

Flash Fiction, Defamiliarization and Cultural Criticism: A Case Study of Salahshoor's *Please Smile*

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Abstract

It sounds like we have passed the stormy and turbulent epoch of theory. In fairness to literature, we should announce thunderously that literary theory was nothing but a political game which had literature as its means to get to its ends. Today, literary theory is more like a tottering decrepit old creature which garners no one's attention. That's why the current paper is going to forget the cares and concerns of theory and give heed to literature as a mirror reflecting man and his world. For this purpose, we have chosen a short short story, 'Please Smile,' to have it scrutinized. However, prior to studying this flash fiction we need to come up with a brief definition of flash fiction, due to a lack of theoretical criticism. Subsequent to the definition of the genre at hand, we offer the narrative and after that we study it precisely to see how it reflects, questions and challenges the existing culture.

Keywords: literary theory, flash fiction, defamiliarization, cultural criticism, short story, solipsism, Golden Rule

I. Literature, Literary Theory and beyond: as an Introduction

It sounds like we have passed the stormy and turbulent epoch of theory. In fairness to literature, we should announce thunderously that literary theory was nothing but a political game which had literature as its means to get to its ends. The players of the game, sadly, put a certain fact into the oblivion: that manipulating and playing with literature could not augur a rosy future, and that literature would soon claim itself from the pangs of political theories. It's not, notwithstanding, that philosophizing the literature is a recent phenomenon. It is manifestly as old as literature itself. Many people, who cast aspersions on the very idea of the *literature*, have vilified it brutally down the history lane: for example, literature, specifically poetry, is, according to Plato, "far removed from truth, and springs from improper knowledge and lack of understanding of both how to use and how to make what it describes" (Daiches, 1993, p. 22). Plato's attitude towards literature did not cease to stop with him there and then. In the centuries to come, eminent figures as Tertullian and Pope Gregory the Great "renounced all secular knowledge and viewed literature as a foolish pursuit" (Habib, 2012, p. 52). Boethius "echoed Plato's concern that the arts expressed unsavory emotions and that they could seduce men from the righteous path" (Habib, 2012, p. 52). During the Middle Ages, the abstemious orientation of monasticism caused certain Christian scholars not to yield an inch to art and worldly beauty in general: "St. Jerome, St. Basil, St. Bernard, and St. Francis all turned away from the beauty of nature as a distraction from the contemplation of the divine things" (Habib, 2012, p. 52).

Stephen Gosson's *School of Abuse* (1579) also encompassed a 'pleasant' invective against poets and other caterpillars of commonwealth. So far the figures mentioned keep a distance of at least several centuries from us; hence, a question would rise here. Is such a puritan tendency towards literature to be observed in the recent history, i.e., 20th century, too?

Twentieth century has witnessed certain hideous and gruesome neologies as 'death of literature,' the 'end of literature,' the 'death of culture,' 'death of author,' 'anti-art,' 'disappearance of literature,' and 'postculture.' Such concepts, as clear, made heaven and earth to cast shadow over the concept of literature, or even to murder it. In 'The Death of Literature,' Jacques Ehrmann and A. James Arnold (1971) assert that "literature, a dumping ground for fine feelings, a museum of 'belleslettres,' has had its day" (p. 43). Such a claim, that literature has no role and place in the contemporary world, does not come eccentric and alien. About a century and half earlier, Peacock's *The Four Ages of Poetry* (1820) announced, quite similarly, that poetry's foregoing august stature was being confiscated by its somehow new rival, science. Needless to say, the past century has also conducted a smear campaign against the literature, along the lines of former eras. But 20th century assault was more severe and critical. In his "The Attack on Literature," Rene Wellek studies and answers different facets of hostilities towards literature. Some considered literature as a 'constitutionally reactionary' entity which served the interests of the ruling class. They considered literature as the innovation of the oppressive class and is, therefore, an instrument of class oppression. The other assault which is far more fraught with danger, menacing and alarming is a distrust of language. Language is a mandatory component of literature, and one cannot imagine literature in the absence of language. Some adopted the worldview of aestheticians and called for art for art's sake, and yet some, played with literature by rendering various definitions of literature, definitions furthering their aims. Though such assaults threatened literature for a span of time, they could not cease literature of being literature. Consulting a book of literary history, for example *Short Oxford History of English Literature* by Andrew Sanders, one may irrefutably find literature mirroring man and his world during twentieth century just like previous centuries, and there are no two ways about it. The book is far from studying literature through binary oppositions, chain of signifiers, *difference*, trace of signifieds, undecidability of the text, bricolage, instability of self in language and many other similar concepts, quite familiar in the territory of theory. Literature is portrayed as an entity which helps people puzzle out the surrounding world. It is a mirror reflecting man and his surrounding universe through various frames of mind, and lets us get involved in different lives. Everyone would suffer a lack of comprehending human nature without this precious pearl. However, the care and concern of this paper would not allow us to get involved in such a debate. We certainly are going to assume the irrefutable function of literature to echo man and his world in broader, more universal terms.

