

CHAPTER THREE

TOWARDS A NEW HISTORY OF THE INDIAN ENGLISH NOVEL

I

The span of the Indian English novel covers a period of a little over a 100 years. Such a short span does not allow the historian to speak of 'periods' or 'movements' within this area. As a matter of fact, it would be unrealistic to divide the history of the Indian English novel into periods or movements, for such a history would only present a distorted view of the actual growth of this genre. It makes much more sense to view the entire span of the Indian English novel as one single period and see its history in terms of groups or clusters of writers.

Clusters may be formed on the basis of themes and styles. In this regard, the first identifiable cluster consists of novels with social themes. Novels with social themes can be further sub-divided into two groups :

- (1) the novels dealing with the plight of the socially and economically deprived and
- (2) the novels which explore the social realities, particularly the microcosmic reality of life in Indian small towns. The novelists who have explored at length the theme of social injustice include Mulk Raj Anand, Bhabani Bhattacharya, Kamala Markandaya.

A strong sympathy for the underdog, a vivid depiction of the unfairness and cruelty of the lives of the socially and economically deprived are the chief hallmarks of the fiction of Mulk Raj Anand. Anand reveals a vigorous bias in favour of the social outcasts, the exploited proletariat.

Bakha, the untouchable, Munoo, the coolie, Gangu the indentured labourer, Lalu singh, the sepoy bear witness to this prejudice. His early novels *Untouchable* (1935), *Coolie* (1936), *Two Leaves and a Bud* (1937) and the Lalu trilogy, *The Village* (1939), *Across the Black Waters* (1940) and *The Sword and the Sickle* (1942) all explore a common theme : the vicissitudes in the life of the underdog protagonist interspersed with vivid portraits of Indian life - the village life, the city life, the dirt, the extreme poverty, served with a great deal of dash and vigour in a racy adaptation of the Indian vernacular.

His first novel, *Untouchable*, traces one day in the life of the low-caste hero, Bakha. Bakha belongs to the class of 'untouchables', an ugly word used for sweepers and scavengers denoting the lowest rung in the caste ladder. But he is no ordinary sweeper, content with his status in life. He questions his lot in his life, the unfairness of the social order which deprives him of all human dignity and consideration. Even though he carries out his daily duties as a sweeper, with diligence and care, he is still treated with contempt and cruelty. He cannot comprehend the senseless injustice of a system which has assigned him to the lowliest job and which cannot respect or appreciate him when the job is well done. This sense of injustice is further compounded when his sister Sohini is subjected to the humiliation of the lustful advances of the 'high-caste' Kalinath. At every juncture, Bakha is berated, insulted and referred to as an untouchable whose touch 'pollutes' the high-caste members. A ray of light, a dim hope of escape is offered towards the end in the form of three possible solutions : conversion to Christianity, Gandhi's way of upliftment or a change in profession brought about by the modern sanitary system. Bakha is filled with hope and encouragement when he hears the speech

of Gandhi and goes home dreaming of a new future consisting of a classless and casteless society.

Coolie records the upheavals in the life of a waif named Munoo, whose fate takes him from a non-descript village, Bilasapur to a town named Shamnagar and from then on to a slightly larger town named Daulatpur and eventually to the harshness of the city of Bombay and finally to Shimla. It is once again a deeply stirring saga of an oppressed victim of society whose life 'progresses' from degradation to degradation and finally ends in an ignominious death. The novel offers a panoramic picture of Indian life ranging from the inhuman poverty of a small village to the filthy rottenness of the slums of Bombay. The irony lies in the fact that the change of place makes no change in the destiny of Munoo.

In a similar strain, *Two Leaves and a Bud*, which deals with the life of a plantation labourer named Gangu, unfolds a tale of inhuman exploitation and suffering. The trilogy, *The Village*, *Across the Black Waters* and *The Sword and the Sickle*, encompasses three distinct phases - boyhood, youth and manhood - in the life of a sikh peasant, Lalu Singh. Lalu Singh's misadventures lead him from his village in Punjab to war-torn France and back again to India. The three novels record in minute detail the indignities and pettiness of village life, the sordid experiences of a soldier engaged in a futile war and the selfish nature of national and international politics. Once again, the novelist addresses himself to the plight of the oppressed; representing the voice of the ideologically victimized.

His latter novels, *Seven Summers* (1951), *The Big Heart* (1945), *Morning Face* (1968), still retain something of his zeal for

social reform, his concern for the oppressed and his fervour for the redressal of social and economic injustice which constitute his main themes as a novelist.

Bhabani Bhattacharya explores the theme of economic injustice, of man's inhumanity to man in *So Many Hungers* (1947), *He who Rides a Tiger* (1954) and *A Goddess named Gold* (1960). *So Many Hungers*, as the title so explicitly reveals, deals with the terrible Bengal famine which followed in the wake of the second world war and left millions of people dead. Bhattacharya examines the seamier side of this man-created disaster let loose by the evil and selfish forces of individuals. *He who Rides a Tiger* also deals with the theme of hunger, but this time the novelist looks at the theme satirically. Kalo, the oppressed victim, learns to beat the system by pulling a major hoax on the exploiters : he assumes the garb of a 'miracle' man and plays on the gullibility of the rich devotees amongst whom are the very jute merchants and profiteers, who do not hesitate to donate buckets of milk for religious purposes on the one hand while thousands of children are starving on the other.

Kamala Markandaya takes up the theme of poverty and oppression in *Nectar in a Sieve* (1954), *A Handful of Rice* (1966) and *The Coffor Dams* (1969). *Nectar in a Sieve* is set in a South Indian village. It explores the travails of a peasant family caught up in the turmoil of change, brought about by the invasion of modern technology. *A Handful of Rice* deals with a similar problem on an urban level. It reveals how an individual is rendered alienated and de-humanized by the insensitiveness and hardness of the city life. The theme of the conflict between material and human values and its impact on individuals is, once again,

voiced in *The Cofferdams*. The story is about a group of tribals, victimized by the ruthless exploitation of an engineering firm, which builds a dam across the river and displace them from the land they had hitherto occupied.

If Anand's forte is social injustice, R.K. Narayan's forte is social realism. Narayan is content to explore the ordinary, commonplace reality of life in Indian small towns, Malgudi being a microcosmic representative of such a town. It is not for Narayan to look for his material in the realm of the extraordinary or in a political or social cause. The mundane aspects of human life afford him with all the stuff he requires for his writing. The everyday routine of human existence, with all its ironies, absurdities and humour proves a rich source for Narayan for the exercise of his creative talents. The town of Malgudi, with its recognizably explicit landmarks, the River Sarayu, the Mempi Hills, the Market Road, Lawley Extension, the Albert Mission School, Nallappa's Mango Grove, is evocative of the idyllic charm of so many other small towns all over India. Its very appeal lies in its ordinariness, inhabited as it is with a range of ordinary, lovable, human characters. Who can forget Narayan's extraordinary gallery of characters - Swami, Mr. Sampath, Maragayya, Raju, Mali? !

Narayan's first novel, *Swami and Friends* (1935) is a sensitively rendered account of childhood, touching on its bitter-sweet memories, its foolish dreams, its moments of tranquil beauty and tenderness. Narayan's view of childhood is unsentimental, dry, tongue-in-cheek. There is no attempt to idealize the characters. Swami and his friends strike the reader as genuine, unaffected and human in their qualities. The relationships between Swami and Rajam, between Swami and Mani, between Swami and his father are drawn with

considerable discernment and understanding, revealing a keen insight into the psychological workings of a child's mind. Swami comes from a reasonably well-off middle-class family, consisting of a strict, disciplinarian father, a fairly indulgent mother and a doting grandmother. These figures are sketched with a great deal of affection and amused tolerance.

Swami and Friends, (1935), *The Bachelor of Arts* (1937), *The Dark Room* (1938) and *The English Teacher* (1945) form the early phase of Narayan as a novelist. There is a basic underlying theme common to all these novels.

