Chapter V

Knowing the Nation: Characterization, Language, and Identity

Identity is thus a quintessentially plural concept, with varying relevance of different identities in distinct contexts. And, most importantly, we have choice over what significance to attach to our different identities. There is no escape from reasoning just because the notion of identity has been invoked. Choices over identities do involve constraints and connections, but the choices that exist and have to be made are real, not illusory. In particular, the choice of priorities between different identities, including what relative weights to attach to their respective demands, cannot be only a matter of discovery. They are inescapably decisional, and demand reason—not just recognition. (Sen)

You taught me language; and my profit on't
Is, I know how to curse. The red plague rid you
For learning me your language! (The Tempest - Act 1, Scene 2)

Most Indian Writing in English can be divided into two categories as pre Rushdian and post–Rushdian. The concept of nation and history of nation has acquired focus with the advent of Rushdie’s Midnight’s Children. Rushdie and the predecessors focus their attention in producing literature, which investigates as well as contests for making and unmaking histories. Their literary productions have dual function of consolidating or rupturing historical forces. Their works seem to demand the reconsideration of the relationship between presentness, pastness and the future possibilities. The select authors disclose questions at the intersection of the concept of “history” and the “aesthetics” involved in its production. These authors provoke generative interdisciplinary discussion on the uses and disadvantages of history for theory, for practice, and for pedagogy. The select novelists and other writers of Indian Writing in English have kindled the minds of the readers by focusing as well as raising several questions concerning violence, nation, self–subjectivity, memory, place, land and environment. The character sketches of contemporary novels depict the issues and the predicament of the time.
The earlier chapters have focused on how some of the characters interact with place and time/space–time which function significantly determining the identities and languages of characters as the space and time pass. These select writers are interconnected although they are disconnected by distance. It is also possible to draw a parallel between their works. Because of their position as minority voices and because of the way they use language in their texts reflect the processes of the construction of history, memory and identity in their characters’ experience of travel. The third and the fourth chapter have dealt with the relationship of place and time and the significations of history. The previous chapters have dealt with the authors’ negotiations with space and time. The novelists have displayed the interface of space and time with history and geography where the present is understood in the light of the past.

Salman Rushdie has a different notion of English in India. He goes to the extent of placing the English language above the position of regional languages. He is at ease with English. His characters in the novels are mostly polyglots. Rushdie is at times aggressive in taking position with language. He gives a vital significance to English language. Despite this Rushdie says in an “Introduction” to Mirror Work:

It’s high time Indian Literature got itself noticed, and it’s started happening. New writers seem to emerge every few weeks. Their work is as multiform as the place, and readers who care about the vitality of literature will find at least some of these voices saying something they want to hear. However, my Delhi interrogator may be pleased to hear that this large and various survey turns out to be making, fundamentally, just one – perhaps rather surprising-point.

This is it: the prose writing – both fiction and non-fiction – created in this period by Indian writers working in English, is proving to be a stronger and more important body of work than most of what has been produced in the 16 ‘official languages’ of India, the so-called ‘Vernacular languages’, during the same time; and, indeed, this is new, and still burgeoning. ‘Indo-Anglian’ literature represents perhaps the most valuable contribution India has yet made to the world of books. (viii)

Rushdie can easily be refuted by citing examples from each vernacular language from every state of India. The works of regional languages exhibit profound human quality as well as everlasting quality. The well researched book Textures of time: Writing History in South India 1600-1800 by Velcheru Narayana Rao, David Shulman and Sanjay Subrahmanyam show the literary works yoked with history and literature. They depict that the regional works demonstrate ‘ethno –
history’ which tends to blur that all history is ethno-history “culturally formed and determined, imbued with the metaphysical intuitions of the author who inhabits a highly specific and determined cultural world” (13). It is far better than what Rushdie claims to be Indian English Literature. In line with this R. Radhakrishnan refutes Rushdie’s claim. He goes on to say a few Tamil novelists and short story writers (who are contemporary of Rushdie) whose literary talents easily equal and exceed anything that Rushdie has written. He mentions some names from Tamil language.

