CHAPTER-I

A Historical Perspective:
The Social and Political Contexts of Indian English Fiction.

In talking about the concept of Indian tradition as well as the tradition of Indian English literature, it is to be noted that the distinctive quality of this genre of literature — fiction in particular — is its social content — particularly in its representation of the conflict between the individual and the community. The powerful focus on political, social and economic struggle ascertain its strong connection to the cultural and historical background of a traditional society in the midst of vast changes. This is the focal point of difference with the Victorian novel which is generally regarded as the precursor of the Indian English novel as a distinct genre. Writers from the earliest stages of Indian English writing like Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay, Sri Aurobindo and others were treating the novel as a document for social change and as a weapon of the nationalistic struggle. This idea was taken up by the early greats of the Indian English fiction namely M.R. Anand, R.K. Narayan and others who used the novel in an attempt to portray social truths and as a vehicle of change and reform.

The moot point is that these writers had created a central tradition in talking about a pan-Indian reality, a trend, which has been changing in the modernist and post-modernist era when writers have started looking into a plurality of tradition. At the early stage, the Indian English writers shared what Meenakshi Mukherjee has called ‘the anxiety of Indianess’ (Considerations 174) concerned with defining their national identity at a pan-Indian level with the new brand of writers. This necessity is no longer felt and having gained a sense of confidence in
their distinct identity they are now looking at the plurality of Indian life by examining the multi-layered and multicultural traditions of India.

The variation in Indian literature and Indian English literature is a difference of history, tradition and language. The literatures are closely associated with the traditions, languages, histories and experiences of the various parts of the country where they originate. However, it is a different story with Indian English literature, it is the story related to the colonial encounter, as a critic has elucidated: “The literature written in English has an altogether different history and is linked with the global process of colonization. However it has also grown out of an Indian ethos and is responsive to the changing conceptions of Indian nationalism and self-interest.” (Kar, 7). The plurality of Indian English literature is the result of this clash of the local and the global.

The colonial encounter beginning in the early nineteenth century has been an important factor in the formation of Indian English literature (fiction), an encounter of conflict as well as of awareness. It has created an awareness of difference which in turn has led to the charting of cultural territory in the post-colonial context. Whereby a new territory, a new space was mapped creating new texts with a new language of changed outlook and protest as Nilufer Bharucha has noted, “these texts would also be charting cultural territory, repossessing history, hybridising language, offering resistance and providing a voice to the subaltern.” (Bharucha, 357).

The distinct identity of Indian English literature which the early writers had so anxiously sought to create has become an acknowledged fact of late because in spite of its global incarnation it has managed to retain its uniqueness as the same critic has noted: “Membership in the microcosmic community comes before the membership in the microcosmic global village, and one does not detract from the
Thus having charted out a cultural territory for themselves by liberating themselves from the colonial yoke and also from the marginalised position of the so called exotic writing. Then being assured of a compact but growing readership, the Indian English literatures have definitely assured for themselves a distinct identity in the midst of the global community, all the while being aware of their point of origin by being true to their “ancestral roots”. (Kar 1)

The history of the genesis of Indian English writing is a fascinating subject of study. It reflects the transformation, transition and upheavals of an entire people and traces the social, political and cultural history of the Indian nation from the late nineteenth century and continues to reflect the ever changing scenario of Indian life in contemporary times. Indian English fiction has been variously called the “twice born fiction” and the “last born” (Mukherjee 20) to pinpoint and highlight its specific and individualising traits. Indian English fiction or writing is both imbibed and inherited. Born out of the encounter between the east and the west, it is enriched with the cultural heritage of an ancient civilization.

It is also in the unique position of developing a bilingual and bicultural identity—the regional (Indian) and the international. Historically and chronologically, Indian English fiction came into being later than the writings in the various regional languages. The English language, being an adapted and a foreign tongue which was made the vehicle of expression of the Indian psyche, has placed Indian English fiction in a culturally and linguistically complex situation. In this situation the Indian English writer faces the problem of language versus culture. The problem rises from the hiatus that exists between the cultural experience that is expressed and the language chosen to express it. The writer may exploit this gap to his advantage to achieve a certain quaintness, a certain unique quality that will make the work stand
in the midst of both regional and western literature. The writers of the older school of Indian English fiction like Mulk Raj Anand, Arun Joshi, Raja Rao as also Anita Desai often used this hiatus to heighten the clash of cultures between the west and the east in their writings. However, there is no incompatibility between the use of English and the search for Indian roots, especially from the multilingual perspective.

Multilingualism is a feature of our socio-cultural and religious life and an awareness of linguistic and literary variety is embedded deep within us. In India, English certainly occupies an important place in the preservation of different cultures and traditions. Like other non-Indian languages and cultures, which have from time immemorial got embedded into the Indian socio-cultural spectrum, English is the latest in this category. Therefore, the English language, though not of Indian origin, cannot be dismissed as an alien language for in the multilingual Indian situation, Indian writing in English both fictional and non-fictional opens up newer ways of absorbing the old ideas becoming in the process a significant device in the creative assimilation that has characterized Indian culture from the beginning. The Indian English writer can thus turn his situation to great advantage by drawing more actively from the rich reservoir of Indian language and literature.