Presently, we have far passed the time when the literary theory was at its adolescence and quite energetic. Nowadays, it is more like a tottering decrepit old creature which garners no one's attention. The reason is that literary theory wanted to bereave literature of its mission, of introducing people to the recent and modern worlds of experience. Eagleton states that "literary theory is less an object of intellectual enquiry in its own right than a particular perspective in which to view the history of our times" (Eagleton, 1996, p. 170). Now let's put all the cares and concerns of theory into oblivion and see how literature assists human beings in their concerns. In this paper, we are going to consider a narrative in the absence of theory and seek man and his world in it. However, prior to getting to that we ought to address ourselves to another issue, and which is the genre of 'short short story.' It is a newly born genre developed from the heart of short story. The problem with short story is not how it contributes to the cause of humans, but how to define it. What is a short short story? Is it qualified to reflect, and perhaps challenge and question cultural elements? We will discuss it in the next section.

2.1. Short Story and Definition

Short story is in all likelihood the most ancient of all literary forms, as it contains ancestors such as in particular fables, parables, folk-tales, anecdotes, and fairy-stories; and in reality, owing to the fact that short story is the most common mirror we can contemplate our lives in, it is considered as a sacred form (Lee, 2005). Notwithstanding the fact that the forefathers of the form go back a long way down the history lane, even before the art of writing, it flourishes specifically in 19th century and comes into its own during the 20th century. The *Oxford English Dictionary* assigns 1877 to the earliest documented reference to 'short story'. Anthony Trollope might be one of the first authors who comes up with the neologism and claims writing 'certain short stories' but he is actually alluding to his shorter than usual stories, i.e. those stories 'about one volume in length' (Trollope, 1950, pp. 136, 160).

However, when it comes to establishing a taxonomy of prose forms, short story pops up quite elusive (Cuddon, 1999, p. 815), and this is due to its diversity that short story has met with surprisingly little theoretical criticism (Childs & Fowler, 2006, p. 217). Nonetheless, diversity and elusiveness of the form are not the whole story. We should not put the historical evolution of literary forms into oblivion. Therefore, the fancy to issue a succinct and aphoristic definition, sprung from empirical formal properties, must be moderated by an historical understanding. The diachronic side of studying short story, thus, examines the widespread tendencies about the form and not inherent features of it. In reality, “no generic definition of science or literature can hope to do more than draw attention to the dominant aspects of the system which will inevitably include elements to be found elsewhere” (Pasco, 1991, p. 410).

