## Elements of Literature and Creative Communication Prof. H S Komalesha Department of Humanities and Social Sciences Indian Institute of Technology, Kharagpur

# Lecture - 43 The Book of Sand

Hello everybody. Welcome to our ongoing discussion on short fiction. If we can quickly recall what we did in the last class, we discussed various elements of short fiction and before that, we understood what short fiction meant, different types of short fiction, and of course, if you want to be a short story writer or if you ever try writing a short story what kind of recipe you require. So, we gave you some kind of broad tips as to how to compose your first ever beautiful short story. Well, now is the time for us to get to know the short story in detail. So, what I am going to propose today is a remarkable short story, and the writer who has written it is one of the exemplary short story writers who ever existed on this planet. Well, of course, you already have seen the title the writer we are discussing today is Borges an extraordinary argentine writer. And the short story is taken from his collection of short stories called the Book of Sand and this particular story is the Book of Sand itself. Why do I call this an extraordinary short story, I am sure when you read the short story you will definitely agree with me that this is one of the most brilliant short stories you would have ever read. Before we discuss the short story and of course, get to know the writer in a little more detailed manner; I have a very interesting excerpt from a beautiful poem by William Blake.

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We have discussed William Blake, you are not new to William Blake. So, this is an excerpt from William Blake's poem. How is that poem related to the short story we are reading? Well just watch this well watch these lines and reflect on what they have got to say and let us see later after having read the story if you can connect the dots and see how they are linked ok.

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Here goes the beautiful excerpt from William Blake and the poem is called *Auguries of Innocence*. Of course, you already know that Blake is a visionary poet and precursor to the romantic poets, and you also know that he believed that his poems were dictated to him in his dreams by beings above, and in the morning he just had to copy them down something like that. So, probably this poem is no exception to that statement.

"To see a world in a grain of sand and heaven in a wild flower hold infinity at the palm of your hand and eternity in an hour."

Well, not a poem that can give itself in so easily to you right in the very first reading. So, you might have to go again and read it again. The poem is propelled by a paradox right you are already familiar with the literary device paradox. So, there is a kind of a contradictory statement or a series of contradictions that propel this entire verbal picture to see what is happening in this, read it again please "to see a world in a grain of sand". Look at the use of binaries in a single quatrain the, poem makes use of a number of binaries in order to construct

its paradoxical meaning. Write in the very first line you have a world is a kind of a macro cosmos and you have a grain of sand how is a grain of sand linked to the world. If the world is a macro cosmos grain of sand is a microcosmos. So, something which is the smallest and the biggest; look how they are shown together. And you have heaven and wildflower similarly bound you to have in the next line infinity and the palm of your hand eternity and an hour. So, it presents some kind of a verbal problem you are used to mathematical problems right. Now look at what is happening here in order for you to solve the first two lines you need to make or you need to understand or you need to make it possible for the next two lines in this quatrain. To see the world in a grain of sand you need to hold infinity in the palm of your hand and heaven in a wildflower if you want to do that you have to hold eternity in an hour. How is it possible? What is the poet trying to say? Of course, for want of time, I would have generally asked you to comment in detail and maybe in the next class we could have taken it up for a detailed discussion, but for want of time let us go ahead and see what the poem is trying to say right. So, probably because always remember we have said that a poem makes sense through the shades of ambiguities it hides within its penumbral spaces right a poem makes sense through the shades of meanings, not the concrete meanings but through ambiguities and uncertainties. So, probably the governing principle, or the operative principle, that you find in a world -you do not need to go to that extent even if come to know a grain of sand probably you will be able to understand the entire world. And similarly, if you want to know what heaven is all that you have to do is to understand a wildflower that can contain the whole principle of heaven in it. Similarly, is infinite because when you talk of grasping infinite or something which is infinite, it is something that baffles the human mind whereas, when you say it in the palm of your hand it is something that you and I see every day. So, even if we come to know what is there in our palm of hand we would be able to understand the concept of infinity. Therefore, understanding in order for us to understand we need to understand the essence of it, and then probably the entire universe opens up its secrets for us something like this. Now, keep this poem aside for time being, and now let us come to discuss the short story later, of course, you yourself on your own can connect the dots.