The study of the emergence of the novel in India, both in the regional languages as well as in the English is more than a subject of literary research, it is related to the socio-political and cultural developments of the country in the nineteenth century. The growth of this genre can be traced to the social and political happenings of a colonized country as well as the influence of several indigenous narrative traditions of an ancient culture. Exposure to the English language and the western world through English language and western literature were by far the most important influences at work in the formation of this new form— the Indian English novel.
However, it would be wrong to say that the Indian English novel was only a legacy of the British rule. Individualism, social and economic freedom, a flexible society and the most important, the protagonists’ ability to shape his/her destiny- aspects of the western (English) novel were an impossibility for the fledging Indian novel. The Indian novelist had to work in a tradition-bound society where every aspect of a person’s life from his profession to his marriage were not his personal affairs. Life for the individual was ordered by his family, caste and community. One of the problems of the early Indian novelist was to reconcile two sets of values- one obtained by reading alien literature and the other that he attained from his real life.

The nineteenth century saw the emergence of the novel form in India in the regional languages. This was the time when colonial power reached its zenith in India and also simultaneously there was the spread of (English) education. Very soon to be educated meant to have some knowledge of the English language. Gradually a few of the educated Indians tried their hand at creative writing like Toru Dutt and Manmohan Ghosh. But these were exceptions rather than the rule. The Indian English novel as a literary form was relatively late in developing in India later than Indian English poetry. The reason for this was that though Indian English literature began as a colonial venture, much more was needed than merely great models. A novel needs direct involvement in values and experience which are valid in the Indian context. The Indian English novel made a diffident appearance in the 1920s and gradually established itself in the next two decades. Bengal, one of the first regions to be exposed to the British education, was one of the earliest producers of the Indian English novel. Among the early novels published were a series of historical novels like S.K.Ghosh’s *The Prince of Destiny* (1909), S.K.Mitra’s *Hindupur* etc. But the histories represented in these novels were entirely romantic
with no actual basis in fact. The real historical novels appeared around the 1930s like A.S. Panchapaka Ayyar’s *Baladiya* and *The Unveiled Court* (1933) by Umrao Bahadur.

The next phase in the development of the Indian English novel was the interest in social issues brought about by the unique social structure of India— the caste system, the joint family, rituals and customs etc, all of which served as materials for the Indian English novel. The novels dealing with social realism were ushered in by famous novelists like Munshi Prem Chand in Hindi and Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay in Bengali during the 1920s. The direct involvement in values and experience in the Indian context now became apparent. The problems of social life of the common people soon became amalgamated with burning public issues of the day, particularly by the Indian Freedom Struggle, which provided rich and ready material for the writers. The purely social reform novels were inflamed by politics, since any desire to improve the lot of the people was bound to be linked with political independence.

If the nineteenth century Indian novels are taken for study, it is seen that the Indian social situation, so very different from the western, was often moulded and manipulated to meet the requirements of this new western literary mode. The realistic novel could come into existence because the tension between the individual and the society had attained a certain intensity. If this tension had not existed or had not been exploited, narrative fiction may have continued to retain qualities associated with the epic or romance. If the social transformation of the nineteenth century had not set in motion certain dialectical forces among the English educated class, the novel in its realistic form might not have taken root in India. So it can be said that social and fictional realism had a close affinity in the nineteenth century in
India and continued to do so. *Anandamath* (Bengali-1882), *Indulekha* (Malyalam-1888), *Lakshyant Kon Gheto* (Marathi-1890), *Umrao Jaan Ada* (Urdu-1899) are examples of such novels.

Around the 1930s, the Indian English novel acquired a distinctive shape and character when it started voicing the aspirations of the people against colonial oppression and awakening them to the need of putting their society on the path of freedom, hope and aspiration. This can be said about Mulk Raj Anand whose novels embody a strong sense of consciousness about the evils of social injustice, particularly exploitation, caste divisions, caste wars etc. In short, the Indian social novels subject the social system to a thorough scrutiny. Even today, these novels continue to be relevant for their, engaging cultural and social debates. A discussion about the social and political aspects of the Indian English novel is incomplete without talking about the Indian Freedom Movement. The Freedom Movement made a sporadic start from around the later part of the nineteenth century after the First War of Indian Independence (1857) and gained great impetus during the 1920s and 1930s until the achievement of independence in 1947. The freedom struggle provided rich and ready material for the writers, particularly the Indian poets and novelists in the regional languages, and Indian English writers were no exception to the rule. The Indian Freedom Movement contributed greatly to the mass social emancipation of the Indian people. “It (the Civil Disobedience Movement) accomplished in weeks what three-quarters of a century of social reform movements had failed to do so....” (Chandra et al 161)

