Chapter 1

Introduction: Narrative Consciousness

Narrative consciousness is a term capable of denoting two senses: a narrative-leaning consciousness as well as a consciousness-leaning narrative. It implies a narrative which records and reflects a consciousness in the making and a consciousness which conceives and constructs a narrative in the making. The study takes up the approximations of narrative and consciousness towards each other as they struggle to evolve into meaningful polarizations as textual and human entities. A literary text, a narrative, is seen as attempting to realize itself as a totality, as a self-contained unit of meaning, an organic wholeness, through an individual who longs to erase the creases of existential anguish for the consciousness to consolidate its selfhood through a narrative. Thus the fictional process and the human presence are seen to be indulging in similar pursuits "which suggest that the creation of a fiction resembles the creation of a human self, real or imaginary" (Edelstein 99).

The term narrative consciousness carries duality written into it as the term refers to narrative that is conscious of itself/its own narrativity or a consciousness, which is related to/consists of a narrative. It is a study of a kind of narrative matrix in which issues of selfhood, narrative and society
interpenetrate resulting in a text which depicts a consciousness ever in the process of becoming—simultaneously the consciousness of an individual seeking definition within the erected fictional bounds and the consciousness of a text with well-marked narrative structures. Hence the struggle is dual but symbiotic as well. This “liquidity” (Weinstein 189) defines the narrative consciousness, as both are manifestations of an individual’s struggles to define oneself.

The goal of this study is to analyse three American novelists, William Faulkner (1897-1962), John Barth (1930- ) and E. L. Doctorow (1931- ), to trace out the narrative consciousness. William Faulkner, a quintessential modernist, John Barth, an apparent postmodernist, and E. L. Doctorow, a postmodern neo-realist—all of them traverse the Moebius strip of self-narrative-society-self. The texture of the consciousness, which envelops the self-art-society/ideology-self continuum, engages their creative energy. It is this unity of meaning that is the subject of this study. The attempt is to trace the dynamic called narrative consciousness by studying these connected elements which constitute it. Their novels basically deal with their protagonists, seething with inner dilemma, courting narrative expiation. The linguistic and social obstacles, which they themselves court with the hope of self-realization, sabotage the voyage towards self-discovery. The precarious integrity of self and the need to redress it through a
narrative, the fragility of the narrative arising from the non-transparency of the medium, the social denial of self to realise itself—all these are central to the dynamic of narrative consciousness. Society and the self-generated spiritual inertia thwart attempts at building an identity while the language, the tool, which helps build it, exposes its own unreliability and inability, dismantling the effects of the text and the man to compose a discernible whole. The resolution they all end up with is one of incomprehensibility of self and an imaginative denouement in which the effort replaces the entity sought, the effort is taken to be the entity. The consciousness which goes after its own affirmation sans dubiety and the narrative that tries to assert its own entirety both fail in effecting a closure, and hence, definition. The texts leave the fluidity of narrative (and) consciousness, locked in generative tension, as they “mutually create one another, mutually constitute themselves as elements in a holistic structure” (Mortimer 6). The study takes a prefatory look at the fiction of Faulkner and Barth before dwelling at length on selected novels of Doctorow.

This apparently dual identity quest, which characterises the narrative consciousness, is reflected in the self-conscious nature of the novels of the authors taken up for study here. This self-consciousness is reflected in the rabid self-absorption of the protagonists as well as the self-conscious nature of the narrative too.
"Self-consciousness" can mean consciousness of a self, of an "I", of a core unity, or it can refer to the consciousness of oneself by an entity (a person, a novel).... If a text flaunts its own artificiality, if its own provisional reality is constantly undercut, if its authors presence in and not behind the text is constantly being emphasized, it is commonly called a self-conscious text. The cohesive function the underlying organizing intelligence whether of the author or the narrator, imbibed within the text can be considered the "self" of the text. If this textually created self is in some ways analogous to a human self, perhaps the human self is only a "linguistic configuration" rather than an ontological entity (Edelstein 99).