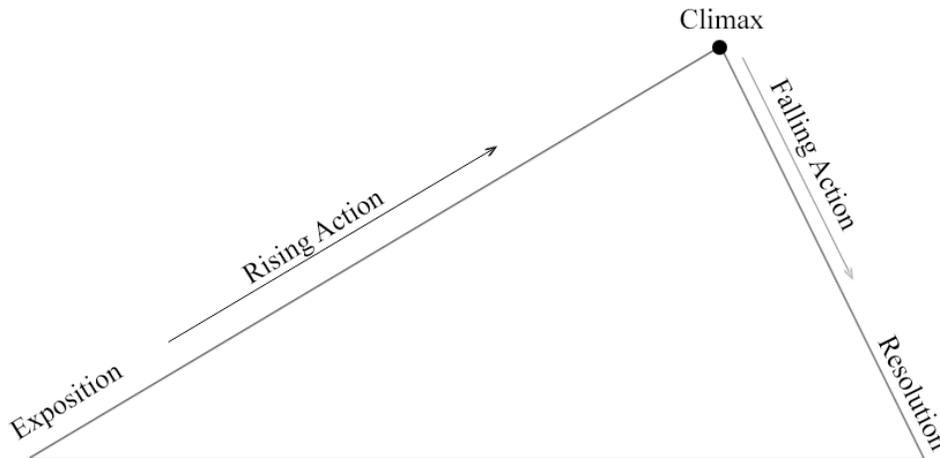
One of the early theoreticians of the genre, however, is Edgar Allen Poe, who is estimated by many as the originator of the modern short story, and hence we may claim that the genre is an American invention and most probably the most significant literary genre to have issued from the United States (Bendixen, 2010), and subsequently embraced universally. We may claim, just like Benjamin F. Fisher, that the American short story and Edgar Allan Poe have a natural, strong bond (Fisher, 2010). And, though, short fiction writers have treaded various realms, Poe’s critical theories regarding short story lives on to be consequential. Poe considers the genre as a ‘prose tale’ that can be read at one sitting of half an hour to two, and addresses itself to a certain unique or ‘single effect’ in which the totality of effect is the focal objective (Poe, 1999, p. 59). Each and every word throughout the short story should exert itself towards inspiring a single effect, and if the authors’ initial sentence fails to get on with this function, “then he has failed in his first step” (Poe, 1999, p. 58). Throughout the composition, no words should be put into service without tending to contribute to ‘one pre-established design’. Poe’s definition may not accord with the *disunifying* effects of ellipsis and ambiguity in modernist short story, yet it furnishes a proper panorama to observe the short story from. Poe, as it happens, rescued the short story from being the underdog of literary forms and affirmed it to be “unquestionably the fairest field for the exercise of the loftiest talent, which can be afforded by the wide domains of mere prose” (Poe, 1999, p. 58).

No prescribed rule has ever determined conclusively the length of this fictional narrative; however, it hardly ever goes beyond 20,000 words (Quinn, 2006, p. 387). One common way to classify the genre has been to differentiate between short story and novel. Mary Pratt, in *The Short Story: The Long and the Short of It* (1981), commences with an assumption that shortness itself is not and cannot be an essential characteristic of something, but exists only relative to something else; and hence, she takes the novel – due to its great length – as the element which governs the growth of short story and its critical examinations. However, any definition of the short story based on a comparison of the quantity invokes a ‘bigger-is-better’ value judgment, and as a result, is an inappropriate and inadequate explanation. We should consider the techniques of the short story and grant the length question a secondary position. When both of the features – quantity and technique – are studied together, just in this case quantity takes on importance (Head, 1994, p. 4). This is precisely the reason why we should not bank on E. M. Forster’s contention that any fictitious prose work over 50,000 words is a novel (1985) (6), and conclude that the stories with fewer number of words are short stories. That being the case, it would seem proper to stick to Norman Friedman who states that any measure based on word-count “is a misleading one because it centres on symptoms rather than causes” (Friedman, 1976, p. 133). Nevertheless, this dimension of prose fictions, called ‘magnitude’ by Aristotle, carries us into our current care and concern: flash fiction. Stories of fewer than 1,000 words (Fulton, 2008) or about 500 words (Abrams & Harpham, 2009, p. 332) are called ‘short short story’ or ‘flash fiction’. Whether containing 1000 or 500 words does not make any difference; what is significant regarding the form is its supreme brevity. James Thomas believes that flash fiction fits on two opposite pages of a standard digest-sized literary magazine (James et al.). Moreover, the reading of such a story would not take long more than smoking a cigarette, and that’s why the genre is called ‘smoke long’ in China (Batchelor, 2011, p. 81).