“Mahatma Gandhi’s emergence as the undisputed leader of the Indian National Congress is an interesting story by itself....”. (Chandra et al 121). The creative writers of Indian English have made use of the country’s freedom struggle
and the Partition as the background of their novels. In many of these novels, Gandhi figures prominently as also his ideology and philosophy. As for example, M.R. Anand, Raja Rao and R.K. Narayan, who published their first works during the 1930s were strongly influenced by Gandhi. In the immediate post-independence era when there was a great outpouring of fiction, the notable works to be influenced by Gandhi-the man and his principles were Bhabani Bhattacharyya’s *So Many Hungers* (1947), K. A. Abbas’s *Inquilab* (1955), K. Markandaya’s *Some Inner Fury* (1957) R.K. Narayan’s *Waiting for the Mahatma* (1958), Attia Hossain’s *Sunlight on a Broken Column* (1961) Manohar Malgaokar’s, *A Bend in the Ganges* (1964) R.K. Narayan’s, *The Vendor of Sweets* and Chaman Nahal’s *The Crown and the Loin Cloth* (1981). Gandhi also touches the fiction of many modern Indian writers indirectly where the focus is on topical themes like the relationship between two communities— Hindus and Muslims, the horrors of the Partition, men-women relationships, the corruption and disillusionment in free modern India. Gandhi appears in different roles as a sage, an eccentric, a moralist, a shrewd politician, a fundamentalist or just a simple man with a special sense of humour. For example, the early *Kanthapura* (Raja Rao) to Shashi Tharoor’s *The Great Indian Novel*.

Thus in the first phase we see two predominant theories in the novel: historical and the other political and reform-motivated. But at the same time, the novelists of this period were also interested in areas of human experience which are issues of deep and abiding interest to the Indian people as a whole. Therefore, they made use of such experience for artistic and creative purpose. These areas were mainly:-

1) the predicament of man in a world surrounded by inimical forces both in nature and in human institutions, and
2) man in relation to himself and his family. A person has to play out a plurality of roles in his/her real life as a father, mother, husband, wife, son, daughter, a friend etc.

Associated with these issues are the resultant conflicts between individual aspirations and the role expected of that person by the society. All these, characteristic of the Indian situation, deal with the tragedy and comedy of such conflicts.

Cultural conflicts, arising out of the impact of two diverse cultures—the east and the west, found expression in many Anglo-Indian novels written in the 1930s and the 40s mainly by the British ladies—often the wives of the colonial officers who spent lonely lives far away from their homes. The emergence of Indian women novelists were also influenced by these same causes. The Indian women novelists like Toru Dutt, Miss Sorabji and Mrs.Ghosal expressed their emotional, sensitive natures through expressions about inner life as well as life of dreams, nostalgia and introspection form the fictional exercise of most of these women writers. These writers anticipated other women writers like Kamala Markandaya, Shanta Rama Rao, Toru Dutt and Ruth Prawer Jhabvala who wrote on these themes in the post-independence era.

The problem with the Indian English writer is to choose a pan-Indian situation (theme), so as to bring about an unity in the heterogeneous nature of his/her audience and situation. The Indian English writer, therefore, mostly chooses 'Indian' themes (which are not many in number and very difficult because of regional variation). However, the writers have sought to overcome this difficulty by choosing themes that are very familiar to all Indians. One of these, which are relevant to Indians as a whole and not to any particular part or a community, is the theme of
social change. Change has become an integral part of Indian life today. The disintegration of the old hierarchical and agrarian society and the break-up of the joint family is one of the major factors of social change. The break-up of family ties and subsequent disintegration of the older values of life has always had an (as a theme) all India appeal irrespective of race, community, religion and class. Attia Hossein in *Sunlight on a Broken Column* writes on this theme about a Muslim household in Lucknow, as does Menion Marath in *Wounds of Spring*, about a matriarchal joint family in Kerala or Mulk Raj Anand about a peasant family in Punjab in *The Sword and the Sickle*.

Meenakshi Mukherjee says that “The concern of the Indian English novel today is the ultra historical modern man whose individuality and personal life are shaped factors of history.” (*Twice Born* 27) In India, the historical factor is provided by the Indian Struggle for Independence from the British colonial rule. The struggle for independence became a unifying force, particularly in the decades before the achievement of political freedom. A great national experience of such width and magnitude strongly influenced the maturity of the novel form. This phenomenon is not unique to Indian English fiction but also to other languages in India.