One of the themes deftly and thoroughly worked in the early novels is the domestic one. Family life is the intimate registering of the Hindu tradition, since this tradition, like the Hebrew one, enfolds both the ultimate and the immediate texture of experience, embracing both the ground of being and the ground under foot. The Brahmanical version of it which is implicit in Narayan's work and sensibility was one in which the initial puritanism was revived and strengthened by the protestant ethic of the British Raj. To distinguish what is proper from what is improper, therefore, was of the highest importance. It was, as Narayan shows, the duty of the women to translate and define the principles of orthodoxy and correctness into codes and etiquettes covering the basic drives for food, shelter, sex and company. In *The Bachelor of Arts*, Narayan engages with this theme of the intricate formalities of the Indian marriage system. In *The Dark Room*, he works through a direct examination of marriage itself.¹

The Dark Room is a serious attempt at the analysis of a socio - cultural situation, namely the position of women in Indian

society. The plight of Savitri is representative of the plight of a large number of Indian housewives. The tyranny of Savitri's husband, Ramani, does not sound in the least exaggerated. The descriptions of the daily household routine, the children, the servants, reveal the essential Narayan touch. If *The Dark Room* examines the darker side of marriage, *The English Teacher* looks at its blissful, more tender side. *Mr. Sampath* (1949), *The Financial Expert* (1952) and *The Guide* (1958) belong to the middle phase of Narayan's career. There are two protagonists in *Mr. Sampath* : Srinivas dominates the first half of the novel, Mr. Sampath the latter. As in most Narayan's novels, the change is always from without. It is usually the alien figure of the outsider who is responsible for upsetting the status quo and setting the wheels of change into motion. The outsider comes in various forms : as Rajam in *Swami and Friends*, as Mr. Sampath in *Mr. Sampath*, as Dr. Pal in *The Financial Expert*, as Marco in *The Guide*, as Vasu in *The Man-eater of Malgudi*. The influence of this outsider is seen as evil and corrupting. The outsider appears rather intriguing and fascinating at first. He manages to cast the spell of his charm over his gullible audience, only to reveal himself as a malicious and scheming manipulator. Once his mask is ripped off, he no longer appears attractive. He diminishes in stature and seems almost dehumanized, a pathetic, isolated figure.

Mr. Sampath has all the traits of the outsider. When he first befriends Srinivas, Srinivas is fascinated by him, by his jaunty, debonair personality, his grandiose notions about the future. In fact, Mr. Sampath is so persuasive and glib that he manages to talk Srinivas into shutting down his press and opt for a career in show-business. The world of show-business exercises the most disastrous effects on everyone concerned. Srinivas never really feels

entirely at home in this bizarre atmosphere. Ravi's obsession with Shanti, the leading lady seals his fate. Mr. Sampath himself, is completely ruined as a result of this foolhardy enterprise.

The Financial Expert, Narayan's next novel, is generally recognized to have a well-knit plot with the usual ingredients : the central character, Margayya, the portrait of a miser, the outsider motif in the shape of Dr. Pal, the reversal in the life of the protagonist, the figure of the irascible, truant son and finally, the downfall from eminence of the central character.

Narayan's favourite theme of transformation finds perfect expression in *The Guide*, a novel of great maturity and skill. The protagonist Raju is transformed from being a confidence trickster to a man who inspires faith. The movement from one state to the other is utterly convincing. Though, initially, he dons the grab of saintliness rather unwittingly, he discovers that it is not easy to shrug it off afterall. Saintliness has been thrust upon him. He is compelled to live up to it, till the role becomes the reality, the mask becomes the character. There is no escape for Raju, the guide. He is destined to become the guide of men, the saviour of people.

Narayan cannot resist expressing his penchant for irony even towards the end. Does Raju, indeed, become a martyr for the drought stricken people ? Or is it yet another exercise in self - deception? The question remains unanswered.

The old cycle of deception, unmasking and revelation is reworked in a more recent novel, *The Talkative Man*. The compulsive and avid reader of Narayan's works, who has developed a deep fondness for the town of Malgudi, will notice that Malgudi

has evolved considerably over the years. It has come a long way from being the idyllic place he was first introduced to, in *Swami and Friends*. It has not been left unaffected by the march of time. It has acquired many new features, signs of the effects of modern urbanization. And yet, what finally prevails is calm, acceptance, reconciliation. Change is the universal law of life. It is inevitable, irrevocable. But the human capacity to absorb change and to emerge from the deleterious effects of change, with a renewed vigour to face life, is limitless, and it is this human capability that Narayan portrays so successfully in his novels.

Other novelists who have successfully portrayed social realism in their novels include contemporary novelists such as Amitav Ghosh, Upmanyu Chatterjee, Allan Sealy, Anita Desai in her non-female oriented novels like *In Custody* (1984) and *Baumgartner's Bombay* (1988). Parsi writers such as Bapsi Sidhwa, Boman Desai, Rohinton Mistry, Firdaus Kanga and Farrukh Dhondy, who have explored the problem of Parsi ethnicity in its social context in their novels, also belong to this group.

Amitav Ghosh's reputation as a significant novelist rests on two of his novels, *A Circle of Reason* (1986) and *The Shadow Lines* (1988). Both these novels present an authentic picture of Indian reality. *A Circle of Reason* immediately drew attention when it was first published for it showed a great deal of promise. The novel is in the picaresque tradition centering around the protagonist, Alu, whose adventures take him from his village, Lal Pukar in West Bengal to the Middle East and then to Algiers and back again to his homeland. The events in the novel are loosely held together by the presence of Alu. The novel contains unforgettable portraits of characters like Balaram, Alu's uncle, the idealistic,

village school-master, his aunt Toru debi whose entire existence is bound up in her Singer sewing machine, the malignant and repulsive Bhudeb Roy, Zindi, who lends maternal affection and protection to Alu. The novel blends fantasy and reality with extreme finesse.

The Shadow Lines reveals greater maturity and technical excellence as an artist. The action of the novel spreads over into three cities, Calcutta, London and Dhaka. The theme of the novel is the devastating effect of political events on individual lives. Cataclysmic events such as the second world war, the communal riots in Dhaka in the wake of the disappearance of the heir of Prophet Mohammed from the Hazratbal Mosque form the back drop to some of the major incidents in the novel. The death of Tridib seems all the more tragic and absurd on account of its senseless cause. Ila, the female angle in the novel, is drawn with a gentle irony. It is ironic that a woman so cosmopolitan and liberated in her upbringing and outlook should become a victim of the worst kind of male chauvinism.

Upmanyu Chatterjee's *English August* (1988) relates the comic-ironic experiences of an IAS officer from an upper-middle class, elite background, who is posted to a remote village.

Allan Sealy's *Trotter-nama* (1988) unfolds the saga of the Trotter family through various generations in a style which is reminiscent of Lawrence Sterne and G. V. Desani.

Parsi writers in recent times have emphasized the problem of the Parsi ethnic identity in their novels. They include novelists such as Bapsi Sidhwa, Boman Desai, Rohinton Mistry, Firdaus Kanga and Farrukh Dhondy.

The common historical background, persecution in Iran, flight to India, the 1300 years on Indian soil gives Parsis a common historical identity. In addition to these features, Parsis share a collective elite consciousness, which has grown from the colonial times when the Parsis were closely connected with the British rulers of India. This Parsi identity, composed of religious exclusivity, ethnicity, common history and elitism has brought Parsis into conflict with the Indian identity....After the independence of India, the exalted social position enjoyed by Parsis during the Raj, has been eroded and Parsis have been marginalized in independent India. This has galled the community as a whole as its elite consciousness has not been acknowledged by the new rulers of India. Parsis are today trying to reorient themselves to this much reduced role. Some seek to assimilate themselves into the Indian mainstream by adopting Indian culture and jettisoning their Parsi identity.... The current fiction being written by Parsis address itself to this problem of Parsi identity and the assimilation of Parsis into the Indian milieu or the expatriate situation.²

In her first novel. *The Crow - Eaters* (1978), Bapsi Sidhwa makes a strong assertion of the Parsi ethos. The novel highlights the peculiarities and eccentricities of Parsi culture in a highly hilarious way. It relates the comic story of an enterprising Parsi named Faredoon Junglewalla, who shifts his family from Gujarat to Lahore in search of business. Freddy, as he is called, is extremely proud and conscious of his Parsi identity. In Lahore, he comes to enjoy tremendous respect and status, living in the midst of a mixed community consisting of Hindus, Muslims and the British. Like most Parsis, Freddy has a strong Anglo-Phile bias, which is revealed in his absurd use of English proverbs.

Furthermore, Sidhwa takes a dig at the peculiar nature of Parsi death rites, whereby the human corpse is neither cremated nor buried but left exposed on a high structure called the Tower of Silence, to be pecked at by vultures and other scavengers. She also makes fun of the typical Parsi consciousness of an elitist status revealed in their desire for all things Western and their tendency to appear more British than the British.

Like most Parsis of the time, Freddy remains unaffected by the Nationalist movement for independence, which is taking place in the background. He has no wish to involve himself in the partition imbroglio and is content to sit back and take refuge in his religious identity which offers him immunity against communal passions. He believes that India has corrupted his son, Yezdi, who has taken to wandering around like an ascetic in search of spiritual fulfillment.

Towards the end of the novel, after the disastrous visit to England, the Junglewallas come to accept that their 'home' is in India and not the west.

In her third novel, *The Ice-Candy Man* (1988), Sidhwa once again, takes up the problem of Parsi identity, set against the background of the partition. This time the action is seen through the eyes of a crippled and sensitive child, Lenny, who is fascinated, bewildered and aghast by the violent whirl of events around her. The harmless sounding title camouflages the horror and bestiality of the partition which Sidhwa examines at an allegorical level. Lenny's ayah symbolizes Mother India, her chocolate-brown complexion representing earthiness, fecundity and sensuality, which is finally cruelly revaged and destroyed by the rapaciousness and viciousness of the Ice-candy man. Lenny's family tries to hide the

ayah and protect her. However, it is Lenny who unwittingly, betrays her. Nilufer Bharucha reads into this betrayal "the wider and constant betrayal by all Parsis of the one land which has given them refuge."³

The Parsi community, in this novel, decides to remain neutral during the partition crisis. Colonel Bharucha addresses a meeting of the Lahore Parsis and advocates a policy of absolute silence over the communal conflict. "We have to be extra wary, or we'll be neither here nor there....we must hunt with the hounds and run with the hares."⁴

The novel ends with the rescue of the ayah through the efforts of Lenny's family.