2.2 Flash Fiction

One unanimous standpoint, however, holds that the genuine short story confines its scope for plot or action, and on the authority of this notion, we may pronounce that short story embraces one single dramatic event, bolstered up with subsidiary events to facilitate its understanding. Such a description relays us once more towards Poe’s description of the genre. Poe’s definition of short story can be adopted also for flash fiction, but of course, on a smaller scale. Therefore, flash fiction is a prose tale which strives towards implanting a single effect and is not composed of more than three or four paragraphs, and so can be read within the course of three or four minutes.

Poe's affirmation represents the aesthetic energy of some special kinds of prose narratives, and the impacts of such energy on the reader. So as to study the structure of flash fiction, Freytag's pyramid is a handy tool, which is also used for illustrating the structure of short story. The only difference is that different stages in the pyramid contain some paragraphs in a short story; however, in a flash fiction, they are comprised of some few sentences.



The Structure of a Flash Fiction

Just as comprehensible from the figure, the plot of a flash fiction is a narrative of events divided into five parts. During the first phase, actually the first few sentences, the narrative fiction exhibits the characters, setting and the general atmosphere which overwhelms the story. In other words, it offers the background information needed to apprehend the story properly. Exposition ends with a conflict afflicting the protagonist and so we get to the next stage, which is 'rising action.' During this phase, the basic internal conflict gets tangled and more intricate when secondary conflicts, or obstacles frustrating the protagonist, find their way to the story. Plot relies on the rising action to move forward. To put it in a nutshell, the rising action is the complication of the plot and leads up to the climax. The turning point of the flash fiction happens in the climax of the story where all the rising action and conflicts reach their peak and the protagonist changes for better or worse. The falling action designates that the climax is over and the story is heading towards the end. During the last phase, the mystery is solved, and all patterns of events succeed in some emotional or artistic effect.

2.3. Elements of a Flash Fiction

Out of the aforementioned details, we come to perceive that each flash fiction is composed of certain elements, which are as follows:

1. Characters of a flash fiction are fictional representations of people who are endowed with certain ethical, intellectual and sentimental traits and are momentous in the plot of the story. The number of characters involved in the form would never exceed two or three characters; however, in general, a flash fiction takes in just one character, and the event and conflict of the story are related to this single character. Fictional characters are whether static or developing. The static character remains unchanged at the end of the story; however, the developing character embraces some obvious changes in identity or frame of mind. Flash fiction, in its succinct span, presents a compelling opportunity to study human nature in all its complication and heterogeneity. It lets us examine characters' motifs by probing the recesses of their mind, and hence know them better than in the external world.
2. The atmosphere of a flash fiction is the mood and feeling kindled by it. The narrator's tone may invoke certain feelings of exhilaration, woe, hope, despondence, anxiety and fear.
3. Conflict is a clash of actions, beliefs, desires or intentions, and is the basis of the plot of the story (Arp, 2005, p. 104). It is the tension built up between the characters, or actually the opposition between them (Cuddon, 1999, p. 175). Such conflict may appear when a character sets against another person or a group of people;

when a character is in conflict with some external forces such as the society, nature and destiny; and when a character is in conflict with an element in his own nature. (Arp, 2005, p. 104)

