CHAPTER I

Introduction: Making of the Novelist

It is interesting to note that the Indian English fiction responds to urgencies of life of the day. The upbeat mood of the age of Gandhi got transcreated into the works of the “big three” viz. Anand, Narayan and Rao. The Indo-Pak war of 1971 with conclusive Indian victory and the associated political clout as a regional power initiated a new readiness to play more active a role in the various fields of human activity. Literature was no exception. The ‘big three’, though still continued writing almost to the close of this century, the initiative and driving energy moved out from them to a new group of writers, more confident about their powers, and eloquent enough to write absorbing stories of the changing socio-economic, ethno-moral realities of both national and regional nature. Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children* breaks a new path both in content and expression and that heralds a new upsurge in creative activity with all the ingredients of the post-modernist iconoclastic tendencies which in themselves are symptomatic of the new aspirations of the new writers who between 1981 to 2000, far outnumber the writers of any corresponding periods in the history of Indian English fiction.
M.K. Naik in his seminal book *Indian English Literature 1980-2000* aptly entitles the chapter on new fiction after 1980 as ‘Midnight’s Children, Children: The Novel’. The fecundity and resourcefulness of the post-Rushdie young writers is just amazing. Not only they are numerous they are eloquent and impressive enough not to face hassels of publication which once dogged Mulk Raj Anand before his *Untouchable* finally got a publisher but not before its rejection by no less than nineteen publishers in England. Now Indian English fiction writers have won a ready acceptability abroad. Some of them are getting fantastic amounts of consideration money for writing their novels.

The unleashing of imaginative resourcefulness has enabled the post-Rushdie writers to use surrealism and magic realism which according to Naik “has patent affinities with the strong oral traditions and narrative patterns of Third World societies.”¹ *The Great Indian Novel* (1989) by Shashi Tharoor exemplifies the imaginative fertility of the novelists of this period by which the past and the present are shown in active correspondence. The chief characters and events of the Mahabharata find their equivalents in the leading political figures and developments in modern Indian history.

No wonder, then, if the Indian English fiction writers collect a sizeable number of awards and prizes at both international and national levels. Rushdie and Arundhati Roy have bagged the coveted Booker Prize, the British equivalent of the Nobel Prize for literature. They have given authenticity and acceptability of the prowess of the
Indian writers writing in English among the major areas where English is being used for creative purposes. These writers have conquered the English tongue so well that it has been used eloquently to trace the delicate nuances of Indian reality in its varied forms. This mastery over the creative medium makes K.R. Srinivasa Iyengar to comment:

English has become ours, it is not less ours for being primarily the English man’s or the American’s and Indo-Anglian literature too is our literature, the literature which, with all its limitations, still taught us to be a new nation and a new people.²

Even a cursory glance over the Indo-Anglian fiction clearly shows that Indian novelists have collectively tried to depict as well as expose the real pattern of Indian society with its corruption, hypocrisy, tyranny, along with the social evils of untouchability and social disparities. Arundhati Roy amazed the Booker Prize juries by her deft portrayal of the social reality in the Keralite society where she was born and brought up. So impressive and aesthetically satisfying was this portrayal that the Booker Prize Committee decided in favour of her extraordinary novel *The God of Small Things*. Its theme tries to peep into the life of Keralite society, its rites and customs, traditional patriarchal dealings, and the caste-ridden mentality of some sections of people.

Arundhati Roy became a major literary figure overnight by winning the reputed ‘Booker Prize’ on her very first creation. In this popular novel she has expressed her own views on class antagonism
and class extortions, on the tyranny and tortures faced by the untouchables. These misfortunes related to the society were alive in the village Ayemenem, a few kilometers away from Kottayam town of highly educated Indian province, Kerala. The theme of the novel ‘The God of Small Things’ revolves round the village of the Kottayam girl, Arundhati Roy. She had passed early years of her childhood in Ayemenem village. Roy wants to put her village at the threshold of modern society. In one of her interviews, Arundhati Roy expresses this view:

Fiction for me has been a way of trying to make sense of the world as I know it. It is located very close to me this book. It is located in the village I grew up in. If I had to put it very simply, it is about trying to make the connections between the smallest of things and the biggest ones and to see how they fit together.  