The man-woman relationship— a theme of perennial significance in the novel — is treated in a unique manner in the Indian English novel as in the Indian regional language novels. In the western novels, the relationship is treated from the point of view of romantic love whereas in the Indian English novels, marital bliss is the central theme. (This outlook has changed in the recent Indian English novels). If the eternal triangle is taken as the focal point of the clash of relationships, then again there is a difference between the western idea and the Indian viewpoint. In the western novel, the clash of relationship is between three people of opposite sexes. In
the Indian concept, if the theory of the triangle is used then the third side is not an individual but a very powerful social force, namely the family, particularly the joint family. The family is an integral part of Indian life and central to the Indian social ethos. This institution is very important - an almost indispensable part of Indian life. As such, it is very important in the context of Indian literature for it gives an opportunity for the study of group behaviour, the complexities of human nature, the emphasis of a value structure of a pre-industrial way of life and also as a traditional dominant force of society, which in India still exercises some considerable amount of authority. This forms the core of most of the regional as well as the regional Indian English novels for it dwells on the conflict between social hierarchy and the emergence of the individual. This theme is also pan-Indian in its relevance.

In India, the western concept of individual experience has always been considered alien. In the Indian context, the duty towards the family is placed on a higher esteem vis-à-vis duty to oneself. Sexual love, personal happiness, extreme individualism; these do not have central importance in the Indian context. The place of faith in socio-cultural life has been a theme of fascination for generations of Indian English novelists. Rituals, adherence to faith, in the superior wisdom of a guru, shape the conduct of many people in different parts of India in diverse ways and different degrees. The importance, the corruption involved in relation to the guru cult, the people who make a business of spiritualism, present an aspect of moral weakness in the victims concerned. In modern Indian and the Indian English novels, however, the place of rituals and the importance of the guru have shown a declining tendency. Classical role models, ideals and mythical figures have all but disappeared from the modern Indian novel though we find traces of these in Indian social life.
Society and life in India is an interesting conglomeration of tradition and change. As a critic says, “Tradition in India is wrapped up in the crannies of nature, in the rituals and religion, in the collective; simple living of the villagers, in the emotional integration of large families.” (Prasad 24 – 25) However, with the pace and march of modern life, change has become an inevitable part of Indian life. The orbit of fiction will become narrow, even stifling, if it is concerned with only a single, isolated phenomenon. Fiction as with any other literature must delineate the contours of change. Change-- the result of a mixture of phenomenon comprising of historical consciousness and contemporarity of every society is in a process of constant growth. Indian fiction in English, like its counterpart in Indian regional language fiction, reflects like a many coloured glass (prism), the myriad nuances of tradition and change in Indian life. An illustration of this theme would be Mulk Raj Anand’s Untouchable. The writer in Untouchable is a herald of a new dynamism. Barkha’s rebellious anger is directed against his father Lakha’s placid acceptance of the laws of untouchability.

In Bhabani Bhattacharyya’s Music for Mohini, Jayadev, the quiet scholar and Mohini, the young city-bred wife, worked as forces of progress which were resisted initially by the mother who is finally reconciled with the changing times. A more comprehensive and intrinsic picture of the permanent and transitional values clashing and coalescing together is fictionalised through the comic and ironic mode in R.K.Narayan’s novels. His fiction mirrors modern India rooted in ancient traditions and caught up in the crucible of change. The corroding sordid boons of modern materialistic civilization and the primordial ways of India interact in the characters of Narayan’s novels. His ‘Malgudi’ is a regional world, but it gains representativeness by concentration. Malgudi is both the matrix of tradition and

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crucible of change. His characters are Upanishadic, traditionally moving from the unreal to the real, from darkness to light, from death to immortality.

From tradition to change, Indian fiction in English besides articulating meaningfully Indian ethos and heritage forms an impressive core of commonwealth literature. Indian writing in English, like the other writings of the commonwealth world, share the complex fate of the third world art and reflect similar traits. This is because the majority of the writers have been exposed to the western culture and the experience of multicultural situation has filtered into the lives of the colonised people. The nuances of cultural interaction became the essential mode of perception in a good number of Indian novels in English. Indian culture is receptive, not recalcitrant and at the most resistant. It has something vital and unifying that stood it in good stead in the wake of various invasions and interaction of various races, languages and regional tradition.

The most distinctive lineament of commonwealth writers is the duality of selves, the native consciousness and the consciousness acquired from western civilization. In our belief in the scientific rational approach to a problem, we have assimilated the western culture and we combine them with our own devotion to religion or faith in the inexplicable. In relation to confrontation, conflicts or co-relation with western ideas, we find novels where in the central theme of confrontation with the British rule is obvious. But in these novels, the encounter of culture gets lost in the ardent zeal of nationalism or racial conflict. One feels with E.M.Forster that the two races cannot integrate and one cannot dominate over the other for long even though the bridge can be gulled at the personal level.