An American Brat (1993), Sidhwa's latest novel, explores the problem of Parsi ethnicity in the context of the de-colonized nation of Pakistan and the United States of America. The Parsi community came to enjoy a great deal of respect and status in Pakistan in the aftermath of the Partition, on account of its neutrality and refusal to get involved in communal issues. *An American Brat* relates the story of a well-established family of the Ginwallas. The novel is noteworthy for its remarkable portrait of the heroine, Feroza and her mother, Zarin, particularly Zarin, who comes across as a woman of a very robust and pragmatic personality with well-defined views on most subjects. Zarin is a strong Bhutto supporter. She objects very strongly to the establishment of the fundamentalist regime in the wake of Bhutto's hanging, the spread of the 'mullah mentality' as she refers to it, and decides to send her daughter to the United States away from the 'corrupting' influence of Islamic mores. Once in America, Feroza gradually

sheds her inhibitions, and develops into an independent, strong-minded person, who comes to question and see in perspective both her own existence and that of her community in the narrow, closed mould, back home in Pakistan. However, this self-realization is a very slow process for both, Feroza and Zarin. Zarin develops an objectivity towards her religious ethnicity after her brief sojourn in America, which makes her question the unjust rules of her community which prevent her daughter from finding her happiness in a mixed marriage. Thus, exposure to the American way of life becomes an education in itself for both, mother and daughter.

Finally, however, Zarin does succeed in undermining the relationship between Feroza and David by bringing ethno-religious pressure upon David, which makes him shy away from the elitist exclusivity of the Parsis.

Boman Desai's *The Memory of Elephants* (1988) also deals with the problem of Parsi ethnicity. It is a truly postmodern novel in the sense that it effectively combines reality, fantasy and moral allegory. The novel centres around the figure of Homi, who lives in a world suspended from time and space and who has invented a memo-scan which gives him a great memory, the memory of elephants. This memory encapsulates not just the events in the present and the recent past but includes the memory of the entire Parsi race.

Homi relives significant events from his own past as well as the past of his race. The action offers glimpses of the persecution of the Parsis by the Arabs, their escape to India, the life of the Parsi community in Gujarat and then Bombay, the typical conflict between the two cultures, eastern and western, experienced by most

Parsis with a definite bias for Western culture.

Homi's grandmother, Bapaiji typifies the Parsi who is firmly affiliated to her Indian roots and, at the same time, conscious of the exclusive nature of the Parsi ethos. Whereas Homi's younger brother, Rusi, like so many Parsis in the post-colonial period, tries to find an identity in the west, to compensate for the loss of an elitist status that the entire Parsi community is so acutely conscious of. However, Rusi discovers to his frustration that to a Westerner, there is no difference between a Parsi and any other Asian immigrant. Finally, Rusi ends up marrying an American Jew girl - Jan, and finds refuge in 'bi-culturalism'.

Rohinton Mistry's *Such a Long Journey* (1991), his first novel, relates the life of a middle-class Parsi, Gustad Noble, with an interesting combination of factual history based on the scandal involving Rs.60 lakhs surrounding a Parsi named Sohrab Nagarwala during Mrs. Gandhi's regime.

Gustad Noble resides in a typical middle-class Parsi locality. He hails from a prosperous family whose inheritance has been squandered away by his uncle. Gustad is nostalgic about his family's past glory. The inhabitants of the Khodadad Building form the other characters in the novel. They are drawn in a humorous vein, with all their Parsi eccentricities.

Jimmy Billimoria is the fictional version of the real-life Sohrab Nagarwala. The year is 1971, which marked the end of the Bangladesh war. Gustad is worried about the fortunes of his family when his son Roshan refuses to enroll at the IIT after making it to the admission list. He has a friend, Dinshawji, an associate from the bank, who is a rather comic-sinister figure with his

heartly humour. Gustad is also saddened by the sudden departure of his friend, Jimmy Billimoria from Bombay.

Besides the mystery shrouding the figure of Billimoria, the novel is a serious attempt at an analysis of ordinary, everyday trivialities of a minority community. The wall which is symbolic of shelter for the inhabitants of the Khodadad building is finally demolished by the municipal corporation, led by Gustad's childhood friend, Malcolm Saldhana. The irony is complete with the death of the half-witted Tehmul langra, who is hit on the head by a brick during the confrontation with the demolition squad.

Farrukh Dhondy's novel *Bombay Duck* (1990) highlights the identity and culture crisis faced by expatriate Parsis. Fridaus Kanga's *Trying to Grow* (1989) is a moving, autobiographical account of a Parsi family in Bombay with a serious study of its cultural ethos.

Other significant novels reflecting social reality include Anita Desai's *In Custody* and *Baumgartner's Bombay*. *In custody* deals with the deliberate political marginalization of the Urdu language which also implies the marginalization of a minority community. The protagonist, Deven, who is a small-time lecturer in Hindi, is given the task of interviewing the once famous but now ageing and almost forgotten poet, Nur, for his friend Murad's literary magazine. It is no easy task that Deven is saddled with as he discovers when he meets the poet in person.

The saddened state into which the poet Nur has fallen, the language Urdu has fallen, fill Deven in turn with revulsion, pity and compassion. Urdu which once enjoyed a respectable status in Northern India has fallen upon evil days and Urdu poetry, which has a rich tradition has been completely marginalized in postcolonial

India. The sad fate of the poet Nur symbolizes the fate of Urdu language and literature.

Deven manfully sticks to his task of drawing out the redoubtable Nur from his decayed cocoon consisting of two domineering wives and a group of flatterers, even when he recognizes how hopeless his efforts are. Nur is marginalized in his own household by his scheming and pretentious younger wife, who scoffs at him with contempt and flaunts her own cheap efforts at poetry shamelessly before him.

Baumgartner's Bombay looks at the twice-over marginalized figure of a German Jew refugee named Hugo Baumgartner. Baumgartner escapes from Hitler's Germany to arrive in India, where he makes the sad discovery that he is as much the figure of an unwanted foreigner as ever. He cannot really and truly belong to India despite the fact that he spends the rest of his life in Bombay. Baumgartner becomes a victim of political persecution in both the countries, Germany and India. The irony is complete when Baumgartner is brutally murdered by a fellow German, a down-and-out young fellow, whom he takes pity on, just as he pities and gives home to stray cats.

Another significant cluster of novels can be traced around the theme of gender injustice. All novels classified under this group do not necessarily represent an aggressive feminist view point in the sense of Western feminism. Nor do all women writers concern themselves with the problem of the status of women in Indian society. For instance, older women writers such as Kamala Markandaya and Nayantara Sehgal explore other issues such as the east - west conflict, the political and economic situation in the country.

There are women novelists, however, who have taken up themes related to the marginalized or 'sub-altern' state of women in Indian culture, chief among them being Anita Desai, Shashi Deshpande, Bharati Mukherjee and more recent novelists such as Namita Gokhale, Nina Sibal and Gita Hariharan.

Anita Desai is not an overtly feminist writer. Yet some of her novels explore the inner psyche, the shuttered sensibility of women from fairly well-to-do backgrounds, who find themselves trapped within the confines of loveless marriages. She examines in graphic detail the neurosis generated by the self-created isolation and alienation of such women in her novels, *Cry, the Peacock* (1963), *Voices in the City* (1965), *Where shall we go this Summer?* (1975) and *Fire on the Mountain* (1977).

Cry, the Peacock relates the story of Maya, who feels restless and uneasy within her marriage. She has led a very sheltered and uneventful life both before and after her marriage. Having nothing to do all day long, since the household chores are taken care of by the servants, Maya takes to brooding and fantasizing about her many fears. Her childless condition does nothing to improve her mental state. Her husband, Gautama, like her father, is very patient with her and takes good care of her. However, nothing can prevent Maya's mind from sinking into the dark, abyss of madness. The death of her beloved dog proves to be the last straw that snaps her flimsy hold on sanity. Finally, she pushes her husband to his death and commits suicide herself.

Voices in the City once again centres around the figure of a neurotic wife, haunted by several fears and ugly thoughts, and oppressed by the demands of her married life. Her neurosis can

be traced to her upper-middle class upbringing, to her family, consisting of an emotionally facile mother, a sensitive and fragile brother, Nirode and a sister named, Amla. Affected by the atmosphere of her home, Monisha withdraws more and more into her inner shell. Marriage does not help in getting rid of her depression. On the contrary, she becomes more unstable and suicidal inspite of all the love and affection she receives from her husband, Jiban. Her tragedy turns a full circle with her suicide. She kills herself in the most horrible way, by setting herself on fire.

