CHAPTER II

The last two decades of the twentieth century are extraordinarily eventful in Indian life as well as in Indian English literature when seen in the vast background of the Indian continent. The ends of centuries have often been periods startling changes, vigorous experimentation and new bearings. In Indian English literature, the changes begin to be registered with the ushering in of the decade of the 1980s itself. The publication of Salman Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children* in 1981 was rightly hailed by *The New York Review of Books* as one of the most important novels to come out of the English-speaking world in this generation. A new era had dawned in Indian English literature.

To understand completely the importance of all that has happened during the last two decades, it is necessary to have a glance at the events that happened a little back. In 1971, Indian won a major war after independence against its traditional enemy, Pakistan. In 1974, India held an atomic explosion which demonstrated India’s rapid progress in the field of science, was another feather in her cap. In 1975, Indian people faced a severe shock in the form of emergency and suspension of fundamental rights, which was a fatal blow to Indian democracy. The result was the fall of the Congress monolith and the India’s first ever experiment with a coalition government, which gave some valuable lessons to be learnt. One among
them was that the days of one party rule ended. A few years later it became apparent that regional parties were getting stronger and that they were in a position to influence the government. This ultimately affected the democratic way of life. In total, the events that had happened in the last three decades in the field of politics have indubitably strengthened the roots of democracy. Two traumatic events occurred during the next twenty years: the assassination of two prominent leaders – Indira Gandhi (1984) and Rajiv Gandhi (1991). And towards the end of the 90s there was one more clash with Pakistan in the Kargil Sector, with India succeeding in throwing out the invaders. The implosion of a number of nuclear devices in 1998 was another significant development, heralding finally the arrival of India as a nuclear power. With all these, Indian Space Programmes, increasing demand for Indian software engineers and lamentable brain-drain are some other things to follow.

At the same time, Indian economy was undergoing a remarkable transformation as a result of liberalization policies adopted during the early 90s. This has been a change from an inward-looking, firmly regulated, closed system to a highly liberalized, market-oriented, open one. As a result, India seems to be on the threshold of a new era of economic development. But this does mean that all has been well with the Indian nation during the last two decades. There have been gross failures in several areas.
The economic progress is constantly being hamstrung by Black Money. Corruption which goes hand in hand with Black Money is rampant in public life, politics, administration and business. To nullify the economic gains further, there is that serious problem of population explosion, which persists in spite of nearly fifty years of family planning. As a result of these factors, poverty, that chronic disease of India, has actually worsened after independence. Other disastrous failures have been in the areas of education and the empowerment of women and the Dalits. There are dowry deaths and bride-burning. Reserving 33% seats for women in the legislatures has yet to produce concrete results. A large number of Dalits still continue to be oppressed in the villages. The demolition of the disputed structure of the Babri Masjid in Ayodhya in 1992 has raised the frightening specter of religious fundamentalism, which would appear to threaten the very fabric of Indian pluralistic and secular polity.

The social scene presents another disturbing development. The traditional Indian joint family is disintegrating, particularly in urban areas. In spite of all the limitations of the joint family system, it is arguable that a strong sense of family loyalties has always been one of the major strengths of Indian society. Another thing that to be noted is the increasing corrosion of values in the Indian middle class; and this is all the more alarming, because it is the middle class that is generally the custodian of values in a society.
It is possible to consider Indian literature of the last two decades in the light of all these developments and their possible impact on the creative mind. But it is not easy to talk authoritatively on the literatures in all the Indian languages. As far as Indian English literature is concerned, it has perhaps been easier for it to reflect the new challenges and changes than its sister literatures in India, because of the fact that its vehicle itself is a globalised language.

It is significant that the spirit of the age is more pervasively and effectively reflected in the fiction of the period than in other forms like poetry and drama. Because, the novel, by its very nature, is better equipped to deal with social reality, whatever liberties it may take in projecting it.

The stage was thus set for the rise of quite a few young, talented Indian English writers, who were agreeably surprised to discover that their work found ready acceptance from Western readers and publishers. This was a further incentive for the better writers of the new generation to bring fresh perspectives to bear on their experience of India, the West and the world.

In the Eighties, yet another breed of Indian fictionists in English emerged. A second coming is witnessed. It included Salman Rushdie, Vikram Seth, Upamanyu Chatterjee, Allan Sealy, Shashi Deshpande, Namita Gokhale, Shashi Tharoor, Farukh Dhondi, Amitav Ghosh, Bapsi Sidhwa, Brinda Mukherjee, Ipsita Roy
Chakravarti, Sudhir Kakkar, Dina Mehta, Dolly Ramanujan, Arundhati Roy, Jhumpa Lahiri, and Shauna Singh. Apart from these, some lesser writers have also emerged on the contemporary scene such as Shiv K.Kumar, Saros Cowasjee, V.A.Shahane, K.V.Subbaram, Ranga Rao, Raj Gill, Balaraj Khanna, etc. The most significant and praiseworthy outcome of this emergence is that the Indian English novelists are now writing with new visions, new themes, new technical and linguistic devices, new ease and a new confidence, experimenting in their works and winning international recognition and acclaim, which insures a bright future for the Indian fiction in English. It is Salman Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children* (1981) that brought a renaissance in Indian writing in English, which has undone that of the pre and post independence production and treatment. Its influence is apparent with appearance of post-modern playfulness, turn to history, new exuberance of language and sexual frankness. It brought magic realism to the forefront and, to be the trend of the coming decade.