Well, we have already identified the writer as an extraordinary writer. In fact, he is one of those writers who did not get the Nobel and the loss is not to the writer, but to the Nobel Prize itself he is a remarkable writer to that extent he is a major modern writer, but it is said that his writings inaugurate the post the postmodern strand in literature. That credit goes to him, a major Argentine writer. And of course, in the picture that you see you may be right if you have guessed that it seems he has lost his sight its true right at an early age when he was hardly 40 45 years old, he lost his eyesight and strangely enough during that time he was made the director of the Argentine National Library. So, you can see the irony and of course, Borges did not miss the irony and that is when he seemed to have remarked.

"No one should read self pity or reproach into the statement of majesty of the god who with such splendid glory who with such splendid irony granted me books and night at one touch."

'Granted me books', because he is now the director of the entire Argentinian national library and unfortunately he cannot read it. Nevertheless, he continued reading he did not the loss of sight did not stop this writer either from reading books or from writing whatever he wrote. In fact, he wrote many of his works after having lost sight of I mean after having lost sight his eyes.

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So, these are some well-known remarks attributed to Borges especially the one here. You have wakened not out of sleep, especially the writer is known for blurring the boundaries between the wakeful state and the sleepful state of reality and fantasy fact and fiction his in poems after poems essays after essays and in his short stories after short stories you find the boundaries getting blurred between these binaries. So, when you wake up you think you have woken up into reality, but who knows to remind us of the 3rd or 4th-century Chinese philosopher Zhuangzi who said in his remarkable poem the butterfly says when you wake up you think that you have woken up into reality, but who knows to reality, but who knows you might have as well slipped into another state of dream something like this. So, these are some influences you can as well say influences.



Jorge Luis Borges is a major short story writer more than a poet essayist and a translator, of course, he was a polymath an extraordinary scholar who must have poured the entire world's literature which is the reason why his writings you find traces of Latin literature, traces of Greek literature, French literature more than anything else Indian literature, Chinese literature, you can find influences of all of them even in the short story we read its linked to India in an extraordinary way. Of course, we discuss more of that in the subsequent slides alright. And in fact, considering his contribution another fellow Nobel laureate and Octavio Paz.

- "Borges's grasp of world literature is one of the fundamental elements of his art."
- The third phase of his career is also marked by a personal tragedy, the complete loss of his sight. This compelled him to write shorter texts. His works from this period blend the genre of prose and poetry
- *The Book of Sand*, one of his later collections of stories, is an allegory that mixes the simplicity and wisdom of a folklorist with the profound vision of a man who has explored the labyrinths of his own soul to its core.
- Octavio Paz: "He cultivated three genres: the essay, the poem, and the short story. The division is arbitrary. His essays read like stories, his stories are poems; and his poems make us think, as though they were essays."



Life & Works

He says that Borges wrote in you can just he says that Borges cultivated three genres the essay the poem and the short story right. Unfortunately or fortunately the division is absolutely arbitrary because his essays if you read them they read like stories. And if you pick up his stories they exhibit his extraordinary poetic capabilities and when you read his poems they make you think as though they are extraordinary philosophical pieces critical pieces for extraordinary thinking something like this. And another fellow critic says that Borges s grasp of world literature is one of the defining features of his art that is why I said he was a polymath right having been influenced by the entire world literature. His story in fact, if you want to get a flavor of world literature just read his short stories. If you ask me personally I have two favorite writers when it comes to short stories; one is Borges, and the other is Jewish American writer Isaac Bashawiz Singer. And they represent two extraordinary features. In fact, if you look at Singer he focuses on human beings just human beings whereas, if you look at Borges it is more than human beings. In fact, the manifestation of the universe and the correlations between the universal principles and how a human being tries to define his identity seek his identity vis a vis that universal features are something that we find in Borges. Therefore, you can call them in terms of their treatment of the subjects they are almost poles apart, but they are exemplary writers. So, if there are three to four words, of course, it's reductivist we cannot reduce a writer to four words, but if there are four keywords that can define Borges's aura of writing.

One is 'time', he was obsessed with time, especially the concept of infinity, eternity, and all that then 'mirrors', 'books', and 'laberans'. So, if there is any writer, in fact, who gives these four keywords to any perceptive student of literature that student would invariably tell you well they belong to Borges something like that right.

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So, now let us go ahead and take a look at the short story I mean before that of course, very interesting thing. In fact, when somebody asks him what is Borges's idea of paradise. He seemed to have said that I have always imagined paradise to be something like a kind of library he himself was the director of one of the biggest libraries in the world and continues. In fact, he was continuously obsessed with books and libraries despite the misfortune in his life books played a major role and when somebody asked him if he believed in reincarnation he seemed to have said well not so much in the traditional sense of the term, but if writers die I believe they would be born as books. Of course, it is not a bad imagination for writers to have right. Well, we have popular notions where if you die you are born into a star and the native Americans think you are born into a plant or something like that, and here is a writer remark in making the remark that you would be; you would be turned into a book something like this.