Where shall we go this summer? focusses on the life of a married woman named Sita, who, like Maya and Monisha, comes perilously close to madness and suicide. Pregnant with her fifth child, driven to desperation and despair, Sita escapes to Manori, the magical island of her dreams, the place where she had spent a happy childhood, in the hope of reviving her flagellated spirits.

She is sick and tired of her bored and meaningless existence back home with her husband and children. Now, at the age of forty, she is not looking forward to having her fifth child. She is so frustrated with her life, she cannot control her reactions. Her husband feels that she has grown hysterical and nervy.

She seeks to recapture something of the magic and wonder she had experienced in her childhood home in Manori. Her stay in Manori makes her come to terms with both her past and her present. She comes to realize that things have changed, the island is not the place it once was. In fact it's a dangerous place for a lonely, pregnant woman with just a couple of children for company.

Finally, it is the thought of her children, particularly the thought of her unborn child, which drives her back to her home and husband in Bombay. The protagonist in this novel, is able to make a mature resolution in the face of her personal turmoil and is thus saved from death or madness.

In *Fire on the mountain*, the protagonist is Nanda, an old woman, who is a sad failure, inspite of all the wealth and power she wields. She reflects on her own life and that of her children and grand-children. Her daughter is married to a bestial drunkard and a womanizer. Her grand-daughter, Raka, the product of this unfortunate marriage is a sick, disturbed child, who ultimately becomes the perpetrator of the most horrible form of violence - she sets the forest on fire. The vibrant personality of Ila Das, the childhood friend of Nanda adds an interesting angle to the story.

Shashi Deshpande is another significant novelist who presents an authentic picture of the status of middle-class married women in her novels. She does not analyze the neurotic and psychotic aspects of the female psyche in the manner of Anita Desai. Rather, she concerns herself with making a realistic observation of the problems faced by educated, sensitive, intelligent women within the Indian marriage system. If this makes her a feminist writer, then she is one. However, her brand of feminism is different. Hers is not the firebreathing, hysterical variety of feminism. Her female protagonists are confused about their identities, struggling to find their own voice and torn apart by the conflicting claims of their families and their own, individual needs.

In her first novel, *Roots and Shadows* (1983), the protagonist Indu visits her ancestral home, the place where she had spent her childhood, in order to renew the roots of her existence, to get back in touch with herself and place in proper perspective her intense and emotionally exhausting relationship with her husband, Jayant. In her second novel, *The Dark Hold no Terrors* (1983), the protagonist Saru is a successful doctor, married to a small-time lecturer. She, too, escapes to her childhood home, to seek refuge from her turbulent existence. She is deeply troubled by the sadistic, cruel behaviour of her husband, who cannot forgive her for being more successful than he is. She is also haunted by her past, by the guilt associated with the death of her brother, Dhruv during her childhood.

Finally, she comes to the resolution that there is no escape for her either from the past or from the present, that she can learn to live with herself only if she comes to terms with her relationship with her husband and the death of her brother.

In her award-winning novel, *That Long Silence*, the heroine, Jaya feels crushed by the domineering and insensitive nature of her husband, Mohan. He does not take her career as a writer very seriously. At the same time when he gets into trouble, facing a likely indictment on the charge of corruption, he expects her to fall in completely with his wishes and takes her support for granted.

He makes her leave their luxurious apartment in Churchgate and move to a seedy flat in Dadar, a place where she had spent a greater part of her early life. This return to the past makes Jaya see everything in a clearer perspective - her past, her

relationship with her husband, her relationship with her children, her career as a writer. She arrives at certain inescapable and unvarnished truths about herself through this process of introspection.

Bharati Mukherjee is not, strictly speaking, a feminist writer. Her novels, centred though they are around female characters, describe the gradual process of the assimilation of the Indian expatriate into the Western milieu. Now this process often tends to be a painful one, even violent at times. However, when the assimilation is complete, the Indianness of the expatriate is replaced by a thoroughly westernized outlook.

Bharati Mukherjee's first novel, *The Tiger's Daughter* (1971) relates the story of an Indian woman named Tara, who was born in Calcutta and educated in New York and who is married to an American named David. She comes home to Calcutta, having spent several years in America. She feels completely alienated from her homeland when she arrives. Nor does she feel a sense of belonging to the land where she has immigrated. She is unable to resolve this feeling of being a complete stranger in her own country and finally goes back to America and her American husband.

Her next novel, *Wife* (1975) deals with the gradual deterioration of the sensibility of the protagonist, Dimple Das Gupta, ending in utter despair, insanity and violence. Dimple is married to an American immigrant engineer. She is unable to withstand the culture shock she receives upon embarking on a new life in New York. She becomes so completely alienated from the environment around her and herself that she ends up killing her husband.

In her latest novel, *Jasmine* (1989), Bharati Mukherjee traces the metamorphosis of a Punjabi girl from Jyoti to Jasmine to Jase and finally Jane. Jyoti immigrates to America after the death of her husband and undergoes the gradual process of Americanization. From a submissive, Indian woman, she gets transformed into an independent, bold Westernized woman, who, after a series of assorted experiences in the white environment, finally settles down with an American husband.

In her first novel, *The Thousand Faces of Night* (1992), Gita Hariharan traces the history of female subjugation through three generations, cutting across the barriers of class and caste. The theme of the novel is the oppression and humiliation that women have to endure regardless of age, education or class. The protagonist Devi who has been educated in the west, her middleclass mother Sita, her grand-mother and the low caste servant, Mayamma are all subject to the laws of the patriarchal culture, determined by Manu, which robs them of all freedom and status.

The next cluster of novels can be grouped around political themes. Writers do not exercise their creative energies in a void. Since they do not function in a world divorced from reality, they are obviously affected by the political climate of the country in which they live. Very often, they choose to weave important political events into the fabric of their fiction. Several Indian English novelists such as Raja Rao, R.K. Narayan, Bhabani Bhattacharya, Manohar Malgaonkar, Khushwant Singh, Nayantara Sehgal, Salman Rushdie and Shashi Tharoor have focussed on significant political events such as the Independence movement, the Partition, the Chinese Aggression, the Emergency in their fiction.

Raja Rao's *Kanthapura* (1938) is the most celebrated example of the fictional handling of the theme of a political movement. It records the impact of Gandhi's freedom struggle of the twenties and the thirties on a remote village in South India, a village which is representative of the several lakh villages which had similarly come under the sway of Gandhi's non-violent, non-cooperation movement.

Kanthapura "portrays as no government-sponsored or foundation-patronized history of the freedom Movement does - the tomes which are called histories of the Freedom Movement are as lifeless as the monolithic monuments created to the memory of the unknown soldier, nor for that matter does any book of this scope and size that I have read in English on this theme picture so vividly, truthfully and touchingly the story of the resurgence of India under Gandhi's leadership : its religious character, its economic and social concerns, its political ideals precisely in the way Gandhi tried to spiritualize politics, the capacity for sacrifice of our people in response to the call of one like Gandhi not the spectacular sacrifice of the few chosen ones who later became India's rulers but the officially unchronicled, little, nameless, unremembered acts of courage and sacrifice of peasants and farm hands, students and lawyers, women and old men, thanks to whom Gandhi's unique experiment gathered momentum and grew into a national movement. *Kanthapura* is India in microcosm : what happened there is what happened everywhere in India during those terrible years of our fight for our Freedom."⁵

The story, which is narrated by an old widow in a very racy style replete with native colour and humour, centres around the character of Moorthy, who brings Gandhi's influence to the

village of Kanthapura, and transforms it from being an unremarkable Indian village with its fixed quarters for different castes, its superstitions, its orthodox values to a place which becomes socially and politically progressive. At first, the villagers of Kanthapura with curious sounding names like Waterfall Venkamma, Nose-scratching Nanjamma, Temple Rangappa, Range Gowda and a host of other characters, are suspicious and hostile towards the teachings of Gandhi. Gradually, however, the entire village gets caught in the whirl wind generated by Gandhi's ideas and becomes an active participant in the Satyagraha movement. Moorthy, Rangamma and Ratna become leaders of this movement in Kanthapura.

The salt laws are defied and the toddy shops are picketed. Authority in the shape of the policeman, Bade Khan, who symbolizes political oppression, is openly routed. Finally, all the menfolk in the village are arrested and jailed and the village itself is razed to ashes. However, it is no mean sacrifice that Kanthapura and its inhabitants make. It is from the ashes of the burnt village that the future of India rises, phoenix-like. Kanthapura becomes a blazing beacon for the entire country, setting the patriotic passions of the people afire.

The entire story is narrated in terms of myth, a 'sthala-purana' and the figure of Gandhi in the novel assumes the shape of an 'avatar' such as Rama or Krishna. In fact Raja Rao sets the pace for the latter-day Rushdie and Shashi Tharoor with his brilliant mingling of fact and fantasy, traditional myth and contemporary political reality.