4. Climax of the flash fiction arises when a crisis is attained and resolution achieved (Cuddon, 1999, p. 175). In the climax, the protagonist realizes certain facts which he has been ignorant of, and changes for better or worse.
5. Resolution is the untying or untangling the complexities of plot. The conflicts are resolved, mystery solved, and false impression discharged, and hence, grants an aesthetic prospect to the story.
6. The voice that relates a flash fiction is the narrator. Narrator of the story may be a fictional character within the story, as in first-person narratives. In third-person narratives, however, the narrator may not be visible “in that the reader is unaware of anything but a voice, detached or intrusive, making comments on the characters or events” (Quinn, 2006, p. 279). Such a narrator can fly on the wings of fiction and go everywhere he yearns for, peer inside the hearts and minds of his characters and comment on the events and actions of the characters of the story.
7. Theme is the central idea governing the whole story and that the author wishes to transfer to the reader. The theme of a flash fiction is a subject without fail, though a subject is not always a theme (Childs & Fowler, 2006, p. 239). It is not a direct statement declared by the author as the theme of his work, but is indirectly conveyed through the recurrence of certain motifs, images, notions, events and symbols.

Flash fiction, despite its brevity, conceives a fictional world through which we can study our surrounding environment more evidently. Via a flash fiction, one can spot the unseen sides of neighboring people and the cares and concerns flowing in the artery of society. Flash fiction unveils the evils of the world and highlights the weak spots in a social milieu. Therefore, from this point of view, flash fiction is a kind of critical intervention in which the author, according to Russian formalists, defamiliarizes the reality so as to grant the readers an ability to scrutinize the peripheral world critically. Viktor Shklovsky, one of the prominent masterminds of Russian Formalists in Petrograd in the early twentieth century, argues that if we study the ‘general laws of perception,’ we figure out and verify that the perception gets to be ‘automatic’ as it becomes customary, and hence, “all of our habits retreat into the area of the unconsciously automatic; if one remembers the sensations of holding a pen or of speaking in a foreign language for the first time and compares that with his feeling at performing the action for the ten thousandth time, he will agree with us” (Rivkin & Ryan, 2004, p. 15). The result is that the object is in front of us, but we cannot see it. In point of fact, we cannot offer a critical view of the object since the veil of repetition has cast a shadow over it. The objective of art, according to Shklovsky, is to authorize the readers to perceive this object, hidden because of being wrapped in the shroud of habit, but not as it is known. In this case, “art exists that one may recover the sensation of life; it exists to make one feel things, to make the stone stony” (Rivkin & Ryan, 2004, p. 16). However, it is necessary to mention that by defamiliarization, we do not mean the kind of defamiliarization that Russian Formalists had in mind, and just considered literature just as an entity which defamiliarized without any reference to the realities of the world. We are mentioning an age-old trait of literature which unveils the covered realities to the eyes of the readers. In the following part, we will scrutinize a flash fiction so as to see how it would lift the veil of familiarity over different facets of society to criticize it.

2.4. Please Smile

Now, regarding the aforementioned issues, a flash fiction will be studied to see the abilities of the form to criticize the culture, despite its extreme brevity. The sample flash fiction which is opted for is *Please Smile* by Yazdan Salahshoor, which was published in *Iran Newspaper*:

No one knew who the murderer was. No one even knew who the murdered one was! They had found human blood as much as a small mirror, which appeared swinging and still fresh. “Possibly a blood bag has fallen from a nurse’s hand and has been lacerated.” said the hospital doctor. However, on the ground there was no trace of the drops of blood. It was as if the blood had flowed slowly and collected on the bottom of the elevator cab. “I had required hundreds of times to change the elevator cab. But no one fulfilled it. Some said the managing board lacked the budget. Hence, this is the outcome!” said the head nurse. However, it was a controversial issue which needed to be wrapped up. Otherwise, this tiny hospital, which had been complained against previously, for further investigations was to . . . The head nurse covered her mouth not to scream, and said: “I still pay 300,000 in monthly installments.” The shift doctor didn’t say anything. His income from the night-time job there was not much to worry its being closed down; however, he preferred not to be debriefed by the police even if someone had been killed.