In the early childhood of Arundhati Roy a heart breaking atmosphere was stamped on her memory by her family and society. Her father divorced her mother and thus she got a broken family and faced a lot of cares, anxieties, distress and agitation. She worked in the pickle factory of her grandmother as a curry powder and pickle lable-sticker. With all these vicissitudes, she is intelligent enough to give her mind and heart to studies. As her mother Mary Roy says:

Arundhati is a born talker and a born writer. While she was studying in our school it was a problem to find a teacher who could cope with her voracious appetite for reading and writing. Most of the time she educated herself. I can remember our Vice-Principal Sneha Zakaria resorting to Shakespeare’s Tempest as a text for this little fourth grader.
She further studied in Delhi and became a great architect. But there was a great promising writer in her which gave a glorious device to Indian fiction writing in English. She gave a new track, a new vision to Indo-Anglian fiction. Her novel presents a realistic picture of her broken family village and the other villages nearby. Most of her attention is focussed on Indian society because she is born, educated and brought up in India. She knows well that untouchability is a curse and a great crime against man and God. This dangerous disease kills the people or keeps a great difference among the people of a country. This is what she depicts among other things in her popular book *The God of Small Things*. The novel depicts clearly the confrontation between the high and mighty and the low and the weak, ‘Big Man, the Laltain and small man, the mombatti, between the ‘God of Big Things’ and ‘God of Small Things’. ‘Laltain’ means the big men of the society who like a ‘Laltain are well fed, well protected and can survive the gush of the wind unlike the ‘Mombatti’ representing defenseless, the dalit, the deserted downtrodden who have no protection and can easily be blown away by the gusts of wind. But Mombatti can burn other’s light very easily than the Laltain.

Although some critics have given opposite view that Arundhati was a haughty girl and her fiction is full of her snobbish ideas. But this is not a correct judgement on Arundhati Roy. So far as reality is concerned she always remains a Kottayam girl. In her book we meet the moral uprightness of the Christian community. She follows the opinion that God never makes any difference between a touchable and
an untouchable, between the poor and the rich and between the sordid and the noble. All have the same mental and bodily properties as they are made by the same almighty God. There is need for proper facilities and appreciation for the downtrodden then they can do as well as the so-called superior ones in society. The rise of any country depends on the co-operation of the dalit and others in harmony with each other. Arundhati Roy’s views are akin to the sentiment expressed by Thomas Gray in his famous lines:

Full many a gem of purest ray serene  
The dark unfathomed caves of ocean bear  
Full many a flower is born to blush unseen  
And lost its fragrance in the desert air.\(^5\)

A careful scrutiny of the novel would show that it does not suffer from snobbery but is a creation and a result of challenging circumstances of Kottayam society. The period depicted by the novelist is the period when Ayemenem, like any other village of the region, has been trying to find a place for itself to escape the label of being a nondescript. The Syrian Christians who populated the region in large number found quite an unlikely ally in their quest in the person of Arundhati Roy. In short, the Keralan society stands broken into fragments and this is not proper, so feels the novelist, for the progress of the country. While writing about the reality of her village, Roy must have heard the promptings from R.N. Tagore’s prayer to make her village and her village folks strong and independent:

Where the mind is without fear and the head is held high;
This village society was unfortunately not ready to accept Mary Roy, a divorced woman and mother of Arundhari Roy. In this way a small child saw the naked tyranny and hypocrisy of society by her own eyes. She not only saw but became a victim of it. It was very apt to become sensible with such condition that is why she has depicted in her great fiction *The God of Small Things* her inner longings for a conducive atmosphere. This novel is autobiographical in which all the characters represent some aspect of reality which Arundhati Roy saw in the Christian society. The influence of social problems like hypocrisy, untouchability, tyrannical treatment of women, conflicts between different class and caste provide the basic fictional elements in this novel. Arundhati must be craving for things which are found by Mulk Raj Anand as the essentials of a proper living as man:

I hope for a world where men and women will awaken through the first elementary battles for bread, peace, fresh air and freedom, which they are fighting to see the slow fire that is rising from the grey, smouldering ashes of their lives; so that, having struggled on a horizontal plane, they earn the right to stand perpendicular and touch the stars,
so that they can perceive the true worth of their humanity, the dignity of man.\textsuperscript{7}

The Judges of the Booker Committee were deeply impressed by the novel for its Indian setting and its story of the complexity of sexual involvement of partners belonging to different castes or to be more precise of love between a Parvan and a Syrian Christian. Roy further presents her valuable insight into the complicated politics of Kerala and her ironical language full of pathos. The task is so well done that she becomes one book marvel and brings Ayemenem on the literary stage of the world. She has used a new and entirely original style which has turned and twisted the language to conform to the feeling particularly the jolly and jocund mood. Her style can not help without jerk and jolt to the average reader. Arundhati Roy has employed in the book the architectural method which, in itself, is a revolution in the literary area of fiction. The novel shows its worth both in matter and manner. Sometime the author has dared to coin some new terms which are essentially Indian in nature. In other words, whatever newness we get in this novel, smells the fragrance of Indianness. The reader is open to broken sentences, illogical statement, unrestricted sprinkling of italics, bizarre phrases, ungrammatical construction, unconventional rhythm etc. which simply suit her purpose of making the situation clear. In other words, the author has tried her best to create such words and phrases, intonations and connotation that the sound suggests the sense. Arundhati Roy in one of her interviews, admits:
I never believed that there was any sort of direct link between studying architecture and building buildings. So far as I am concerned, I still practise architecture. Constructing my book was actually an architectural thing.8

The other aspect of the fiction is the hypocrisy of the society where by they build a great barrier between man and woman. Man by virtue of being a male fails to understand the gravity of a woman, her deep sensitivity and her dedication for house whom she loves dearly. The novel presents the constant struggle of the woman against their uninterrupted exploitation, torture and struggle which they undergo because of the male dominated conservative framework, Roy has portrayed the woman characters who are seen suffering from the sense of existential problems and passions. Women in her works are hypersensitive, solitary and helpless. They always show their mettle and possess all the virtues of a great character. But unfortunately, they are denigrated, isolated and tormented by the patriarchal domination but it may truly be said that women are complement to men. They are not object of pleasure but a reservoir of all the healthy values of life. Her realistic and miserable picture of the Indian women is really superb and it reminds what Plato holds: “We shall have to train the women also, then in both kinds of skill, and train them for war as well and treat them in the same way as the men.”9 Thus we see that men and women are the two wheels of the same chariot or the two phases of the same coin. Plato further observes: “The only difference between men and women is one of physical function—one begets, the
other bears children. Apart from that, both can and both should follow the same range of occupation and perform the same functions (though men will on the whole, perform them better); they should receive the same education to enable them to do so. In this way society will get the best value from both.”

But it is a great fault in man that he fails to understand and admire the nobler and purer side of a woman’s love. Actually speaking she has a great place in the life of a man. If a man is flower, the fragrance is woman. Without her presence, home is not home but a dreary wilderness. A good daughter, an affectionate mother, a loyal wife—it is these that create a heavenly atmosphere in our earthly life. Isaac Pocock rightly says:

Oh say not woman’s love is bought
With vain and empty treasure
Oh say not woman’s heart is caught
By every idle pleasure.
When first her gentle bosom knows
Love’s flame, it wanders never
Deep in her heart the passion glows,
She loves and loves for ever.

Much of the charm of the novel is due to the dexterous handling of characters. In fact Roy has a very keen sense of character-drawing. Characterization is the next important ingredient of a novel. Arundhati Roy has her personal view of the past life through the vision of the twins. Rahel seems to represent the author’s mother Mary Roy. Arundhati wants to present her own past life, so she creates such characters which aptly offset her vision in the novel. It is
an acknowledged fact that without proper characterization a novel is without momentum. Walter Allen holds the view:

A novel is a totality, made up of all the words in it, and it must be judged as a totality. Of this totality, characterization is only a part, yet it is plainly an essential one and the first in order of importance since, so far as the reader is concerned. Without it the most profound apprehensions of man's fate count for nothing. Only through character can the novelist's apprehensions of man's fate be uttered at all.  