R. K. Narayan has never really chosen to emphasize political reality in his novels, with one clear exception, namely *Waiting for the Mahatma* (1955). It would be an exaggeration to describe

Waiting for the Mahatma as an overtly political novel, making a strong political statement or drawing a graphic image of a political event. The novel chiefly narrates the romance of a young couple, Sriram and Bharati, against the backdrop of the freedom struggle. As the novel progresses, the background assumes limelight, the hazily drawn political events, the dimly-sketched figure of the Mahatma suddenly stand out in sharply etched lines and loom large over the lives of the protagonists. The Mahatma is an actual character in the novel, who grows in strength and stature with each passing incident.

Sriram, a lazy, good for nothing lay about, falls in love with Bharati, who is herself strongly committed to Gandhi's freedom movement. She draws Sriram into the Satyagraha Movement and transforms him from an ignorant, politically naive and ordinary creature into a true patriot. The entire transit is described ironically. Finally, it is the Mahatma who wins and emerges as a towering figure in the novel. The tragic and ironic implications of his assassination are beautifully brought out towards the end of the novel.

Bhabani Bhattacharya's award-winning novel, *Shadow from Ladakh* (1966) has as its theme the Chinese aggression of 1962. This watershed in the political career of Nehru casts its huge shadow over the entire novel, which is peopled with thinly-disguised, actual political figures. Satyajit with his Gandhigram recalls Gandhi whereas Bhasker, the Chief Engineer of Steel town is a distinct reminder of Nehru, Sevagram symbolizes Gandhi's rural economics and Steel town symbolizes Nehru's dream of a modern, industrialized India. Pitted against this dichotomy is the figure of Mao. There was bound to be a political showdown between the two extremities

represented by Nehru's social democratic ideas and Mao's ambitious, expansionist moves. The conflict between Satyajit and Bhasker is resolved by the romantic figure of Sumita.

However, the conflict on the political level between India and China cannot be resolved so sentimentally. The five little Chinese girls who genuflect before Bhasker is the novelist's romantic answer to the problem.

Manohar Malgaonkar's *Distant Drum* (1960) and *A Bend in the Ganges* (1964) both have as their backdrop the battle against British colonialism resulting in freedom and the bloody aftermath of the partition.

Distant Drum relates the story of an army officer named Kiran Garud who witnesses army life during both, the British rule as well as the post-independence period. Though the novel does not, strictly speaking, have to do with political events, political events do cast their shadow on its characters. On the one hand, the novel traces the romance between Kiran and Bina, on the other it also highlights the conflict between loyalties - the loyalty to a friend and the loyalty to one's country - involved in the relationship between Kiran and Abdul Jamal. The two friends, who had fought together in Burma during the war and had faced the 1947 riots together in Delhi, find themselves in opposite camps after the Partition.

A Bend in the Ganges (1964) focusses on the tragic irony of the partition, the horror and the brutality it entailed, leaving millions of people dead and tearing apart every pretence of civilization. The opening chapter entitled *A Ceremony of Purification* has ironic implications. The burning fires which consumed foreign cloth during Gandhi's Satyagraha movement are replaced by the

fires of communal passions, consuming millions of Hindus and Muslims.

The novel relates the story of two friends, Gian and Debi, both of whom find themselves transported to the Andamans for different reasons. Gian is sentenced for a murder caused by an ancient family feud. Debi has joined the nationalist movement and is betrayed by his friend, Shafi and sentenced to life imprisonment. The Japanese occupation of the Andamans enables them both to return to India. Debi seeks to take revenge upon Shafi. He takes away Shafi's mistress, Mumtaz from him. However, both Debi and Mumtaz fall prey to the communal frenzy that overtakes Lahore during the Partition. Finally, only Gian and Debi's sister, Sundari are able to escape from Lahore, with millions butchered on either side.

The Partition, for obvious reasons, holds tremendous fascination as a subject matter for fiction writers, being one of the cruellest and most tragic chapters in India's political history. No other historical event in the twentieth century except, perhaps, for the Holocaust, has aroused so much feeling and fired the imaginations of creative artists as the Partition.

Khushwant Singh's *Train to Pakistan* (1956) records the insanity and the brutality that overtook the communities of Sikhs, Hindus and Muslims in 1947. The novel is set in a tiny border village named Mano Majra situated on the banks of the Sutlej. It has its inhabitants from the three communities, living in absolute harmony. The village has never known communal violence. But 1947 brings about a change in the status quo. There is suspicion and hostility in the air. There are rumours about the mass massacres of Hindus across the border. There are ugly stories

making the rounds of trainloads of Hindus and Sikhs arriving dead from Pakistan. The villagers of Mano Majra are bewildered by such tales. The violence which has driven people completely berserk elsewhere in the country has not touched them as yet. However, trainloads of refugees arrive and egg them onto seek revenge. A few people like Jugga and Hukum Chand are still able to hold on to their sanity inspite of the atmosphere around them. Finally, it is they who succeed in averting the tragedy of the massacre of a trainload of Muslims on their way to Pakistan.

Nayantara Sehgal focusses upon political activities, particularly the wily games of power played amongst politicians, bureaucrats and businessmen in Delhi, in most of her novels. *This Time of Morning* (1965) deals with the fall from power of a political magnate, Kalyan Sinha. The political events in the novel are strongly reminiscent of the events during Nehru's last years of power. *Storm in Chandigarh* (1969) is, as the title indicates, set in the newly designed capital of Punjab and Haryana. Tension mounts between the two states during the course of the action, culminating in violence.

Enjoying the advantage of her illustrious family background, Nayantara Sehgal has a genuine eye for detail where political developments are concerned. *Rich Like Us* (1987) unfolds against the backdrop of one of the darkest periods in the history of Independent India, the Emergency. The novelist presents a stark, authentic picture of the erosion of democratic values and political ethics that was set into motion during this period.

One of the most prominent contemporary Indian English novelists to emphasize history in his fiction is Salman Rushdie.

Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* (1981) and *Shame* (1983) deal with the political history of the Indian sub-continent in a fantastic mode.

.....Rushdie's concept of history, explicitly stated in the novel (*Midnight's Children*), is also exemplified in the very unfolding of the cinema canvas of the novel. History is regarded as a terrain of consciousness.... the terrain where the autobiography of the novelist-narrator (Saleem-Salman), the biography of his kith and kind, and the wider realities stretching to the ends of time and space, intersect, criss-cross and cross-weave into a world where fantasy and reality, myth and fact, reinforce each other to give us a heightened picture of reality, the secret reality of history.⁶

Midnight's Children is history inverted, history standing on its head as it were. The novelist takes a puckish delight in weaving an intricate pattern, combining the warp of history with the woof of fantasy. The protagonist of the novel, Saleem Sinai represents the mirror of a nation, reflecting the variegated colours of the history of that nation.

Being born at the same hour as the nation gained its independence, Saleem Sinai becomes the first child of midnight. "How, in what terms, may the career of a single individual be said to impinge on the fate of a nation? I must answer in adverbs and hyphens. I was linked to history both literally and metaphorically, both actively and passively, in what our (admirably modern) scientists might term 'modes of connection' composed of dualistically-combined configurations of the two pairs of opposed adverbs given above. This is why hyphens are necessary : ac-

tively-literally, passively - metaphorically, actively-metaphorically, passively-literally, I was inextricably entwined with my world."⁷

The events in Saleem's life are linked with major political and historical events of the nation : the language riots of 1957, the Nanavati murder case, the Chinese aggression, Nehru's death, the rise of Mrs. Gandhi, the Bangladesh war and the declaration of the Emergency. But it is not a simple juxtaposition of personal and political history. History is, as it were, condensed and encapsulated in the person of Saleem Sinai. The unfolding of events takes place under the translucence of Saleem's skin. The inward, apocalyptic vision is achieved through a skillful combination of fantasy and reality. The lovingly-sketched character of Tai, the dream conference of the children of midnight, the metamorphosis of the Brass Monkey and Parvati-witch are some of the instances of sojourns into fantasy land. These are interspersed with passages which could be described as straight journalistic pieces.