It is this problematic which energizes the fiction of Faulkner, Barth and Doctorow. Their major characters are caught in the dilemma caused by this apparently dual search for selves--that of the text and the author. They embark on a voyage to decipher themselves and compose narratives to that effect. But the scepticism of existence spreads and the exploration spreads to the nature and meaning of narratives, and by extension, to that of language itself. The quest of the man to know oneself triggers a narrative. The narrative, which is meant to explore the man in his social surroundings, causes an exploration of its own identity. The result is the
narrative consciousness which encapsulates the art-life tension at one level and the creative-evolutionary dilemma at another.

Self or identity is an omnipresent term in the every day discourses of life. The language of self-reference has become the staple of common vocabulary of modern life. Identity encompasses all aspects of activities in life. To have an identity is “to be like others and yet also to have qualities that make one different from them...It is to maintain a balance between similarity and difference in the face of individual development and social changes, so that one can assimilate to self demands for change or adjustment but also fulfill an inner desire for constancy,” states Hewitt (152). But it is imperative to differentiate between the ordinary use of the term from the more important, intellectual uses of it. There are certain core experiences which bring the consciousness of one’s self to the surface. Shock, failure, defeat, victory, death, crime, injustice, loss, adversity—events of these kinds can cause the problematisation of self. The taken for grantedness of life is rejected and the search for alternatives begin—alternatives which would help the self-realisation in the renewed context. Adversity thus causes the problematisation as well as the need for reaffirmation of self. This adversity can take the guise of inner uncertainties of philosophical kind as well as those unjustly thrust by the society. The crowded composite of consciousness that contains and
constitutes language can hardly sever its ties with the society too. The individual’s narrative descent into the past automatically gathers the social scenario and the way he feels betrayed by the rather constrictive norms it has imposed on him. As the individual’s self-seeking narrative exfoliates into linguistic and social ones, it does so only to relapse into the textual liquidity of everything--the flux that is narrative consciousness.

Narratives contain and constitute an act of communication. Etymologically the word narrative comes from the Greek root ‘gnarus’ meaning ‘to know’. The novels of the writers under study are always attempts at knowledge, means of communication, with oneself and the world. In a very basic way, the narrative endeavour in their fiction is tied up with questions of self and/or identity. Because, “fiction is (like other forms of narrative), the privileged site for celebrating the enactment of individual identity. Fiction is one of the arenas in which the culture tells its fables of selfhood, of the successful negotiation between a self, on the one hand, and a world, on the other” (Weinstein 175). Hence the centrality of articulation in the definition of personhood can’t be ignored. In many ways the novels studied here are expressions of a psyche in turmoil, a consciousness grappling with itself to be. Instead of presenting the whole of an entity confronting life, they reveal a process of selection and omission, acceptance and rejection, cognition and perception, confusion
and conception of an ever evolving consciousness—a consciousness in pursuit of what Jung has called "the dream of totality"—the self (qtd. in Garzilli v). These novels attest that “Selves are texts, motley tissues woven from reminiscences and borrowings” (Weinstein 2-3).

Since language embodies consciousness without clearly revealing it, the representation generally held to be self in reality is an ever-evolving consciousness manifesting itself through language. As consciousness is circumscribed by the idea of language, it foregrounds itself in the course of the individuals narrative push for definition. “Characters constitute their consciousness as they invent suitable forms of language” (Mathews 31). Self is revealed as a kind of representation, “more or less random and more or less ingenious combinations of images and identifications” (Weinstein 2-3), heavily enmeshed in linguistic endeavours. Yet, ironically, the major irritant in the narrative/existential quest for moorings by the consciousness is language itself since the protagonists of the fiction investigated find out that “there is no common measure between mind and language” (Mathews 37).

The brooding, pathological self-consciousness of these self-seeking protagonists aggravates the linguistic scepticism. Language proves an unreliable instrument as the narrative mines into the depths of existence for meanings. The meanings of meanings tend to delay infinitely the quest. Hence self-conscious narrative leads into linguistic consciousness and vice
versa. This elusive signification exposes the hollowness of the attempt at narrative expiation. The sense of inner vacuum which initiates the need for textual consolation results in heightened exasperation at the fluid core of language too. The questor finds that “writing doesn’t respond to loss. it initiates it; writing itself is as much a kind of loss as it is a kind of compensation” (Mathews 19). Because “language and the act of writing are so bound to the idea of loss--of the word’s referent, the writer’s self, even of time itself” (Lockyer 3). An act of verbal self-composition hence is the making of an unmaking, a spiral which, as it is wound at one end, gets undone at the other. Thus the self-consciousness of the protagonists/narrators turns into self-consciousness of the narrative and soon into self-consciousness of the language resulting in the making of the narrative consciousness.

