ In the peaceful village of Mano Majra, Hindus, Muslims, and Sikhs live side by side. Partition brings trains filled with corpses, turning neighbors into enemies overnight. The story follows Jugga, a local dacoit, who sacrifices himself to save a train of Muslim refugees.

Reflection:

Train to Pakistan portrays Partition not through politicians but through ordinary villagers, showing how communal violence, fear, and betrayal destroyed lives.

*Pinki Virani – Aruna’s Story Book/Collection: Aruna’s Story (1998)*

➤ Aruna Shanbaug, a nurse in Mumbai, was attacked and strangled by a ward boy in 1973. The assault left her in a vegetative state, dependent on care at KEM Hospital for the rest of her life. Pinki Virani narrates her story with compassion, questioning society’s silence and the failure of justice.

Reflection:

Aruna’s Story is not just a biography but a social document that raises questions about women’s dignity, medical ethics, and human rights.

**Indian Literature Across Social Themes**

*Traditions as Evils*

*Munshi Premchand –: Sadgati aur Anya Kahaniyan 1931*

➤ Dukhi, a poor Dalit man, goes to a Brahmin priest to fix his daughter’s wedding date. Instead of helping, the priest exploits him, forcing him into hard labour without food or rest. Exhausted, Dukhi collapses and dies, his body left unattended like waste.

Reflection:

Sadgati exposes the cruelty of caste traditions that dehumanize marginalized communities, showing

*Rabindranath Tagore – “Strir Patra” (The Wife’s Letter) 1914 Book: Galpaguchchha (1892)*

➤ Mrinal, a young wife in a conservative household, writes a letter to her husband before leaving forever. She describes her stifling life, marked by restrictions, neglect, and lack of respect. Through her act of departure, she asserts her independence and dignity.

Reflection:

Strir Patra challenges patriarchal traditions, highlighting women’s search for voice, freedom, and selfhood against oppressive family structures.

*Mahasweta Devi – “Hajar Churashir Ma” (Mother of 1084) 1974 Book:*

➤ Sujata, a mother, discovers her son has been killed as a Naxalite revolutionary, identified only as “corpse no. 1084.” While grieving, she realizes her family and society were indifferent to his ideals and silent about injustice. Her journey forces her to confront rigid traditions of obedience, silence, and blind authority.

Reflection:

Hajar Churashir Ma shows how traditions of family honor and political conformity suffocate truth, while real humanity lies in compassion and resistance.

*Rural Life*

*Premchand – Godaan (The Gift of a Cow) 1936*

➤ Hori, a poor farmer, dreams of owning a cow, a symbol of prosperity and respect in rural India. He struggles with debt, caste oppression, and family conflicts while trying to fulfill this dream. Despite hardships, Hori remains honest and hopeful until his death.

Reflection:

Godaan mirrors the exploitation, poverty, and resilience of rural peasants, showing both their suffering and their deep-rooted dignity.



*R.K. Narayan – Malgudi Days 1943*

- Set in the fictional town of Malgudi, these short stories depict ordinary people—astrologers, teachers, vendors, children—facing life’s joys and struggles. Through humor and irony, Narayan reveals the charm and simplicity of Indian small-town culture. Each story highlights how universal emotions emerge from local traditions.

Reflection:

Malgudi Days portrays the simplicity, warmth, and contradictions of rural and small-town India, blending tradition with modern change.

*Manoj Das – Farewell to a Ghost: Short Stories and a Novelette*

- In a coastal village, the ghost of a woman wronged in love lingers, becoming part of local lore. Through villagers’ stories, the ghost represents history, pain, and collective memory. The tale blends realism with folklore, capturing village life’s depth and imagination.

Reflection:

Farewell to a Ghost reflects rural India’s blend of superstition, history, and human emotions, where folklore becomes a mirror of social truths.

**Partition and Politics**

*Khushwant Singh – Train to Pakistan 1956*

- Set in the border village of Mano Majra, Hindus, Muslims, and Sikhs live peacefully until Partition violence erupts. When a train filled with corpses arrives, the village is thrown into fear and hatred. A Sikh bandit, Jugga, ultimately sacrifices himself to save Muslim villagers.

Reflection:

The novel captures the brutality of Partition, communal mistrust, and the tragic cost of politics on ordinary lives.

*Saadat Hasan Manto – “Toba Tek Singh” Book/Collection: Published in Phundne (Short story collection) 1955*

- Set in a mental asylum after Partition, inmates are to be exchanged between India and Pakistan. Bishan Singh, a patient, refuses to

accept whether his town, Toba Tek Singh, is in India or Pakistan. He collapses and dies on no-man’s land, symbolizing the absurdity of Partition.

Reflection:

Manto uses dark satire to show the madness, displacement, and senseless violence of Partition politics.