'Shame shares the same conglomeration of fact and fantasy as *Midnight's Children*. Rushdie himself describes it as 'a modern fairy tale'. A fairy tale rooted in reality but it is reality looked at from a different perspective. "I build imaginary countries and try to impose them on the ones that exist. I, too, face the problem of history, what to retain, what to dump, how to hold on to what memory insists on relinquishing, how to deal with change."⁸

Rushdie makes a clear distinction between the real and fictional nature of the world he creates. "The country in this story is not Pakistan. or not quite. There are two countries, real and fictional, occupying the same space, or almost the same space. My story, my fictional country exists, like myself, at a slight angle to reality. I have found this off-centering to be necessary, but its

value is, ofcourse, open to dabate. My view is that I am not writing only about Pakistan."⁹

Omar Khayyam Shakil and Sufiya Zenobia are the two pivots around which the history of a nation revolves. Iskander Harrappa and Raza Hyder are the manifest products of time thrown up during the course of the churning of history. Omar Khayyam Shakil, reared up by three doting mothers symbolizes the uncertain origin of a sibling nation, a nation born of shame, groping its way through unrest and instability. Sufiya Zenobia personifies the shame of the nation. The moral of the fable is : a nation born of shame cannot hope to free itself from the shackles of a guilty past, the vestiges of a shameful inheritance. Iskander Harrappa and Raza Hydar are pawn figures in this political allegory. The rise and fall of Iskander Harrappa and the triumph of Raza Hyder and his fiery end are outlined with the frightening and compelling inevitability of a Greek tragedy. It is not enough to trace pat connections between the figures of Iskander Harrappa and Raza Hyder with Zulfikar Ali Bhutto and General Zia. Political reality has been infused with an allegorical and fabulous import. We recognize in Iskandar Harrappa and Raza Hyder monsters or mad men who have often erupted during the course of history, who, seeking to control fate, only succeeded in becoming victims of fate. Iskander Harrappa's meteoric rise as a politician culminates in a tragic end, whereas Raza Hyder is destroyed by forces within his family : the shame-ridden figure of Sufiya Zenobia, which gets metamorphosed into a devouring Beast and the vengeful ire of the Shakil sisters.

Another contemporary novelist, Shashi Tharoor, has given a mythicized version of India's political history from the Independence

to the Emergency in *The Great Indian Novel* (1989). There are obvious parallels drawn between the political personalities and the characters from the *Mahabharata*. Gandhi, for instance, is seen as Bheeshma.

Yet another cluster of novels is formed round the theme of the East-West encounter. Several Indian English novelists have been drawn towards this theme. The east-west conflict assumes a significantly personal meaning for Indian novelists on account of the colonial experience. There has been a mixed reaction to the colonial encounter between the Indian native and the white colonizer, the meeting of two disparate cultures. Some writers see the impact of Western culture as a deplorable fact; others see it as a significant encounter, marking a notable change in the cultural history of both the races.

The cultural differences have been explored on several, different levels - the philosophical level as in the case of Raja Rao, the close inter-personal level as in some of the novels of Kamala Markandaya, the socio-political level as in the novels of Ruth Jhabvala, the comic-ironic level as in the case of G. V. Desani.

The Serpent and the Rope (1960) is a classic illustration of the East-West theme. It does not just superfluously touch upon the ordinary, mundane aspect of the conflict. It is a profound analysis of the spiritual differences between the two cultures. The protagonist of the novel is Ramaswamy, a sensitive, South Indian brahmin, whose mind and character are moulded by the finest influences of his native culture. Like Raja Rao himself, the narrator wins a scholarship, and goes to France to pursue his research in European history, where he meets Madeleine, a French woman whom he falls in love with and eventually marries. The

marriage symbolizes the coming together of the two cultures. In France, Rama is exposed to the finer aspects of European philosophy which helps to sharpen his already existent spiritual sensibility. Rama's mind becomes a playground for the spiritual symbiosis of the two cultures. His French experience, however, represents the first stage, a very small beginning, of his spiritual growth.

The death of his son Krishna/Pierre followed by the death of his father in India marks the beginning of a new phase in Rama's life. His return to India, and his pilgrimage to Benares, Allahabad and Hardwar in the company of his step-mother and step-brother make him acutely aware of his sense of belonging to the past, the ancient traditions of India and its rich philosophy. There are dark abysses in Rama's soul which only he can fill and it is this search for fulfillment that makes Rama such a wanderer.

His marriage with Madeleine slowly begins to disintegrate following the death of their son. Madeleine drifts away from him and seeks salvation in Buddhist philosophy. His meeting with Savithri, the free-thinking, liberated woman in residence at Cambridge represents yet another twist in Rama's destiny. Savithri comes to symbolize the best qualities of Indian womanhood for Rama. She is Savitri as well as Radha. A deep spiritual affinity develops between Rama and Savithri. Ultimately it stops just at that. Their relationship does not progress beyond the spiritual plane. Savithri is persuaded by Rama to return to India and find fulfillment in marriage to her affianced Jagirdar, whom she does not love.

Rama's darker side comes to the fore in his lapse into an adulterous relationship with Lakshmi towards the end of his second

visit to India. Eventually he returns to Madeleine in France, who, ultimately leaves him in search of her own solace. Finally Rama makes a promise to himself to return to India to seek his own Guru.

The novel, thus, goes far beyond being a superficial exploration of the problems of a mixed marriage and the encounter of two different cultures. It is a serious study of two different philosophical attitudes, two different spiritual sensibilities.

Kamala Markandaya's *Some Inner Fury* (1962), which basically has a political theme - the freedom struggle and all the turbulence it generated in the form of civil disobedience - also touches upon the east-west theme. The impact of Western culture on the Indian sensibility, culminating in an anglophile attitude is characterized in the figure of Kit. However, the protagonist of the novel is Kit's sister, Mira. Mira is a superb example of the sophisticated, Westernized Indian woman, who can speak English with as much ease as any English-woman. She falls passionately in love with an Englishman named Richard, who, too, ardently returns her love. But their love is doomed right from the beginning on account of the political turmoil in the country. They are torn apart, not because of racial differences, but because of conflicting political loyalties. Mira realizes that her way is separate from Richard's and that she cannot possibly share her future with him.

In Kamala Markandaya's estimate, there has not been much understanding between East and West inspite of the long association between them. Neither has had the correct attitude towards the other. Generally speaking, the West has been self-consciously superior and the East self-consciously inferior....A

meeting between East and West at a personal level is always possible. The union between Mira and Richard indicates the possibility of hearts meeting. But political and other forces have the power to estrange and to separate.¹⁰

G. V. Desani's *All about H. Hatterr* (1942) is a humorous, farcical and fantastic treatment of the East-West encounter theme. In this case, the two cultures are actually personified in the gullible, absurd yet lovable figure of the protagonist, who is at once the 'sahib' with the 'sola topi' as well as the Mad Hatterr from *Alice in Wonderland*. Hatterr is a Eurasian, 'a love-brat, a mixed Oriental - Occidental sinfant.' (p.- 101). His is the classic dilemma of a man caught between two cultures. He vacillates between being a 'pukka sahib' and a complete Indian, but he can be neither. He is rejected by both the races, both the cultures.

The novel traces the adventures of Hatterr in search of his true self, his identity and ultimately, the meaning of life, in a comic-ironic mode. Hatterr learns from the school of life. His teachers are charlatans, loose women and rogues. He is fooled by such people at every stage of his life, and he repeatedly emerges victimized, robbed, beaten, even disrobed from his various experiences. The novel parodies the westerner's faith in the wisdom and philosophy of the East in Hatterr's encounter with the fake holy men. In fact, 'the entire perennial question of the meaning of existence as posed by Hamlet has been brilliantly parodied by Desani. The alternative to the existential angst offered by belief in God and spirituality is also ridiculed and satirized by the novelist.

Hatterr's dog, Jenkins, literally symbolizes the 'under-dog' Indian native. He has an appropriate master in Hatterr, who is culturally victimized. It is also significant that Hatterr treats his dog just as

an Englishman treats an Indian native, and also that the dog has no known pedigree and no proper identity.

At the end of his long spiritual odyssey, Hatterr arrives at the philosophy of acceptance. "I say, accept.. things are. They are there... Good and bad. To hell with judging, its take it, don't leave it, and every man for himself! I take it. I am not kicking. I am not complaining against the Tyranny of Law."¹¹

His final pronouncement is, "Carry on, boys and continue like hell."¹²

Ruth Prawer Jhabvala's novels too, highlight the East-West theme. However, her novels present a special case altogether, as she herself is not an Indian. She is of Polish origin, married to an Indian and has spent a greater part of her life in Delhi. It is not surprising, therefore, that Delhi forms the background in most of her novels.

The world of post-independence Delhi is seen through the eyes of an outsider. Ruth Jhabvala examines the artificial nature of the elite, upper middle-class society in Delhi with a great deal of irony and amused detachment. She exposes the absurdities, the pretenses, the hollowness of the so-called sophisticated, educated, refined intelligentsia. She also reveals the hypocrisy of several Hindu customs, particularly the custom of marriage involving elaborate matchmaking, comparison of horoscopes, the stifling of romantic love. She has dealt with this theme in *To whom she will* (1955) and *The House-holder* (1960).

Esmond in India (1958) problematizes the east-west cultural conflict. Esmond is a priggish 'culture' shark who attaches himself

to rich Indian women, ostensibly to impart their own 'cultural' knowledge to them, actually to take advantage of them. He has no respect for his Indian wife, whom he looks upon with contempt. Finally, he leaves India to go back to the 'solid grey houses' and 'the solid grey people' of England.

In *A Backward Place* (1965), the protagonist is an English girl named Judy, who is married to and very much in love with an Indian named Bal. She tries her best to sustain this impossible marriage to a man who turns out to be a sad failure at everything. But it is in her most renowned novel, *Heat and Dust* (1975), that Ruth Jhabvala brings to bear her sharp focus on the Indian native-white outsider relationship. This relationship is traced through two generations. The novel, however, is completely lacking in depth, with a lot of sexual intrigue involving nabobs and gurus, thrown in to generate cheap interest.