William Faulkner (1897--1962), one of the foremost among modern American novelists, is preoccupied with what Gail L. Mortimer terms the, “dilemma of desire” (121). The way realization nullifies the sweetness of a desire haunts the man. The spiritual, political and narrative counterparts of the dilemma--the simultaneous necessity of participation as well as isolation, convinced of the effective sterility of both--present itself in the body of his fiction. William Faulkner’s creative energy is fuelled primarily by the articulatory and identity concerns. His fiction basically deals with
the upheavals of a consciousness attempting a core identity. This is the epicenter that splinters into the linguistic, metaphysical and the social dilemmas of existence. The characters of William Faulkner’s fiction are embroiled in the struggle to delineate an integral sense of themselves in the racially fractured social psyche of the South. Their birth and growth in the slavery-infested South mould them into precarious entities as contentless vessels. But the self-narratives of Faulkner are also stuck with the agonies of articulation as well. The bottomless void that the articulation attempts to bridge simmers in their consciousness as they venture to relate their past and their tale. The integration of self is under-realised not just because of the linguistic scepticism, but also because of the denials spread by the prejudiced society too. Hence the story is always of an individual’s abortive attempt to take stock of himself/herself, via a narrative recall/diagnosis of the past and the society. This “dilemma of desire” (Mortimer 121), reflective of the stated approximations of the poles of the creating consciousness, defines the simultaneous flight and pursuit of the Faulknerian hero and Faulkner the writer.

John Barth (1930-- ), eager to be simply known as a teller of tales, ends up being the teller of tales of tales, thanks to obsessions like that of Faulkner operating at a different level. A reluctant postmodernist, Barth endeavours to replenish the narrative exhaustion of the contemporary
period by choosing to dwell on the theme of exhaustion itself. His fiction attempts “up-bringing novels” (FB 132) of his orientation-seeking protagonists and settle down to be counted as “down-bringing-novels” (FB 132). The key term in the fictional scheme of Barth is self-consciousness and the key area that of narrative voice. Whatever the thematic and contextual variations, the Barthian hero is invariably on a mission to discover himself. The mission ultimately boils down to one of communicating oneself the meaning of one’s existence. In this narrative voyage ironies abound, the central one being the frailty of the destinations and the untrustworthy nature of the means of the voyage: the container and the contained seeking each other, in a way. The experimentative vein of Faulkner vis-à-vis the narrative voice rises to untested heights in Barth. The hunt for voice and the search for narrative alternatives merge in the turmoil of the consciousness of the fiction. The articulatory crises are chronic in them, as chronic as the metaphysical and existential anguish. In the “narrative equals language equals life” (FB 236) motto of Barth is contained the elusiveness of each segment which constitutes the fiction of self. The frequent trips his fiction makes to the mythic literature of the past, to especially his mascot Scheherazade, are part of the narrative-existential role taking exercise. From Todd to Ebenezer, Meneleaus to the Siamese twin, the query is as to this essence, the personhood. The dormant strains of social criticism submerged in the ironic appraisal of the narrative, literary traditions of the
past, surface strongly in the later novels of Barth, forming the self-society-language matrix of Faulkner. It is the matrix which houses the mutually combatant, mutually containing narrative consciousness.

In a similar vein, E. L. Doctorow (1931--) wants to know how he can make use of the disreputable genre materials of the past in the present scenario. His very first attempt, a western, sets the configuration of his fiction: self-composition through narrative exposition and social analysis in a vicious cycle. From Blue, his first protagonist to the latest, the self-narrative-society circularity persists. Doctorow, a contemporary of Barth and in whom this study peaks, is the one in whom the mentioned constituents of the flux of the textual/human consciousness remain in a more or less balanced state. The three major chapters of this study dwell in depth on the narrative consciousness of his selected fiction--Welcome to Hard Times, The Book of Daniel, Ragtime and Loon Lake--investigating separately into the self-narrative and Society segments of the phenomenon.