Indian writing in English upto the Gandhian era reflects the efforts of an ancient land to rediscover itself. There was a definite attempt to retain the Indian
identity. The Indian writers like Toru Dutt, Vivekananda, Sri Aurobindo, Gandhi, Nehru, Radhakrishnan, R.K.Narayan and Kamala Markandaya, all have retained his/her Indian sensibility and the achievement—a distinct creativeness. This consciousness of Indianess has been a persistent quality from the early days to date in the Indian English literary sphere. Indian English writing is a product of two worlds—the Indian and the Western, so it is but natural that a concern with identity is one of the commonest themes of this literature. R.Parthasarathi expresses this in lines which talk about loss of language and tradition, the theme of his poem:—

He spent his youth whoring after English Gods, there is
something to be said for exile, you learn your roots are
deep. (45–46)

Many of the leading novelists have written about this quest for identity. Whereas the earlier novelists like Raja Rao and Sudhin N.Ghose began with the individual and traditional Hinduism, the later novelists wrote family sagas featuring minority communities. On one hand we have The Serpent and the Rope—Raja Rao and on the other we have family stories like Salman Rushdie’s Midnight’s Children, Allan Sealy’s The Trotternama, Nina Sibal’s Yatra, Boman Desai’s The Memory of Elephants and Gurucharan Das’s A Fine Family. The theme of the quest for identity has been of perennial interest for Indian writers. One early novel dealing with the writer’s quest for identity, however, is My Brother’s Face (1925) by Dhan Gopal Mukherjee. The novel an autobiographical element echoes the writer-narrator’s quest for identity. The variety and complexity of contemporary India is presented vividly in this novel. The interesting thing about these early novels is that the hero’s quest never leads him further into his own family, the tendency is to look inward rather than outward. The introspective hero in Amitav Ghosh’s novel The Shadow
Lines, turns to the experience of his grandmother and his cousin Tridib to help him come to terms with his life in India. This quest for identity forms the core of most Indian novelists from the older generation of writers like Raja Rao and Sudhin N.Ghose to the present generation like Salman Rushdie and Allan Sealy. These writers embark on their own discovery of India, trying to come to terms with what it means to be an Indian.

Talking about this quest for identity one would say that this is totally a western influence because the novel as an art form is a western and alien concept, though it is backed by the time-honoured tradition of the art of story telling of India. Thus the novel in India which began under English tutelage gained a distinct flavour of its own. As C.D.Narasimhaiah says in The Swan and the Eagle that their (the three bigs of Indian English novel) “essentially Indian sensibility had arisen out of a happy conjunction of the Swan (East) and the Eagle (West).” (Narasimhaiah 24) The distinct flavour which the novel gained because of the conjunction of the east and the west, was alien and native; native being written by Indians and alien being the tongue instrumental in blending mysticism and dialectical materialism. Dialectical materialism holds that literature and all other forms of art are an ideological superstructure, an edifice of the spirit built upon foundations of social, economic and political faith but this logic cannot permeate into the Indian novel. As the initial forays in novel writing entailed a dual adventure, namely experimenting to create an art form totally alien to Indian literary ethos and writing in a medium hitherto understood as a mode of literary expression. Meenakshi Mukherjee remarks that, “The Indian who writes in English is an exhypothesan Indian. He is a product of two cultures and therefore abnormal by the standards of either.” (Considerations 2)
The Indian literary firmament did always possess a rich hoary background of story telling—only the form was in verse. But the novel as a medium of story telling and art is essentially of the west and alien to India’s time honoured art of story telling. V.S.Naipaul in *India: A Wounded Civilization* says, "The novel is of the west. It is part of that western concern with the condition of men, a response to the here and now..." (9). Such criticism emphasises the incompatibility of an Indian way of life and the orientation of a novel. Indian society shows a certain lack of individual identity. Individuals in India are not allowed to live and act for themselves. Various constraints put them in a shell of inertia. They can never think of themselves as an independent and is unable to shake off the shackles. Such a background cannot form creative material so very essential for a novel. The Indian novelist has to operate in a tradition-oriented society where neither a person’s profession, nor their marriage, is their personal affair. Everything here is preordained. Life itself is a boon of their past deeds. After birth, the family maps their progress, rigidly confining their activities. Thus the Indian novelist is confronted not by the absence of a literary stance, but is concerned by the problem of choice between two sets of values, one inherited by reading an alien nature and the other handed down to him in real life.

A study of the novel in India clearly betrays its dependence and influence on the West. The early Indian novels were bereft of the kind of realism portrayed from Defoe to Balzac— that of a particular world view at a certain phase in human history. They depicted the action of the individual in his day-to-day life. The very fact that the writers of English turned homewards to the life of their own country should be testimony enough that in form and content it is characteristically Indian. Even the medium, the language to which it adjusts itself to an Indian sensibility becomes
Indian in tone and character and passes into what may be called Indian English as literature inspired by the kind of realism which one associates with the rise of the novel in 18th century England. Indian English fiction is in fact more authentic and real than Anglo-Indian fiction. A common charge against early Indian fiction in English is that of imitativeness. But then change cannot be accepted as the truth because they did not imitate the Victorian novel, nor the Anglo-Indian novel where themes were totally different. They (the Indian novels) were genuine portrayals of Indian life as their authors knew it, in their own social and domestic spheres. When these writers borrowed a literary form, they cannot have made for imitation any more than the English novel form from the Italian novella did. Even as the English adapted the Italian novella to their own purpose and made it quite their own, Indian writers of English fiction were and are still trying to create a new form out of what they borrowed. Hence, it is quite futile to attempt any value judgement on Indian novels in English in terms of the criteria applicable to the western novel.