A fifth cluster of Indian English novels can be classified on the basis of style. The novels of Mulk Raj Anand, R. K. Narayan, Raja Rao, Bhabani Bhattacharya, Kamala Markandaya, Amitav Ghosh and Upmanyu Chatterjee fall under the realistic mode of narration. Then there are novels written in the fantastic mode. 'Magic realism' is the word in current use. It implies a departure from reality, a journey into fantasy land, where fact and fiction, myth and reality are blended inextricably. This mode of narration has been honed to a fine art by Salman Rushdie, who, in turn has been considerably influenced by his predecessors in India such as Raja Rao and G. V. Desani and his Western counterparts like Gunter Grass and Gabriel Garcia Marquez. It can be alternately seen as the post-modern tendency to see history in terms of fragmented time and deliberately induced chaos. Or this mode of

narration, in the Indian context, can be also traced to the Islamic narrative tradition of *The Arabian Nights* and the Hindu narrative tradition of *The Panchatantra* and *Kathasaritsagar*. Rushdie seems to be heir to both these traditions.

Born in a subcontinent where the fusion of the past, present and even the future, creates a virtually timeless environment and culture, he (Rushdie) finds it not only easy and natural, but compulsive as well, to telescope all time into a timeless present. His sense of time in this novel (*Midnight's children*) is essentially cyclical and Puranic, in which all movement forward and backward is illusory, because the reality is regarded as a changeless, movementless, self-sustained structure. In this frame-work, there is no end or beginning or rather there are endless ends and beginnings. This reality cannot be captured by causality or sequentiality, because everything is everything else. Given this structural monism and substantive homogeneity this is a universe in which connections are everywhere, and one has only to will them. The best narrative structure is one in which there is really no narrative logic or dynamic. The classical Indian technique of weaving tales into tales, piling up fables on fables, through the employment of the feeblest of connections, is the most appropriate one for functioning in this universe.¹³

Rushdie has himself admitted the influence of the Indian cinema on his style of narration. The fantastic situations, the absurd isomorphisms, the clichéd use of the recognition and identity themes are all brought into use in his fantastic version of historical reality as presented in *Midnight's Children*, *Shame* and *The Satanic Verses* (1989). *The Satanic Verses*, which has received

such a hysterical reception, is a fine illustration of the magical-real realm of fiction. It combines religious fantasy with fictional narrative.

Jahilia is much more than Mecca. It is Mecca fictionalized into a dream world, the city of sand looms larger than life, peopled with the boldly drawn figures of Mahound, the poet Baal, Hind and Abu Simbel. Gibreel Farishta and Saladin Chamcha represent two extremes of duality. They find themselves hurtled into a schizoid land which is an imaginative reconstruction of Vilayet, a phantasmagoric twilight zone, flickering on the edges of fantasy and reality. Gibreel Farishta is set adrift on a sea of swirling dreams, which takes him to the beginning of time where he acquires the identity of the archangel Gibreel. Events relating the birth of a new faith, the faith of submission, pass rapidly through his dreams in the form of telescopic images, fictionalized history narrated in bits and pieces, which are constantly shifting and rearranging themselves like iridescent glass-pieces in a kaleidoscope.

The dream sequences relating to Mahound, Ayesha and Jahilia possess the qualities of an allegory, The triumph of Mahound and Ayesha, the butterfly-eating prophet is seen as ironical, raising profound questions regarding the dubious nature of all such revelations, the cunning ease with which faith can detour around difficulties to bargain its way to acceptability. The angel and the devil are two sides of the same coin. The thin line dividing angelic and satanic forces get blurred till the two contrary sides merge. Gibreel Farishta and Saladin Chamcha stand together in configuration.

Haroun and the Sea of Stories (1990) is a fantastic tale with realistic overtones of story-teller named Rashid who lives in a sad city, the saddest of cities, a city so sad that it has forgotten its own name. Rashid has lost his Gift of the Gab because the very Sea of Stories from which all stories come has been contaminated by Khattam-shud, the Prince of Silence. Rashid's son, Haroun is determined to rescue his father and return his special gift to him. The story echoes Rushdie's own dark misery of his exile since the publication of *The Satanic Verses*.

The fantastic mode of narration has also been employed by Raja Rao and G.V.Desani. Raja Rao's novel, *The Cat and Shakespeare* (1965) is a brilliant exercise in the fusion of metaphysics, reality and fantasy. It revolves around two main characters : Ramakrishna Pai, the narrator, who is both a realist and a dreamer, who gets involved in an adulterous relationship with a schoolmistress named Shanta and Govindan Nair, who is a complex character, completely given over to the idea of total surrender to the cat principle which, he believes governs the universe. The cat principle is a vedantic concept which represents a complete surrender to the Mother-cat, the Divine will. Shakespeare represents the other concept in the novel, that of a profound knowledge of life and all its mysteries. The novel does not have an easily recognizable, straightforward plot. Rather it is a richly woven tapestry of deep metaphysical discussion, humour, setting together the dialectical opposites of illusion and reality.

G.V. Desani's *All about H. Hatterr*, as noted earlier, set the pace for Rushdie with its rich blending of absurdity and reality. M.K. Naik, has referred to it as "the half-tragic, half-comic autobiography of a half-caste harlequin, the story of the hero's

search for, both self and a viable philosophy of living, a social chronicle depicting colonial consciousness in its diverse aspect; an uproariously funny picaresque comedy, a 'human horseplay' - brimful of various kinds of humour ranging from sheer farce and extravaganza to subtle wit; a triumphant experiment in blending Western and Indian narrative forms, and an astonishing exhibition of seemingly pixilated and pyrotechnical prose.¹⁴

Having listed the five major, discernible clusters of Indian English novels, the historian of this area of literature may consider those novels which cannot be neatly categorised into any of the identified clusters. Novelists such as E.M.Forster and Rudyard Kipling have written about India and offered sharp insights into the Indian psyche in their fiction. Should these novelists be left out of consideration while formulating the history of the Indian English novel merely because their nationalities happen to be British ? Should the boundaries regarding the nationality of novelists be so narrowly defined? Both Forster and Kipling have known India right down to its very soul. 'A Passage to India' brilliantly reflects the complex composite of Indian society. Kipling's 'Kim' is a truly Indian novel in the picaresque tradition. One cannot doubt the deep compassion and understanding of either of these two novelists who spent a great many valuable years of their lives in India.

On the other hand, it is difficult to categorize the novels of V.S.Naipaul as Indian even though Naipaul happens to be an Indian by birth. Despite the world wide acclamation received by 'A Suitable Boy', Vikram Seth offers similar difficulties. The pan Indian, urban world of 'A Suitable Boy' is too exclusive, too sophisticated, too glamorous to be truly Indian like the world of Bollywood

films and television serials, this world exists at a sharp tangent to the Indian reality.

The historian of the Indian English novel will have to think of a new category to include novelists like Forster and Kipling in his survey and leave out novelists such as Naipaul, Seth, Hanif Kureishi using his own discretion.

II

The formation of clusters of novels such as these is preferable to the canonization of a few authors as some critics have chosen or drawing an artificial line of development through the authors on the basis of chronology and inadequately defined periods.

The history of the Indian English novel viewed in terms of such clusters circumvents the difficulties involved in the concept of 'development' or 'evolution'. It makes no pretence of tracing such a development. Nor does it attempt to make any generalizations about the influences of the authors on one another. It does not place the authors in neat cut-and-dried periods. For example, Raja Rao and Salman Rushdie have not been placed in two separate slots on the basis of generation. In fact, *Kanthapura* and *Midnight's Children* have both been co-classified as novels bearing a political theme. Both texts stand together in configuration, each complete in itself. It would be absurd to claim that the latter text belongs to one period and one period only and therefore, has no connection with the former.

Moreover, this approach leaves room for a future application of some of the principles of literary history as outlined by Western theorists such as Wellek, Crane, Jauss and the New His-

toricists. It may appear fragmented at present. But with the passage of time, it may be further modified by considerations of dialectical oppositions within and outside the area, in relation to subjects such as sociology, history, psychology, semantics, linguistics and so forth, as suggested by Crane or a fusion of the responses of the readers over generations as outlined by Jauss and the reader - response theorists. The future historian of the Indian English novel may even contextualize it in terms of society and culture, in the manner suggested by the New Historicists.

For the moment however, the history of the Indian English novel can be, thus, seen in terms of clusters or groups of novels. All the existing novels cannot be rigidly classified under these clusters. No history of literature can be all comprehensive and complete in this sense. Every method of historiography has limitations and tends to leave gaps in its charting of history. Accordingly, the history of the Indian English novel, seen in terms of schools or groups rather than periods or movements, may leave out several novels from its purview. There are novels which will always remain 'unclassifiable' in this sense.

Nevertheless, the concept of a periodless and canonless history is a very valid one in the present state of things. In our case, perhaps, such a history gives a more authentic reflection of the growth of this area of literature than an artificial linking of novels on the basis of chronology and extra-literary events would.