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- Published in 1975 "The Book of Sand" (Spanish "El Libro de Arena") is a part of the larger collection of short stories named *The Book of Sands*.
- It can be paralleled with his 1949 story "The Zahir" and his 1941 story "The Library of Babel"
- The story was translated into English by Norman Thomas di Giovanni.



So, here is the short story let us not waste time let us get into this.

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It begins in a very enigmatic way. The short story begins rather enigmatically. In fact, you might as well be under the impression that it is something like geometry he says lines consist of an infinite number of points planes an infinite number of lines, volumes an infinite number of planes, and hyper volumes an infinite number of volumes.

You may be under the impression we are discussing geometry absolutely no we are definitely discussing fiction and he says these days everybody thinks whatever they say is a true story; however, his story is truly something like that ok.

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And now the story begins. It so, happens that the narrator or the protagonist in the story is a retired guy. So, he is relaxing and all of a sudden one afternoon maybe he hears a knock on the door and when he opens it to his surprise he finds a stranger a tall man of indistinct features so; obviously, this guy looks like a foreigner. However, the moment he enters this stranger when the narrator welcomes him in he realizes that this stranger exudes a strange melancholic air which as I do now he says. So, the entire story is narrated from a flashback point of view we have discussed the flashback technique you can quickly recall that. So, it is a recollection of what happened.

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Now, when he welcomes the stranger in he realizes that the stranger is actually a Bible seller, but not any kind of Bible and this guy himself is a bibliophile the meaning of bibliophile a lover of books. He says I do not think there is any dearth of Bibles in this house and he goes on to even illustrate the rarest of the rare Bibles that he has and things like that and all of a sudden the stranger says he does not merely sell Bibles he has in his possession a rare book probably a magical kind of a book and he goes on to show this book to him.

In fact, the protagonist shows a lot of interest because he says it is a book that you would not have seen anything like that, and imagine it is not an ordinary statement because he is the director of a national library he would have seen all kinds of books. And when the stranger says it's one of the rarest books and he shows interest and the stranger opens his book and spreads a cloth-bound octavo volume which of course, gives the impression that it must have been passed on several hands must have I mean involved in that book. So, when he examines it he experiences an unexpected weight there when he holds the book the volume of the book does not it is not proportionate to the weight that he anticipates something like that. And on the spine, he says Holy Writ it is printed Holy Writ and below that Bombay giving an impression, of course, not just here you find India connections to this story in more remarkable ways than just this.

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# The Book

The text was cramped and arranged in versicles. In the upper corner of each page were Arabic numerals. It caught my attention that the even-numbered page bore, let's say, the number 40,514 and the oddnumbered page that followed 999. I turned the page; the overleaf bore an eight-digit number. Also printed was a small illustration, like those in dictionaries: an anchor drawn in pen and ink, as though by a child's unskilled hand.





So, then the stranger goes on to narrate how he acquired this book he said that while he was traveling in India somewhere on the outskirts of Bikaner he comes across this story I mean this book, and the owner who had this book was somebody who did not know how to read it. Therefore he gave him some money and also Bible and picked this book in return now he wants to he has come to sell it. Now he realizes that the text was cramped and arranged in versicles when the protagonist opens it he sees it arranged in versicles as if in maybe in multiple columns arranged and the moment he opens it, he notices something strange here what is it let us say for instance on the left-hand side if there is a page number 40514.

On the right-hand side he notices the page number let us say for instance 999 well this is something strange right, of course, he does not make out in which language it is written probably they think it must be written in Sanskrit, but the stranger says no. In fact, nobody knew how to read it, therefore, probably written in one of the dialects and anyhow nobody knows how to read it that is the state. Now all that they can identify is the page number which is Arabic numerals. So, generally, the right-hand side should have one-page number more than the left-hand side right if you have noticed the left-hand side is 93 94 110 111 something like this. So, here strangely it has some kind of a curious it looks like a mismatch and this guy thinks that it must be some kind of a printing mistake or something like that and when he is turning through the pages in one of the pages he comes across a small illustration something like an anchor that you can find in dictionaries and it looks as if it is been drawn by a child an unskilled hand at writing something like that.