As a student of the 'special board', he was not permitted to work and had underwritten that. If the university authorities came to know it . . . It was 3 in the morning; however, the blood was still waving and fresh. They had to make their decision, and had only two options: whether someone has been killed or a blood bag has fallen from a nurse's hand and has caused this entire catastrophe. "Is blood something unusual in a hospital?" said the doctor. Definitely, it wasn't. They all knew that hospital and blood are like two sides of a coin. Hence, the doctor suggested that the janitor cleans the bottom of the elevator cab. "Yes! This is the answer! Why did we think that way! It was clear from the outset that nothing was unusual." said the head nurse. They left the elevator and the doors closed. It was as if the curtains of a theater were being drawn. Actually it was the end of the play, and they opted for the easiest way. How about you? Are you sure that you don't choose the same way at the similar events. This is not a detective fiction, but a psychological test. Please smile.(Salahshoor, 2013)

The presented fictional prose by Yazdan Salahshoor encompasses 404 words (369 words in the original Farsi version). This concise work of art is an example of flash fiction with aforementioned structural features and elements. It is a heterodiegetic narrative, in Genette's (1994)(244) terminology, and avails itself of two characters. At the very outset, the narrator fashions a gloomy and murky atmosphere by referring to a murder; however, this flash fiction is not about murder, neither the murderer. The narrative is about the banality of disasters. It unveils the habit of facing disasters and simply assessing them *usual*. The story aims at criticizing an aspect of society in which the most horrible and ghastly deeds are reckoned ordinary. It is on account of a 'habitualization' that the most horrendous and shocking conducts come as banal and usual. The purpose beyond art, according to Russian Formalists, is to divulge the dreadful face of such actions to the readers, and capacitate them to perceive the dark side of such inhumane treatments. Viktor Shklovsky, in *Art as Technique* (1927), argues that after we catch glimpse of an object for several times, we start to recognize it. Hence, the objects are just in front of us, but we are utterly impotent to see or feel them.

As a consequence, we cannot pronounce something significant about it (Rivkin and Ryan 15). The recognized object has been 'automatized' in our mind since it is covered in a thick layer of habit. Shklovsky asks us to ponder on the first time we held a pen and compare it with our present feeling after performing the task for the ten thousandth time to discern how objects and actions, consequent to frequent use and performance, retreat to 'the area of unconsciously automatic' (Rivkin & Ryan, 2004, p. 15). Such a "habitualization devours work, clothes, furniture, one's wife, and the fear of war" and therefore, "life is reckoned as nothing" (Rivkin & Ryan, 2004, p. 15). However, we should not be oblivious to the fact that in everyday life, learning is familiarization. For example, when we learn to drive, sleep or walk, it is not mandatory to ruminate on how we come to do them, and therefore "can direct the precious resource of attention elsewhere" (Morson, 2006, p. 216). If habit was not to govern a big chunk of our lives, we were like babies who couldn't achieve anything. The point is that, though serving its goal, habit also 'gets out of hand' (Morson, 2006, p. 216). Generally, it is practical to see things and not just to recognize them, to spot them as if it was the first time, so as to digest some new features of them. According to Russian Formalists, the authors should fashion stories that cause turmoil in the inertia fostered from automatization of habits through the process of 'defamiliarization'. Defamiliarization, coined by Shklovsky, is "the process of making strange (ostranenie) the familiar, of putting the old in new light" (Bressler, 2012, p. 50). Defamiliarization enables us break out of automated perception and once more experience the stoniness of the stone. The artist slows down the normal perception of the readers so as to grant them ample opportunity to see the world critically. He tries to unsettle the readers by offering an unexpected and horrific ending. Out of this way, the author defamiliarizes the familiar objects and events and empowers the reader to put the old in new light so as to see it critically.

Please Smile is narrated in only one single paragraph. It begins with establishing a gloomy atmosphere by talking of a murder, a murderer, and a murdered. It's only comprehensible that a mysterious killing has been carried out, but nothing of the identity of the murderer and the murdered is apprehended. The story happens in a hospital, and is narrated through a third person point of view. It seems that some of the staff of the hospital have gathered near an elevator in which a fresh blood is flowing smoothly. Out of this ring of people, only two of them speak about the event during the narrative. Others are not granted any voices within the course of the flash fiction. Though there are certain evidences which corroborate that a murder has happened, the shift doctor tries to negate all this and claim that probably a blood bag has fallen down, got lacerated, and consequently, the blood has splashed on the bottom of the elevator cab.