III

The Subaltern Studies group has given directions for looking at historiography from a completely fresh perspective - the subaltern

perspective. It has effectively demonstrated how colonial historiography has marginalized, reduced, even silenced certain groups of communities, their languages, their identities, their histories. The aim of the Subaltern Studies group has been to reconsider and revise historiography from the perspective of these marginalized and silenced groups. Gayatri Chakravorty has, through her brilliant analysis of Mahashweta Devi's story *Stana-Dayini (Breast-giver)* presented an alternate reading of women's history from the perspective of an oppressed victim, whose name, ironically enough, happens to be Jashoda. Traditionally, women's fiction/histories have only examined the lives of 'main-stream', 'upper-class', 'privileged' women. The socially and economically marginalized women have rarely figured in the fiction or histories of women. Mahashwetadevi's powerful story *Stana-Dayini* brings to the fore the plight of one such woman. Such forceful voicing of the silenced communities in literature has challenged, as G.N.Devy puts it, "the tendency to essentialize India".¹⁵

Carried over further to literary history, this historiographic perspective raises several questions about the possibility of imposing one single identity or one single category on Indian literature in general, or, as in the present context, the Indian English novel in particular. The cultural identity of the Indian English novel alone can determine its diverse stands. In that case, the historian of the Indian English novel would have to devise fresh strategies to account for the cultural complexity and diversity of this body of literature. But first of all, the question that would have to be tackled with is whether or not the Indian English novel has a well-determined socio - cultural identity. While speaking of the novel in other Indian languages, the subaltern perspective is extremely useful and relevant. It remains to be seen whether the subaltern

category exists within Indian English fiction or not.

The historian of the Indian English novel would be faced with a host of questions in this regard. Does this area of literature offer resistance to the dominant narrative discourse ? Or is it more elitist in nature, more confirmist of the imperial culture ? Current practitioners in this area seem to be moving away from their homeland, both in terms of geography and cultural identity. On a superficial level, perhaps, this area of literature does offer resistance to the western canon or mainstream literature. But does it really succeed in exploring the cultural otherness of India ?

Though it is convenient to make categories within the Indian English novel on the basis of different themes such as feminist themes, ethnic-minority themes, political themes, themes relating to social reality, it remains to be seen how far these categories represent an accurate reflection of the difference related to culture, gender, ethnic groups, linguistic and religious groups. It would seem that these differences are largely homogenized, reduced or assimilated by writers who are themselves "the product of the vast ideological machinery that silences the subaltern".¹⁶

A brief survey of some of the established and contemporary Indian English novelists reveals interesting facts. Anita Desai and Shashi Deshpandę have explored the issue of gender injustice and created a new feminist discourse within the Indian English novel. But they have confined themselves to the middle-class, educated, urban women. They haven't really voiced the dispossession of the subaltern women. Maya in *Cry, the Peacock* and Manisha in *Voices in the City* belong to the middle-class elite. They are

undoubtedly lonely women suffering from a deep sense of anguish and loss of identity, imprisoned within their respective marriages. But they are by no means under-privileged in terms of education, social status and financial independence. Their anguish is more meta-physical than gender-specific.

Shashi Deshpande's protagonists too, belong to the privileged class. Indu (*Roots and Shadows*), Savita (*The Dark Holds no Terrors*) and Jaya (*That Long Silence*) are educated, socially well-placed and financially sound. They are marginalized within the confines of their relationships. Their struggle is a struggle for their personal identities. It is not a struggle for socio-economic survival.

These women novelists have not focussed on the socially and economically marginalized women, women who are deprived of the privileges of education, social status and financial independence. In fact, the cultural identity afforded by their women protagonists is a fairly limited one.

Parsi writers such as Bapsi Sidhwa, Boman Desai, Rohinton Mistry have spoken of the alienation and dispossession of the Parsi community both at home and abroad. There are other communities in India, which have been dispossessed, marginalized, neglected. The Indian English novelists have not taken note of these communities.

The writers of the diaspora have been fairly successful in creating a cultural space within the vicinity of mainstream literature and offering resistance to it. But once again it would appear that most of them write about the elite, educated, upper middle-class

Indians who represent a minuscule portion of the Indian society. Bharati Mukherjee, for instance, relates the experiences of expatriate Indians in her fiction, which represent a cultural identity wholly different from the native one. *The Tiger's Daughter*, *Wife*, *Jasmine* have as their protagonists women who have migrated to the west and who feel absolutely alienated in the Western environment.

Salman Rushdie is perhaps the only diasporic writer, who has remained firmly rooted in the Indian literary tradition and culture. Both the form and the content of his fiction reflect his ties with the native literary heritage and his deep understanding of the historical enigmas of the subcontinent. Both *Midnight's Children* and *Shame* have as their theme, the political history of the subcontinent cleverly woven with fantasy. The influence of the Islamic narrative tradition of *The Arabian Nights* and the Hindu narrative traditions of *The Panchatantra* and *Kathasaritsagar* can be clearly seen in both the novels.

It would appear then that the concerns of the Indian English novelists are exclusively elitist. The historian, who attempts to view this area of literature from the subaltern perspective would be hard to hard put to find the subaltern in the Indian English novel. On the other hand, if he would widen his perspective a little more and consider Indian novels in other languages, which have been translated into English, as worthy of being included in the same company as novels which have been written by Indian writers exclusively in English, he would find his objective. Novels in a host of regional languages in India have given an authentic, at times, even searing account of the dispossessed, marginalized peoples, their languages, customs, histories. Translations of novels by

Premchand, Tagore, Sarat Chandra, Bankim Chandra Chatterjee, Purnachandra Tejaswi, Kundanika Kapadia ought to find a place in the history of the Indian English novel.

IV

The Indian English novel is a conglomerate of several linguistic, cultural and geographical contexts. It does not exist in isolation, linguistically, culturally and geographically cut off from its surroundings. Those Indian English novelists who reside in India (eg. Mulk Raj Anand, R.K. Narayan, Khushwant Singh, Shashi Deshpande, Nayantra Sehgal, to name a few) are open to the influence of their own and other linguistic and cultural backgrounds. For instance, the influence of the Punjabi language and culture can be obviously determined in the novels of Mulk Raj Anand and Khushwant Singh. The influence of Southern languages and culture can be similarly traced in the novels of R.K. Narayan. What is more worthy of note is that even a novelist like Raja Rao, who has chosen to settle down abroad, is still firmly rooted in his native language and culture.

The complexities within the Indian English novel offer a challenging task to its historian. The historian of this body of literature would have to account for these complex intertwining of varied linguistic, cultural and regional influences. It would undoubtedly be a daunting task which would call for a phenomenal understanding of the vast fabric of Indian society and culture, its particular linguistic, regional, cultural peculiarities. And yet, it is a task which would have to be undertaken. The resultant history of this area of literature will be enriched in terms of a proper historical

contextualization and significance. It would enable the reader to see this entire body of fiction against its linguistic, cultural, native background.

One way of looking at the history of the Indian English novel from a broader cultural and linguistic perspective would be including translations of novels in other Indian languages within the purview. Meenakshi Mukherjee has made a strong case in favour of including translations of fiction in Indian languages in this field of study. In *Realism and Reality. The Novel and Society in India*, she has examined the various strands in narrative fiction in India during the second half of the nineteenth century, much before the Indian English Novel arrived on the scene. Obviously the existence of these strands cannot be ignored in any survey of the development of fiction in India.

G.N.Devy has endorsed the inclusion of translations in a history of Indian English fiction in his critical work, *In Other Tongue : Essays on Indian English Literature*. In fact, he has shown how the three strands of the novel identified by Meenakshi Mukherjee (The novels which emphasize social reform, novels which could be described as historical romances and novels which reflect social reality) could be traced within the Indian English novel.

In his more recent work '*Of Many Heroes*' : *An Indian Essay in Literary Historiography*, G.N.Devy, apart from looking at the conventions of literary history which existed in the pre-colonial period much before the impact of Western literary historiography, has made a very convincing defence for the literary and aesthetic value of translations.

Literary translation is not just a replication of a text in another verbal system of signs. It is a replication of an ordered sub-system of signs within a given language into another corresponding ordered sub-system of signs within a related language. Translation is not a transposition of significance or signs. After the act of translation is over, the original work still remains in its original position. Translation is rather an attempted revitalisation of the original position. Translation is rather an attempted revitalisation of the original in another verbal space and temporal span. Like literary texts that continue to belong to their original periods and styles and also continue to exist through successive chronological periods, translation at once approximates to the original and transcends it.¹⁷

The Indian English novel and novels in Indian languages are not and should not be seen as mutually exclusive. After all, they have both sprung from the same soil. The linguistic and cultural backgrounds of Indian English novelists and regional novelists are not different. The reader of a history of the Indian English novel which includes translations of novels in other Indian languages would have a better perspective to assess the growth, the richness, the culture-specificity of this area of literature.

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