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This is when the mystery intensifies and the stranger says pause here for a while study this page because once you flip through the page you will never be able to see this page again. Now, this must be your curiosity as well right. How is it? Because now they have identified the page number. So, if you want to come back here it should be easy for you to come back right, but the stranger says no you will never be able to come back and as if in a very menacing way he says now close your book and open it again and immediately the protagonist closes the book and when he opens it where and frantically searches for quite some time and to his dismay he does not find the page number.

And again he tries to search for the anchor he is unable to locate the anchor now this looks a bit menacing because I do not think there is anything like that.

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Then now continuing his strange speaking, the stranger says now try to open the first page. Now, this should sound easy for all of us right opening the first page what is so challenging here is you just have to open and what you get is the first page. Now, look at it, when the protagonist tries getting the first page what does he get? I placed my hand left hand on the cover and opened the book with my thumb and forefinger almost touching all my efforts were useless because as if all of a sudden several pages always seem to come in between the cover and my hand every time I open it seems some random pages are coming. Random pages is not the twenty-page sometimes if it's twenty pages sometimes it is. The page number illustrates all that they can understand is page number turn to the power of 5 power of 9 something like that. Now when he is still reeling under the shock the stranger says now open the last page again the protagonist fails I only manage to stammer in a wise not my own this cannot be you neither can open the first page nor the last page you are unable to even find the page that you once opened and these page numbers are mentioned in any random way. There seems to be no order here because generally as I said if the left-hand side page has 103, the right hand should have 104, and here if the left-hand side has a page number of let us say 3348501 the left-hand side has a page number of 99 and this kind of randomness continues and in a highly incredulous voice he says it cannot be.



And the visitor continues the stranger continues it cannot be right still it is. The number of pages in this book is exactly infinite no page is the first none is the last. I do not know why they are numbered in this arbitrary way perhaps it is to indicate that an infinite series includes any number after any order. And then continues his philosophical discussion. If space is infinite we are in no particular point in space, if time is infinite we are in no particular point in time right. Now, imagine a circle mathematically speaking we say in a circle no point is the beginning no point is an ending. Now imagine a huge circle and there you do not know when the point you stand is it that of a beginning is it that of an ending whether you need to turn left and go whether you need to turn right and go you do not even know what is happening here is something that the narrator is holding in his hand that defies his entire sense of coherence his entire sense of logic. In fact, he comes to perceive it as a monstrous being, of course, he realizes that a little later, but definitely he knows that he holds in his hand a kind of book of books metaphorically. In fact, as I said he has another short story called the Library of Babel where he imagines the entire universe to be one huge library made of hexagonal rooms and where every book that was written that is written and that will be written is already stored in that kind of book it is a metaphor. It is a Borgesian metaphor for the universe. Well if you can further condense that metaphor because metaphor itself is a condensed verbal picture if you can further condense it well then you come to this book of a book called The Book of Sand. Now he says why is this called a book of sand he says like

sand has neither beginning nor end this book to has no beginning nor an ending that is why probably it is called the book of sand we do not know right. So, this is the book.

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Now, he asks out of curiosity the protagonist what do you intend to do with it. Do you want to sell it to British Museum? He says no I have no intention of selling I can sell it to you. Well then, of course, this guy they settle down on a price this guy says he has just retired and he has some corpse of money huge money and he is willing to sell I mean to buy it using that money and reluctantly, of course, the stranger agrees and hands over the book and leaves that is it; that is it. Now, what has happened? Against the joy of possessing the book grew the fear that it would be stolen; obviously, when you have something rare in your hands something that is unique in the entire world more than the happiness you are plagued by the fear that you may lose it this fear of losing the fear of loss continues I mean it is something that we are we are in the grips we are constantly in the grips of the fear of loss when especially when we have something very valuable. So, this happens so, in order to unravel the mystery of the book our narrator night after night sits and tries to see what is there in the book unfortunately they cannot read it remember it's written in a language written in a dialect that they cannot read or decipher all that they can decipher when they open the pages the page number and some small illustrations here and there. So, months roll by seasons roll by something like this, and this guy is now almost on the verge of he is on the edge of sanity and insanity. That is when he realizes that the book that he holds in his hand is a monstrous piece right.