However, the drops of blood have not been scattered on the bottom of the elevator cab as if a blood bag has been torn. The blood has been flowing quite smoothly and has collected on the bottom of the elevator. It verifies that a murderer and a murdered should be the cause and the result of this warmblood. Yet this is not the whole story. The crime scene is a hospital that against which some complaints have been filed, and if, owing to this spine-chilling felony, another objection is raised against, the hospital would be closed unquestionably. This is not a serious menace to the hospital, but most possibly, to those who earn their living in it. The head nurse is one of the personnel who is under threat. He asserts that he is still paying 300,000 in monthly installments, and undoubtedly, if the hospital goes closed, he would drown in the sea of troubles. This portion of the flash fiction might slow down our perception and let us think about a society in which unemployment impels the individuals to do whatever so as not to be crushed under the intolerable burden of modern traumas. Head nurse, in addition, pillories the authorities who despite his frequent request did not repair the elevator. Notwithstanding, this motif is secondary to the main theme which will be mentioned later on. Postponing certain actions which must be done straight away is distressing as it might lead to some particular disasters, and this is what the head nurse grumbles about. The shift doctor appears more composed and tranquil than head nurse, and the reason is that he is not paid so much in this hospital to worry its being closed down. There is, nonetheless, one other problem. He recoils from the idea of being debriefed by the police officers. If he is summoned to the police station for further investigations, irrefutably the university would come to know that he is working somewhere; and since a student of the special board is not permitted to work, he would be fired from the university. Therefore, the shift doctor prefers not to opt for the problematic side of the event, and in an absolutely shocking manner raises a question: "Is blood something unusual in a hospital?" (Salahshoor, 2013) This question framed by the doctor completely slows down the process of perception. It unsettles the readers and compels them to contemplate on this artistically posed question. The narrator continues to pronounce that the answers were all negative. Blood was nothing unusual in the hospital even if it had flowed smoothly and slowly on an elevator cab! We hit to the climax of the flash fiction when the doctor orders the janitor to clean the blood. It is one of the most harrowing sentences of this flash fiction. *Please Smile*, in its utmost economy of language, shows how catastrophes like murder are being observed as normal, or actually as non-existent. In spite of the proofs that confirm a murder, a ring of people who work in that hospital try to ignore it as if the person who has been killed has not been a human being, or even did not exist from the very outset, or as if the killer was not a potential peril to the society they live in. *Please Smile* proceeds on to slow down our perception even more when it compares the closing of the doors of the elevator with the drawing of the curtains of a theater. It tries to proclaim that the murder of a human being is considered as if it has been a work of fiction rendered on a theater stage, and was not a real event. *Please Smile* casts aspersions on a dire facet of human beings which is its propensity for egotism, by slowing down the process of the reader's perception by shocking him.

Ayn Rand, an American novelist and philosopher, believes that it is both irrational and immoral to take measures against one's own self-interest. Her Objectivist ethics affirms that "the actor must always be the beneficiary of his action and that man must act for his own rational self-interest" (Rand, 1964, p. 8). According to Rand, no one can be dubbed rational unless he holds his own life as the most significant value that colors his life. Ayn Rand considers "selfishness as a social virtue and the root of social progress" (Nevins, 2010, pp. xii-xiii). It seems that the flash fiction of *Please Smile* is to censure such a worldview, a frame of mind in which what is important is the 'self' and nothing else. The people congregated around the elevator, in the opinion of the likes of Rand, try to be the beneficiary of their own actions. None of them opts for calling the police and informing them of an alleged murder there in the elevator cab. It comes across as the murdered one is not a human being, a person who might possibly be a father or a mother or a little baby, one who conducts a family, or is adored and treasured by a great number of people. One of the main grounds for the staff's silence is the economic situation of the society they are living in. Such a depiction reminds one of Adam Smith and his theory of the 'invisible hand' which saw the economic system as usefully channeling selfish self-interest to wider ends (Skousen, 2007, p. 29). Yet, economic system is not a convincing reason for forgetting other people around us and just minister to our 'selves'. *Please Smile* constructs a fictional world which enables the readers to see the real world more clearly. A profusion of murders are committed every day around the globe, and such frequent perpetration has automatized our perception of such a heinous and gruesome deed. But the narrative, with its artistic ending, defamiliarizes the event and capacitates the readers to see the event afresh, in new guises and in a more critical fashion.