Indian English fiction came into its own early in the third decade of the twentieth century and began to project the themes of patriotism, social justice, east-west confrontation, rural-urban conflict, family relationships etc. at this time, the entire scenario was dominated by the big three of Indian English fiction:- Narayan, Anand and Raja Rao. Among the next batch of writers to follow them, quite a few were women like Kamala Markandaya, Nayantara Sahgal and Anita Desai– the writings of these writers showed a new sensibility and vibrant richness. The novel as a portrait of society got a wide diversified treatment in their hands. Thus as we trace the development of the rise of the novel in India, what comes to mind is that contrary to the belief of the novel being the alien brain-child incapable of sustaining itself to the caring touches of foster parents of Indo-English fiction is but a myth.
What then is the Indian literary tradition? Whether there is a different one for literature written in regional languages and for that written in English is a debate that has been going on endlessly. It is proposed that all Indian literature should be regarded as a part of that single tradition because the cultural milieu in which it is created is the same all throughout the country, although the sub-culture and language are different in different regions. But a distinction is to be made between the literature produced in the colonial times and the post-colonial times. It is an acknowledged fact in contemporary critical discourse that post-colonial writing is one step ahead in a nation’s cultural evolution. While colonial literature tends to be romantic and imitative, post-colonial literature is modernist and adaptive. This process cannot be reversed without falsifying history and a nation’s political independence must rightly provide the terms of reference for a critical examination of all its modern literature. In colonial context, the word ‘modern’ is closely tied up with exit of colonial power from a nation and its attainment of freedom. This is true not only for India but for others with a shared colonial history like countries in Africa and the West Indies.

Indian writing in English is an integral part of and a significant contribution to post-colonial literature. Though it has its own distinctive stamp of Indianess, it does display some of the salient features of post-colonial literature. It draws attention to the issues of cultural differences in literary texts, including issues of gender, class and sexual orientation. In colonial literature, the East (here India), stand for ‘other’, the ‘Centre’ for the colonial country. The post-colonial writers in general and the Indian novelists in particular focus on the sub-human status granted to the native as it is evident in Farrukh Dhondy’s *Bombay Duck*. The East at the same time is viewed as a fascinating realm, as the exotic ‘other’ and the mystical.
Kamala Markandaya’s *Possession* richly demonstrates this tendency where Valmiki is the ‘other’ for Caroline. Indian writers like their post-colonial counterparts, adopted the European model since they too assumed, at least, initially that it had universal validity. Thus there was an unquestioning acceptance of the white hegemony. In the second phase of transition, they adopted the form to suit Indian themes and perceptions. The post-colonial writer, thus, enjoyed the status of a mere licensee. In the third phase, the post-colonial writers came into their own and there was a declaration of cultural independence in unequivocal terms. Thus started the process of systematic decolonisation wherein the Indian writers ‘remade’ the form to their own specification without any reference to European norms. Bankim Chandra, Venkataramani and Arundhuti Roy represent these three phases respectively in the Indian context. The Indian writers of the post-independence era adopted English as a tool and employed it in diverse ways to express widely differing cultural experiences. In works like Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children* and Arundhuti Roy’s *The God of Small Things*, the creative and imaginative use of language of the colonizer show how these writers use the language as a dynamic medium to explore the complex Indian reality.

The validity of Indian English writing needs no longer to be questioned, the self-assured quality of the writing is an evidence in itself though enough to render the issue redundant. Perhaps it was alright to ask whether Indians should write in English at a time when the writing was still self-conscious and unsure. But today it is no longer so.

Upamanyu Chatterjee, a distinguished spokesman of the modern breed of writers who emerged in the 1980s, said in a interview in the *Times of India* that, “The new generation of Indian writers in English...wield the language with greater
skill and less self-consciously than the M.R. Anand generation did.” (Chatterjee 6)

This skill, this lack of self-consciousness, goes a long way in placing Indian writing in English at par with those of the regional languages and strengthens the case for regarding them both as a part of the same tradition. So we see that although the literary scene was earlier dominated by the three ‘giants’: Anand, Narayan and Raja Rao, a new generation of bolder and more experimental novelists, several of who are women, has taken over. The works of these writers provide a new sensibility and vibrant richness. Unfortunately and quite needlessly, some of the earlier critics were engaged in a prolonged language controversy believing that they could not successfully express themselves in a foreign language.