*The God of Small Things* has a number of characters. They are framed so beautifully that they become alive for the readers. Almost all the characters are depicted in consonance with the facts. They are similar to the reader's sentiments and some of them are capable to produce the desired sense of pity and have cathartic effect. The characters of this novel can be divided into two groups—those who belong to Ayemenem House, e.g. Pappachi, Mammachi, Baby Kochamma, Sophie Mol, Ammu, Rahel and Estha, and those who belong to outside the Big House e.g. Velutha, Vellya Pappan, kuttapan, Muraleedharan, K.N.M. Pillai, Inspector Thomas. We can also draw a line between these different characters on the basis of two powerful symbols Laltain and Mombatti employed by the author. Both of them symbolize two forces the ruler and the ruled. Thus the author is not only alive and interested in structure and pattern of the novel but is also richly associated with the norms of characterization. She seems to cling to the ideals of characterization. She has fulfilled what W.H. Hudson hopes:
The principle that it is always better that a character should be made to reveal itself than that it should be dissected from the outside, is thoroughly sound, and it is easy to perceive that where dissection is perpetually substituted for self-revelation, it is often because the novelist is deficient in true dramatic sense and power.\textsuperscript{13}

Quite a few readers may be offended by the erotic overtones and undertones in the novel but it is enough to say that such descriptions are in no way pornographic. In the opinion of Roy sex is not a private thing in so far as, it is a universal matter which appeals to a large number of people. It is as necessary for men as for women. In \textit{The God of Small Things} we find Ammu is forsaken by her husband and other members of the family in her sweet spring. Her sexual thirst is not quenched so she is deprived of the natural instinct of youth and always became haunted by the sexual passion. Her sexual urge can well be seen in the bathroom where she looks at her naked body in the mirror and becomes stimulated. The novelist describes the situation with artistic control:

\begin{quote}
Ammu grew tired of their proprietary handling of her. She wanted her body back. It was hers. She shrugged her children off the way a bitch shrugs of her pups, when she’s had enough of them. She sat up and twisted her hair into a knot at the nape of her neck. Then she swung her legs off the bed, walked to the window and drew back the curtains.\textsuperscript{14}
\end{quote}

One of the leading structural devices used by Roy in the novel is its rich symbolic texture. It is an important element which plays a very crucial role in helping the novelist into transforming her sense
perceptions, emotions and her thought into a vital tool of expression. Sometimes symbol plays a role of a character. In the novel Arundhati Roy has used such fine cohesive and cogent symbols which beautifully project the situation. A symbol expresses a deep and complex spiritual phenomenon. In a great work it is the symbol that makes language rich and expressive. The traumatic experience which presents a rude shock to the ego of man, can be seen in the lives of Ammu, Estha and Rahel. Its emotional blow is so violent that it leaves a permanent imprints on their minds. Ammu remembers through her life the traumatic experience of her childhood:

On one such night, Ammu, aged nine hiding with her mother in the hedge, watched pappachi’s natty, silhouette in the lit windows as he flitted from room to room. Not content with having beaten his wife and daughter (Chacko was away at school), he tore down curtains, kicked furniture and smashed a table lamp. An hour after the lights went out, disdaining Mammachi’s frightened pleading, little Ammu crept back into the house through a ventilator to rescue her new gumboots that she loved more than any thing else…. While Ammu watched, the Impirial Entomologist shred her new gumboots with her mother’s pinking shears.15