A precious rule which almost all of the cultures regarded as priceless and is nothing but a forgotten assumption in the present climate is the ethic of reciprocity or the so-called Golden Rule which signifies a reciprocal relationship between the self and others (Stace, 1990, p. 178). This rule has been esteemed even by the most primitive civilizations. Rushworth Kidder traces the rule in the early contribution of Confucianism (551-479 BC) and states that the theory appears in many religions such as Hinduism, Buddhism, Taoism, Zoroastrianism, and also the world's major religions (Blackburn, 2001, p. 101). Some have maintained that this motto of "do unto others as you would have them do unto you" is missed in no religion (Epstein, 2010, p. 115).

Consequent to scrutinizing the various renderings of this time-honored Golden Rule, we discern that one assumption is held by all of them: they all demand that individuals treat others in a fashion they would like to be treated by others. However, the world depicted in the brief course of *Please Smile* pays no heed to this rule and has adopted solipsism instead. This solipsism is the concept which is censured in the extreme brevity of this flash fiction, and it is done in its most artistic way through defamiliarizing the familiar concepts. Solipsism leads the characters to conclude that nothing unusual has happened, as if the murder has been a work of fiction rendered at a theater. Someone has been killed; nevertheless, none of the staff gives a speck of attention to this event. What is significant for them is the result of this misdemeanor, not itself. One is agitated since he would lose his job if, due to this killing, their medical center is closed down; another shrinks from the idea of being inspected by the police agents, since it would ultimately trigger his being fired from the university. Others' silence imparts thousands of unsaid words. Their taciturnity testifies their adopting of the solipsism espoused by two main characters of the fiction.

3. Conclusion

Flash fiction is a brief narrative which structurally is close to short story, and we can maintain that the only difference is their quantity and not quality. Flash fiction with its extreme brevity incorporates all of the structural elements that we run across in a short story, and this critical factor imposes an enormous difficulty on the author since he should be fairly careful about taking in all the structural components of a short story in an epigrammatic span. The author should also exert himself to create an organic whole and coherent narrative in which all elements are in harmony.

Please Smile by Yazdan Salahshoor is a quintessential example of flash fiction. Owing to an artistic and elegant ending, the author defamiliarizes the phenomenon of murder by sweeping the dust of automatized perception from the eyes of the readers. Through this flash fiction, Salahshoor casts aspersions on an aspect of culture in which solipsism and selfishness dominate and altruism is long forgotten. A definitive and striking evidence of this is that daily we hear about appalling massacres around the world, but we simply regard them as usual, as if nothing has happened. The human species somehow have come to be less sympathetic to the others, and this is what *Please Smile* wants to pour scorn on. Somebody has been killed but no one laments it or undertakes to communicate it to the authorities. What is important to the characters is their own 'selves'. The narrator, at the end of the narrative, in a Brechtian fashion, addresses the readers and unsettles them by posing a shocking question: do you choose the other option if you get stuck in a similar situation? Do you inform the authorities or try to forget everything like the actors of this flash fiction? Consider you are watching a soccer match and someone scores a goal. If the TV does not replay the goal in slow motion, we don't grasp a unique opportunity to study the goal from different angles and with more detail. This flash fiction offers a slow-motion depiction of life and capacitates us to study a murder case and the others' and also our reaction to this more critically, to observe a defamiliarized version of a familiar phenomenon.

4. References

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