Raji Narsimhan drew attention to the basic unnaturalness of the Indian writers in English. Other commentators maintained that the Indian could be successful as long as the ‘operative’ sensibility of the writer is essentially Indian or if they drew their sustenance from their heritage by choosing a specifically Indian subject matter and by projecting an Indian ethos. The emphasis behind this line of thinking involves three critical assumptions that English is an alien medium, in which the Indian writers may not be able to express themselves naturally and that their Indianess implicitly stands at variance with or in a dialectical relationship with the element of the west in their culture. It is submitted that all these three assumptions are erroneous, misleading and to some extent dangerous, since they tend to make Indian English literature apologetic, restrictive and parochial. Whereas the view about the foreignness of English has long since been repudiated and dismissed, the other two notions need to be sorted out in order that the Indian English literature be written and enjoyed by having itself rid of its negative connotations.
Meenakshi Mukherjee says, "Indo-Anglian fiction in my view is a part of a truly Indian fiction and not a tenuous extension of English fiction." (Twice Born 206) Indian English reflects the same concerns as the other Indian fiction of the period and has undergone considerable change in the last decade or two; for eg, most writers, since independence, have turned towards more private and personal concerns. As far as themes are concerned, Indian English fiction looks for themes which are pan-Indian.

There is a self consciousness in Indian English fiction which motivates writers in choosing a theme that is Indian rather than real. The concern about audience is one of the key reasons behind it, i.e. writers feel that they must have a trans-Indian theme to have a trans-Indian audience. Therefore, in Indian English novels, it is often seen that writers in their effort to find a theme of all India interest, often has to spurn situations and characters around them which are more vivid and alive. For example, the partition of Bengal or the horrors in Punjab after the Partition finds mention in very few Indian English novels, for the concerned novelists feel that they are of localised interest. Most of the Indian English writers are "aiming at an Indianess bereft of temporal and spatial values." (Twice Born 213) The Indian English writer would be benefited through exploiting the particular, local and regional reality. A conscious awareness of audience whether at home or abroad limits the scope of the Indian English writer confining him/her to a handful of ‘Indian’ themes. So if the Indian English fiction is to develop strongly then it must concern itself more with the particular, the concrete and what is the immediate.

This so called tradition, which is associated with the Indian English novel, is the tradition of Indianess. It is still frequently assumed that a novel in English by an Indian is justified if it is Indian in some essential fashion. Thus these novels came to
be valued not so much for their power as fiction but because of these quintessence of Indianess so the writers strained to provide this quality and ultimately limited the scope of their novels. Particularly this conscious awareness of their audience puts a break on the Indian English novelist. If the Indian English novel is to develop vigorously, then it must outgrow its general concerns and tackle the particular, the concrete and the immediate. The theory of Indianess is plainly an offshoot of modern’s India’s national self assertion. By now, the pressure behind the whole phase of thought should be less urgent. But whereas in matters of society and economics, such ideas may be harmless and occasionally creative, in literature they spell death. The practical is to a premium on eccentricity and freakish originality, thus stifling the expression of deeper human perceptions which the novel has traditionally sought to represent.

India had many of the cultural conditions favourable to the novel before she was exposed to Europe. But now she has social forces actively favourable to the production of fiction— a large audience, an educated class, a new questioning of age-old socio-religious dogma and a consuming urge for knowledge and interpretation of society. The Indian novelist has instead an extraordinary cultural multiplicity to contemplate, embracing differences of age, caste, religion, wealth and politics. It is a common mistake even among novelists to regard these factors as background or social setting. On the contrary, these divisions and contrasts are dynamic; the novel’s drama has to contain them and concretely objectify them. The novelist is complementary to the modern sociologist, psychologist and even economist.

Indian society has always been a congregated one; the atomisation of the west is still foreign. Thus even individual dramas tend to have a broad social content, and one life reflects another. One sees this in the tension between minority
groups and those who still seek to uphold monolithic class barriers. This can also be seen in the conflicts between the new urbanized class and their village kinsmen, between the masses and those in public office, between students and teachers, and most strikingly between the young and the middle aged (and often bewildered parents). These conflicts are re-enacted in a million forms in modern India. The novelists can thus draw upon certain situations essentially individual which yet have almost the archetypal power of parable. Fiction of this kind will of course be Indian in the deepest sense. It will depict analytically the quirk and spirit of the Indian society, by showing the individuals whose experience is Indian culture. But it will be free of fake profundity, orientalism and bush scene painting. It will be written with an eye on the object and without pondering on the national self esteem of the Indians or the gullibility of the European intellectuals. In writing, the two separate worlds— the world of sensations and the world of words— must penetrate each other.