Doctorow has brought out nine novels, a play, a collection of stories and a novella, and a collection of essays, not to mention the innumerable essays through which he has commented on the major socio-political issues of the contemporary America. His literary career begins with Welcome to Hard Times (1960), published while he was working with the Dial press. To launch himself as a novelist, he writes the story of the destruction,
construction and re-destruction of a western frontier town. It is also the
story of Blue who seeks the futile narrative consolation of recalling the
history of the town through his sceptic ledgers. Big as Life (1966) which
came out next followed the Doctorowian policy of using disreputed genre
materials to tell his stories. If it is the western in the first novel, it is science
fiction in the second one. The novel revolves around the arrival of two
giant humanoids in New York and the way people react to it. The basic
assumptions of life get tested and threatened as a consequence. In 1971
Doctorow's seminal piece of fiction, The Book of Daniel came out. Here
the novelist turns to history and fictionalises one of the landmark political
events of the American past--the Rossenberg case. The novel depicts the
struggle of the Isaacson children, children of the fictionalised Rossenbergs,
to come to terms with themselves, their past and their parents. Though it
has become an obsession for the writer to explore the American past in his
subsequent novels, nothing he ever did afterwards aspires to the same
literary height and similar creative fervour. If critical attention is drawn to
Doctorow by his The Book of Daniel, it is Ragtime (1975) which has
ensured the real arrival of the novelist in the popular conscience. Ragtime,
winner of National Book Critics Circle Award for 1976, tells the story of
three families against the backdrop of the first fifteen years of the
nineteenth century America. At the end the Black, the Jewish and the
WASP families become one melting pot. Drinks before Dinner (1979) is
the result of Doctorow's attempts at a radical theatre of ideas. As the author puts it, it is a drama turned inside out, exploring our idea of a character. In his next novel Loon Lake (1980) he again dwells on his, by now, favourite exercise of fictionally revising the American history. It portrays Joe's initiatory journey in the background of the depression America of the 1930s. Lives of the Poets (1984) is a rollicking narration of the crises of a writer flowingly presented in a deceptively lighthearted intertext. Though subtitled as "A novella and six stories," the book reveals at the end as containing six stories by the writer who is the protagonist of the Novella. The novella, which gives the collection its title, throws quaint links and the subtle weaving to hold the text together. It is rather late that we find Doctorow incorporating his own life in a big way into his fiction, namely in World's Fair (1985). True to the Doctorowian pattern, the book explores certain key cultural emblems of America while revealing the story of the growing up of a small boy in straightforward narrative voice. Billy Bathgate (1989) is a bildungsroman of kinds. Adding one more to Doctorow's little heroes, the novel depicts Billy's initiation years and his involvement with the notorious New York criminal Dutch Shultz.

The play of/for the narrative consciousness in Doctorow's fiction is to be explored from three perspectives. All the leading characters of his fiction are self-seekers. Dissatisfaction, the all-consuming passion that
drives Doctorow, is crucial in the struggles of all the protagonists of the writer. They exhibit a tendency to hop from the physical to the philosophical with confusing ease, especially when caught between the need to act positively and the impossibility of finding anything positive. Taken together, the mentioned components of his fiction very acutely reflect, repeatedly, the writer consistently grappling with himself and his views. The opening chapter on Doctorow shows how the whole of his fiction is investigating the struggle of/for the self from various angles and in differing contexts. The quasi-existential struggles of his primary characters, his themes, the struggle for voice--these will be the parameters to test the afore stated interests of the writer. It will prove, by extension, how these demonstrate the extent to which the author struggles to develop a sense of belonging in the cosmic polity of knowing and being.