*Amitav Ghosh – The Shadow Lines 1988*

- Through memories of one family, the novel weaves stories of India, Bangladesh, and England. It explores how Partition, riots, and political violence leave invisible scars across generations. Borders are shown as fragile “shadow lines” that divide people more than they unite.

Reflection:

Ghosh reveals the psychological trauma of Partition and the artificial nature of political borders, stressing memory and identity.

**Patriotism in Indian Literature**

*Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay – Anandamath (1882, Bengali)*

- Set during the Sannyasi Rebellion in Bengal, the novel depicts a group of monks and peasants rising against oppressive rulers. It narrates their courage, sacrifices, and the spiritual zeal to serve the motherland. The hymn “Vande Mataram” becomes a symbol of patriotic fervor.

Reflection: True patriotism involves selfless sacrifice and dedication to the welfare of the nation. It inspires unity and courage in challenging times.

*Rabindranath Tagore – Where the Mind is Without Fear (1910, Poem, English/Bengali)*

- The poem imagines an India where people live without fear, narrow-mindedness, or division, and where knowledge and truth are freely pursued. Tagore calls for moral awakening and national pride based on intellect and freedom rather than blind obedience.



- Reflection: Patriotism is rooted in moral courage and intellectual freedom, aiming for a nation where dignity and unity prevail.

*Bhisham Sahni – Tamas (1974, Hindi)*

- Set during the Partition of India, the novel portrays the communal violence, fear, and hatred experienced by ordinary people. Amidst chaos, it also shows acts of courage, empathy, and humanity that transcend religious divides.  
Reflection: Patriotism is more than political loyalty; it is the commitment to human values, empathy, and social harmony.

**Women's Voices and Reinterpretations**

*Ismat Chughtai – Lihaaf (The Quilt) (1942, Urdu)*

- The story explores the loneliness and desires of Begum Jaan, who feels neglected by her husband. Through subtle intimacies with her female companion, she finds emotional and physical fulfillment, highlighting the constraints imposed on women in patriarchal society.  
Reflection: Chughtai's work challenges social taboos.

*Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni – The Palace of Illusions (2008, English)*

- Retelling the Mahabharata from Draupadi's perspective, the novel shows her struggles with destiny, marriage, and power  
Reflection: Divakaruni's reinterpretation empowers women's voices, highlighting their choices, struggles, and agency in history and mythology.

*Arundhati Roy – The God of Small Things (1997, English)*

- Set in Kerala, the novel follows Ammu, whose forbidden love and defiance of caste norms lead to tragic consequences. Through her story, the novel addresses gender discrimination, societal rigidity, and the impact of social hierarchies on personal lives.

Reflection: Roy emphasizes that patriarchy and social prejudice shape women's destinies, making the personal deeply political.

**Girl Child Abortion & Gender Bias**

*Pinki Virani – Bitter Chocolate (1998, English)*

- The book investigates child sexual abuse in India, exposing how society often ignores victims. While focusing on abuse, it also highlights the neglect and discrimination faced by girls, showing how gender bias affects protection and justice.  
Reflection: Virani emphasizes that gender bias in society harms children, especially girls, and calls for awareness and systemic change.

*Mahashweta Devi – Draupadi (1989, Bengali)*

- The story portrays Draupadi, a tribal woman, who is brutally abused by powerful men. Her body becomes a site of systemic violence, representing the oppression of women, particularly marginalized ones, in a patriarchal and feudal society.  
Reflection: Devi's story shows how violence against women is intertwined with social injustice, and the need to challenge oppressive structures.

*Bama – Karukku (1992, Tamil)*

- An autobiographical account of a Dalit girl growing up amidst caste and gender oppression, facing discrimination both at home and in society.  
Reflection: Bama highlights that gender bias cannot be separated from social hierarchies, urging awareness of marginalized girls' struggles.

**Prostitution & Marginalized Women**

*Saadat Hasan Manto – Kaali Shalwar (1940, Urdu)*

- The story follows a prostitute struggling to earn dignity and survive in a society that stigmatizes her  
Reflection: Manto emphasizes that society's judgment and hypocrisy worsen the plight of women, and dignity should not be measured by social prejudices.



*Premchand – Sevasadan (1918, Hindi)*

- The novel tells the story of a courtesan who rejects her oppressive life and seeks reform, advocating moral and social upliftment.

Reflection: Premchand shows that women, even marginalized, possess agency, and society must allow them opportunities to reclaim their lives.

*Girish Karnad – Nagamandala (1988, Kannada, play)*

- Using myth and fantasy, the play explores a woman trapped in an oppressive marriage and questions norms around female sexuality, fidelity, and societal judgment.

Reflection: Karnad portrays how oppression and societal expectations confine women, stressing empathy and understanding toward marginalized female experiences.

**Methodology**

Sources: Indian (Sanskrit classics, regional folktales, tribal myths) and global (African, Japanese, Norse,

Native American tales). Selected for cultural value, diversity, and lesser-known examples.

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