How far has the English we use taken its mould from the sensations and feelings of our own daily life, from the intimacies of family or fellowship or the larger social experience, from the place and time and from the very ethos we breathe? Does our English articulate these adequately, truthfully and in a manner to awaken delighted recognition in our fellows? There are various degrees of achievement in this. The English of some of our fiction writers may hardly seem to have shed the mark of a laboured acquisition; that of some others may appear to have been absorbed the new life and on the way to becoming a new idiom. Everything depends on the intimacy of adoption, the level reached in the process of naturalization. While some of the authors have been products of an Indian ‘home’ growth, others have stayed too long in the west. Indian English writing has come a long way since those early days of Mulk Raj Anand, producing the likes of Salman
Rushdie, Arundhuti Roy and Nobel laureate V.S. Naipaul, Vikram Chanda and Vikram Seth. These writers reflect the myriad complexities and varied personal preoccupations of the writers concerned. The themes of loss, betrayal, dominion and hypocrisy, are but some of the areas explored by these writers in their works.

A perusal of recent Indian English fiction shows a changing trend as indicated by Arundhuti Roy's *The God of Small Things*, the haunting and disturbing Booker Award winning novel, written against the backdrop of a specific culture and time in Kerala, is noted for its intensity of personal experience. The book is both an outpouring of personal pains and disturbance of the writer as well as an echo of the overwhelming feminist concerns of the writer. Through exploring the inner world of the main characters, she gives a social commentary on our times.

Women have always been in the forefront of the novel tradition. Just as in Victorian England women had been the greatest producers and consumers of the then relatively new phenomenon called the ‘novel’, in India too women had always been associated with the novel. Indian English writing can boast of quite a few women writers from early times. The Indian English novels reflect the changing role of the Indian women from the traditional mythicised one to the new one of emancipation and modernity and the resultant changes in the social set-up. Taking their cue from Western Feminist writers, the Indian women artistes have engaged themselves in devising literary strategies for rejecting the male-centric literary conventions hitherto accepted as the norm in Indian English writing. The themes of loss, death, solitariness, despair juxtaposed with those of aggression, empowerment, salvation, struggle are an expression of this in the work of Indian English women writers. Kamala Das, Kamala Markandaya, Anita Desai, Arundhuti Roy, Shashi Deshpande, Nayantara Sahgal, Geetha Hariharan, Bharati Mukherjee and all those
great or lesser Indian English women writers have enriched and elevated Indian English writing, in the search for a room of their own. The journey of the Indian woman from the darkness of her tradition-bound ethos to the wide world outside to find a place in the sun can be likened to the journey of the Indian English novel from its tentative beginnings to establishing its identity in the arena of world literature.

The Indian English novel today has reached a certain level of maturity, attained a degree of confidence and has overcome the clichés associated with it. Indian English writers today have emerged from the limited sphere and have attained a certain universal status. They have become a truly modern, a nation without a flag, a sovereign consciousness, a government of the imagination.

In today’s consumerist society, the position of Indian literature (fiction) becomes an ambiguous one. On one hand, its larger audience, particularly the elitist sections and the diaspora require this genre to be appropriated in the wider international market of fiction in English. Whereas another section (critics included) would like to see this branch of literature in collaboration and dialogue with the other Indian language counterparts, for they believe that there cannot be a thorough understanding and expression of identity in isolation from other Indian literatures. Particularly if it is to express its multilayered and multicultural avatar.

The answer lies in the reading of some important texts—(Indian English fiction) of recent origin which have mirrored the realities of the multidimensional and multilingual India and at the same time have become international bestsellers. Works, which can be included in this category, are *A Suitable Boy* (1993) by Vikram Seth, a book compared to *War and Peace*—an international bestseller which yet captures the diverse nuances of Indian life, the varied traditions and regional variations in language, customs, religions, cultures of India from all directions...
emphasizing truly the varied ambience of the genre itself. As Meenakshi Mukherjee claims, “the distinctive quality of *A Suitable Boy* is its polyphonic mosaic.” (*Perishable Empire* 184). Amitav Ghosh’s *The Shadow Lines* (1988) is a notable book as its attempts totalizing concepts of India, not defining but interrogating. It is a book “personal and political evocative of specific places and periods, blending memory with imagination....” (Paranjpe, 117). Arundhati Roy’s *The God of Small Things* (1997) is one of the most memorable and haunting books written in an innovative style. A landmark in Indian English is not only for the celebration of the human spirit against cruelty and suffering but for the interesting manner in which the local is interwoven with the global.

These masterpieces open up new horizons for the Indian English novel. Recent Indian English works such as these and others talk about the multilingual and multicultural context of the production and appreciation of this literature. Particularly in its co-ordination and comparison with other Indian language counterparts. The best hope for Indian English fiction is to offer a resistance to avoid the consumerist culture of the times and oppose its isolated existence and elitist character. At the present moment, the domains of this literature has been considerably enriched as it becomes more of an intercultural literature, as it seems to integrate with other Indian literature, all the while joining effortlessly in the main currents of international literatures in English.
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