Today, when the Indian English fiction has finally made its own standing at the international level, it would be indeed fascinating and significant to know about the changes that have taken place in Indian society. Moreover, the most significant outcome of these changes is that Indian English writers are now writing with a new zeal and confidence and blending social aspects and phenomenal situation in their fictional world.
With the appearance of *Midnight’s Children*, the Indian English novel took a new turn and developed into different genres like novels of Magic Realism, Regional fiction, Fiction of Interior Landscape, Inward-looking novels, Children’s fiction, Mystery novels, Science fiction and novels of Social Realism. This growth of novel in different genres is referred as ‘new’ fiction by critics. New fiction is the typical product of the last two decades. New novelists got recognition and respect in this period. The significant fact about the ‘new’ fiction is that the number of Indian English novels published during the last two decades easily surpasses the total output for any corresponding period earlier. The richness and diversity of the new fiction is represented in the fiction of many novelists of this period. Another highly significant feature of the new fiction is the way these writers handled the English language. Born and brought up in the post-colonial world, the new novelists had no reason to feel self-conscious in handling the English language, which, for them, carries no colonial baggage; it is for them simply a tool.

**Magic Realism:** The pioneer of this genre in definitely Salman Rushdie. Magic realism has been the most dominant genre in the fiction of this period. The Magic Realism technique affords the novelist the widest possible scope for the free exercise of imagination. If realism reflects Reality, Magic Realism only refracts it. This technique can be a useful ally to comic extravaganza, provided it is under proper control. Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children* is the best example for the use of
this technique. After Rushdie, in their first novels, Amitav Ghosh in *The Circle of Reason* (1986) and Shashi Tharoor in *The Great Indian Novel* (1989) tried the technique of Magic Realism. Apparently following Rushdie’s example, several new novelists have tried their hand at this technique. Rushdie succeeds because he used this technique to present a meaningful vision of life. But in the absence of this, it became just a fashionable literary device with others. Reference may be made of Boman Desai’s *The Memory of Elephants* (1988), Richard Crasta’s *The Revised Kamasutra* (1993), GJV Prasad’s *A Clean Breast* (1993), Rukun Advani’s *Beethoven among the Cows* (1994), and Indrajit Hazra’s *The Burnt Forehead of Max Saul* (2000).

**Regional Fiction:** It is a genre which R.K. Narayan is perhaps the greatest exponent in Indian English literature. India is a country so vast and varied, and displaying such tremendous diversity of regional traditions and culture that it cannot but produce regional fiction displaying rich variety. Mention may be made of Manohar Devadoss’s *Green Well Years* (1997) which deals with the ancient temple town of Madurai as its setting. P.A. Krishnan’s *The Tiger Claw Tree* (1998) covers history of four generations of an Iyengar family in the course of a century. M.C. Gabriel’s *Children of the Street* (1994) is a chronicle of South Indian rural life. In Jaideep Prabhu’s *The Middle of Life* (1998), the coastal life in Mangalore is the setting.
**Fiction of Interior Landscape:** This genre is the counterpart of the novel of Social Realism. It deals with the interior world of the mind and sensibility. The able practitioner of this genre is Amitav Ghosh. In his *The Shadow Lines* (1983), the lines are those that divide people and nations, creating entirely unavoidable misery.


Arup Kumar has authored three novels, viz., *The Blind Witness* (1985), *Crystal Cave* (1987) and *Smack* (1990), which are considered as **Children’s Fiction**; they deal with stories related to children. Children’s fiction of this period deals with stories of ghosts, fantasy and is written to entertain the children as well as adults.

Recently added genre to the repertory of Indian English fiction is **Science Fiction**. The pioneer of this genre is a distinguished scientist Jayant Narlikar. He has authored two novels - *The Return of Vaman* (1989) and *The Message from Aristarchus* (1992). Amitav Ghosh’s *The Calcutta Chromosome* (1996) is one of the best novels of this genre. Most of the novels of this genre are written by scientists. They deal with subjects like man’s life in relation to planets, dropping of an infant on the earth, diseases, parasites, etc., and the remedies.

**Novels of Social Realism:** This genre is led by Vikram Seth. His epic novel ‘*A Suitable Boy*’ (1993) is the best known example of this genre. “In spite of the fascination for Magic Realism, fiction of social realism still flourishes, and will perhaps flourish, because….Novels of Social Realism find …….external reality an eternal source of substantial artistic material.”¹ The novels of this genre depict social panorama, portray life in its various aspects and show authors’ engagement with a social milieu and changing times. The novelists of this genre are Rohinton Mistry, Allan Sealy, Firdaus Kanga, Ardesir Vakil, Upamanyu Chatterjee, Ashok Banker, Prema Nandkumar, Partap Sharma, N.K.Singh, Nalinaksha Bhattacharya, Shashi Tharoor, Chaman Nahal, Ahmad Ali, Kiran Doshi, Kiran Nagarkar, Dr.R.Sharma, Ranga Rao, Anurag Mathur, Gustap Irani, Kasturi Shrinivasan, Pankaj Mishra, M.C.Gabriel, and Amit Chaudhuri.
Notes