‘The God of Small Things’ by Arundhati Roy is truly an amalgamation of the above narrated elements, keeping in the mind the chief point and view of the seven years old twins Rahel and Estha whose point of view pervades the large area of the book, having the authorial voice here and there at the same time Roy seems to be influenced by Conrad’s innovations thereby running her story in zigzag way rather than in a straight linear movement. The book also
shows the epistolary method like that of Richardson. If one reads the novel thoroughly one finds that the point of view expressed in the book is plural and not singular. Majority of the episodes of the novel deal with the musings and observations of the twins. In fact *The God of Small Things* is a unique novel in which the novelist boldly intermingles all the styles of narrative techniques—leading to the creation of a new style—a new innovation. Roy’s portrayal of the political scenario is very realistic and authentic. She presents condition as they are. Even the names of Kerala politicians are real enough to raise a storm of controversy in her home state. She ought to have not made direct remarks because instead of direct remarks work of literature can be presented by other means both allegorically and symbolically. However, if a writer decides to call a spade a spade, we may grant him or her that liberty.

Thus the brief analysis of Arundhati Roy’s fiction clearly reveals that she is a novelist with unique talent and has portrayed the society in its own colour as she sees it. The popularity of her novel is clear by this fact that this book was the main topic of discussion in the Chicago Book Fair. Roy recalls these moments:

I had got over the excitement of the book being so much in demand. I decided that this time I would not go with the highest bidder. I would go with the publisher I felt best about. I am very proud of the fact that I went with Random House because I respected them even though another large publishing house offered me $1,50,000 more than the Random House bid.16
The edition of the book, *Arundhati Roy: The Novelist Extraordinary* is of the opinion that “The fastest selling Booker Prize Winner so far was Roddy Doyle’s *Paddy Clarke Ha Ha Ha* which won the award in 1993. It sold 27000 copies of hard back within half an hour of book shops opening day after the announcement. Amazingly, *The God of Small Things* shattered all past records. It registered tremendous sales the world over. The novel has been translated into some forty languages. In the first few months, Roy visited nearly 80 cities across the world to promote the book.” Thus Arundhati Roy preferred such a performance whose profile promulgated her the winner of Booker Prize. When sales of her highly original first novel *The God of Small Things* went through the roof worldwide, it put Indian writing firmly on the world literary map and gave this country a prominent and celebrity novelist. John Updike compared Roy’s arrival in fiction to that of Tiger Wood in golf.

Roy is not only a delineator of characters and story-teller only, she is a perfect human being too as expressed through her non-fictional writings. Her humane vision of life and compassion for the mute illiterate, undemanding tribals and the poverty ridden villagers have made her a champion of the cause of the deprived and the lonely. The immediate success of *The God of Small Things* is much due to the style of Arundhati Roy and the content is absorbing because of the humanistic streaks which inform the novel. Matthew Arnold’s observation holds good to the manner and matter of Roy’s writings. Arnold observes in one of his letters to Clough:
The style is the expression of the nobility of a (writer's) character as the matter is the expression of the richness of his mind.... For in a man style is the saying in the best way what you have to say. Thus what you have to say depends on your age.18

Any work of art is the “product of a complete personality” and is thus a “social thing, dictated by society to serve society.”19

Arnold’s above observation in a way implicitly supports what Roy has to say in the form of the fictional content in her novel and the thoughts in her non-fictional works, viz. *The End of Imagination* (1998) and *The Greater Common Good* (1999). Arundhati Roy by depicting the stagnant life in the poverty and class and caste-ridden socio-political set up of her native village just underlines the need for understanding and humanistic attitude to surmount the problems surrounding the life in the Kerala countryside. She seems to have the same humanistic sense of urgency which we have earlier found in M.R. Anand. The title ‘The Greater Common Good’ is an oblique reference to the liberal movement of the 19th century in England which believed that the duty of all socio-political institutions including the State is to ensure ‘the highest good of the largest number’. At this stage it is enough to say that Roy’s writings are informed by a strong humanistic tendency and in that respect she seems to extend the line taken by M.R. Anand, of course, without his ‘commitment’.
REFERENCES

8. Arundhati Roy in an Interview with the magazine, *First City Delhi City Magazine 1602, Som Vihar*, New Delhi, 22 June 1997, p. 25.