Of equal relevance is the need to study the artist heroes as each novel of the writer is in the form of an artist/writer trying to remember the defining period of his life. Since the effort proves to be fruitless, it is also a limited testimony to the author's faith in the inability of the language to embody any reality/the inability of man to make language mean. Starting with Blue, the ledger keeper-narrator of his first novel, every narrator deals with the difficulty of representation This need to represent and the futility of such a need are emblematic of Doctorowian narrators. All the de facto
historians of his fiction are actually writers who are put to the task of writing by the force of the circumstances. Whatever be the driving force of their need to narrate, their overriding feeling is of one doomed to represent. In a world in which linearity itself is suspect, it pays little to lean on causality. They end up representing the unrepresentability of their mission—whether it is the truth regarding the accusations against the Rossenbergs or the sense of the evil within in the frontier novel. But at the same time these artists concede the fact that often the only way out of the impasse is through imaginative resolutions. So the following chapter investigates the narrator/artist heroes of the writer to bring out the element of fight/flight for identity in them. It will also study the tension unresolved in these narrators/artists owing to their inability to narratively compose a realizable text/self.

The third chapter on Doctorow studies the role played by state/society in the creation of this unresolvable question of identity. "The fundamental referent of identity is social location," in the words of Hewitt, as "identity is a matter of objectification by others as well as self objectification" (150). It is imperative to determine the extent of influence of the state/culture in rendering the self problematic as all the protagonists of these novels, in one way or the other, are fighting for justice, fighting against the state's imposition of itself on the self. Doctorow has stated the
way he is upset by the element of injustice and of the extent of its reach. Yet the fictional diagnosis refuses to place the blame squarely at the doors of the society. It only underlines the dilemma of knowing and being since the tools of communication are incapable of composing the truth. The individual and society are seen as both paired and opposite. The individual is threatened by society and the social order is undermined by the individual disorder. On the other hand they are mutually constructed too. This is where the political and the philosophical meet and often collide in Doctorow. The activist in him fights the injustice of impositions as the artist concedes the necessity of the same imaginatively. It has been the social commitment of the author that made him often select the key moments of the American culture as the gist for his fictional mill. Doctorow's revision of the theme of American dream in Welcome to Hard Times, Depression years in Loon Lake, the Rossenberg case in The Book of Daniel and the ethnic question in Ragtime--all overwhelmingly point to this. In Doctorow's scheme of things, one of the principal forces responsible for the disintegration of the self, thwarting it's potential realizations, is Culture--the counterfeit values imposed by Culture. Hence, his explorations of freedom and justice are linked to explorations of self and the ways in which it is/is not realized.
There is a presumption of universality to the ideal of justice-social justice, economic justice. And it is a platonic ideal too--that every one be able to live as he or she is endowed to live: that if a person is in his genes a poet, he be able to practice his poetry. Plato defined justice as the fulfillment of a person's truest self (qtd in Harter and Thompson 7),

states Doctorow in an interview. The plunges of Doctorow in to the past, there fore, are to examine why individuals/groups/races are denied justice, refused their freedom to realize themselves. The enquiry always leads, though not unambiguously, to the social set up, the transparent betrayals of the right to life. The chapter looks into the way the set values embodied by America, by extension humanity, make a mockery of people's sense of self, defiles their sense of identity, as revealed in Doctorow's fiction.

Ethnic/Immigrant voices raise similar queries regarding the dilemmas of the self in Doctorow. The American society has always been a society of actual, potential or imagined mobility. The novelist lays necessary emphasis on this as he depicts the Ethnic as well as the non-ethnic, who nonetheless are in flight. On the one hand the presence of the ethnic elements and characters could be explained as the logical off shoot of the writers concern for the society, for social justice, aiding America in realizing the potential of melting pot status. On the other, the point made by the novelist not
necessarily taken up by any, is the question about the Eternal Immigrant called Man. Since Doctorow shares with his hero Daniel the dictum that fully connected things don’t exist, he is juxtaposing the immigrant in the American context against the immigrant in the cosmic context, life as the eternal immigration. If the problem for the immigrant is one of meaningfully incorporating himself into the host community, preserving one’s core intact, similar is the anguish of the nationals of the country. Those who are technically believed to belong to the land of heir birth are no more sure of themselves than those who feel alienated on account of their distant origin. This juxtaposition helps the novelist to make the two play against each other as he makes the artist impulse play against the activist one. Ultimately it boils down to a question of the fluidity of identity in every case. These novelists approach the liquidity of existence in which “connections proliferate and meanings drop away” (Saltzman 16). Narrative consciousness becomes the receptacle of these explorations with “interrupted catalysts” of self, narrative and society, to use the term used by Merriwether to describe the fiction of Faulkner (83).