So, now he does not know what to do with it, because this is a tantalizing book. Now look at this, 'tantalizing' is a beautiful metaphor based on Greek mythology. Tantalizing is also a very beautiful word, when something is within your reach and when you are about to touch that it slightly goes away. Just always let us say a foot away from your reach. So, if you reach there it goes a little further if you reach there just a little further. All the while giving you the impression that you might if you stretch yourself you might get it. So, the book is tantalizing because, I mean the narrator is under the impression that there is a key to unlock unlocking the mysteries of the universe because it is a book of the books, but unfortunately he cannot read it and he also does not want to lose it. So, that is why he says he goes he grows a misanthrope and he is on the edge of sanity. Now, unable to withstand this continuous onslaught on his rationality our guy thinks of burning it now he thinks of burning it because what do you do with this book? What do you do with this book? He only grew mad right. So, he thinks of burning it initially but realizes if you burn this book of the books the entire planet may choke in the smoke raised right you do not know. Therefore, he remembers a proverb that the best way to lose a leaf is in the forest in plain sight. So, he decides to lose this book one the argentine national library. So, when the librarian is not sitting there or when his attention is elsewhere he goes there and somewhere even without actually consciously identifying where he is keeping the book he slips the book and comes away.

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#### THE BOOK OF SAND IS ABANDONED, FINALLY

I remember having read that the best place to hide a leaf is in a forest. . I took advantage of the librarians' inattentiveness for a moment to lose the Book of Sand in one of the humid shelves. I tried not to notice how high or how far from the door. I feel somewhat relieved now, but I do avoid even passing by Mexico Street.



This is the story for us this is in a nutshell the story and he says he almost avoids even going through that street now.

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- Borges had been obsessed with the idea of infinity. Here, he reimagined the concept of infinite literature in "The Book of Sand. Infinity is a concept, not a number. There are different types of infinity.
- While meaning is never found in the "Library of Babel," meaning is continually lost in the "Book of Sand."
- The exchange is, in effect, useless: the infinite book, written in an undecipherable character, is useless to the speaker, just as the Bible is useless to the uneducated Indian outcast.
- The page numbering might be a reference to aleph naught, Georg Cantor's first transfinite cardinal number, and hence to the countably infinite, the kind of infinity obtained by simple enumeration. (aleph-nought is the cardinality of the set of all natural numbers, and is an infinite cardinal.)



Now, that we know the story now come to think of it what is the story trying to say of course, like all stories as I have already stated they offer a reconceptualization because the very purpose of literature is to make us look at things from a fresh perspective. Now you and I are familiar with the concept of the infinite. So, when we say something to raise the power of n 10 to the power of n is infinite. So, we are almost accustomed to the very concept of infinity

now. So, in order for us to understand the concept of infinity, it is not that mathematicians have exhausted the notion of infinity well here is a different imagination to understanding one of the most mind-boggling and perplexing concepts that have ever haunted humanity infinite. So, could this be also a way to understand the concept of the infinite? We do not know because we do not know as I said that nobody can exhaust it. And as I said there is there are some very interesting things that you need to know about this particular book.

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I said it has an India connection this is the India connection. In fact, even in the Indian tradition, it is said that there is a reference to the work called Brihatkatha. In fact, Kathasaritsagara we have identified a series of stories about *Kathasaritsagara* written by Somadeva and something about the 11th century. Even before that there are a lot of ancient Indian works that allude to a book called Brihatkatha the author of this particular Brihatkatha is identified as Gunadhya and it is also said that nobody could read it because it is written in a dialect called Paisaci its written in Paisaci Basha and unfortunately this dialect is not spoken by anybody in India. So, therefore, you have strangely many writers referring to this book. In fact, Kathasaritsagara itself the writer says is based on Gunadhya's *Brihatkatha*, but nobody seemed to have seen this copy of *Brihatkatha*. So, it is still an eternal Mystery Paisaci dialect Brihatkatha and of course, Kathasaritsagara we have identified and you also can find traces of Arabian nights and especially don Quixote Cervantes Don Quixote and Shakespeare these are some remarkable influences on this particular short story.

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And based on Borges's concept of infinity a professor of mathematics at Wheaton College called William Goldbloom Bloch he has written a book called the Unimaginable Mathematics of Borges's Library of Babel in 2008. Well if mathematics is what interests you can as well look at it. In fact, there is an entire department of mathematics that is devoted to understanding the mathematical concepts that Borges unveils any short stories and this particular book is a significant effort in understanding Borgesian mathematics right. So, I am a well I hope you enjoy this short story please read it. In fact, no amount of summing up can do justice to the beauty that the original short story contains. Please read the short story and in case you have anything interesting to say you can use our official forum even the Facebook forum you can please feel free to comment. Yeah in the next class we come up with something more interesting some other stories that can hook you up and that can have the ability to captivate your attention something like this until then take care, bye.