... Jayakanthan, Pudumaipiththan, Kupara, Janakiraman, Ka Na Subramanyam, Ashokamithran, Ambai, Neela Padmanabhan, Jayamohan, Sa Kandaswamy, Lasa Ramamirtham, Mowni, Na Picchamurthy, Sunder Ramaswamy and others. I leave it to the readers and the critics of the literatures of the other 15 official languages of India to produce their own lists. (24-25)

English has gained international gaze because of power and being monolingual. On the contrary India is filled with languages. This demands translations to get to know other regional literatures. By using colonization and the inability of the colonized people the English language has attained universally rich powerful status in many senses. This idea brings to one’s mind the calls universal statements of Thiruvalluvar.

The words of the indigent will carry no weight even when they expound grant truths with masterly skill and knowledge. (1046) (Aiyar 256)

Rushdie probably longs for the international recognition of Indian literatures. This strikes a vantage point where translation is focused. Translation within regional languages and into English will perhaps make the rich imaginative powerful works of regional literatures to the international gaze. Amitav Ghosh harps on this point in both The Hungry Tide and Sea Of Poppies.

Most of the protagonists of the select novels are round characters. They are complex and ever changing. Saleem in Midnight’s Children is unique yet represents the independent India. The Moraes in The Moor’s Last Sigh is also a deformed person with complexity like Saleem. Akbar in The Enchantress of Florence is represented as an epitome of secularism. The Mogor d’Amore in The Enchantress of Florence is depicted like Saleem with mysterious parents. Similarly, the story tellers of The Great Indian Novel and Red Earth and Pouring Rain have shown their complexities. Ghosh’s Piya, Kanai, Fokir, Kusum, his uncle, Nirmal take transformation as

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some of the characters seen in *Sea of Poppies*, too. In *Chanakya’s Chant*, Chanakya and Gangasagar represent historical traits in their characters. These characters function as allegory of histories. Timothy Brenman observes this notion of allegory as;

Characterization in any conventional sense barely exists – only a collection of brilliantly sketched cartoons woven together by an intellectual argument. Narrative never follows the emotional logic of the characters’ lives, but the brittle, externally determined contours of “current events”. (84-85)

Saleem is aware of this pickled national history.

The pickles of history [...] may be too strong for some palates, their smell may be overpowering, tears may rise to eyes; I hope nevertheless that it will be possible to say of them that they possess the authentic taste of truth... that they are, despite everything, acts of love. (MC 461)

Rushdie presents his narrator – protagonist Saleem Senai who tries to build up an account of his life by ‘imposing a pattern on Indian history with himself at the centre’. The ‘biography’ of India and the autobiography of Saleem are intertwined in Saleem’s account they are ‘mysteriously handcuffed’ together, his destinies indissolubly chained to those of my country’ (MC 9). Rushdie uses defamiliarization technique in the representation of his characters and their identities. His characters have multiple parents. Saleem/Moraes/Amor has an element of mystery about their births. On the other hand they give description of the lives and adventures of their parents. It may appear that they create their own parents in their imagination.

The way Moraes tells the story signifies a Foucaudian reconstruction of ‘genea-logical histories’. This interrogates the canonical history as well as subverts the “Absolute” and the “Pure”. Saleem distorts history self–consciously to serve his own purpose. Similarly Moraes reconstructs historical facts into his storytelling to (re) reconstruct/ (re) member his family histories. His claim to the last descendant of the Moorish sultan of Granada is the most conspicuous case in point. However, there is a difference between Saleem and Moraes. Saleem’s self-centeredness dominates in *Midnight’s Children*, Moraes in *The Moor’s Last Sigh* tells family histories which are full of remorse and the anxiety of being hunted.

In *The Moor’s Last Sigh*, everything is distorted. There is no whole or normal. Moral principles, language, people, ideas and places are subverted/inverted. As mentioned above Rushdie presents crippled and handicapped characters in most of his novels. Most of the
characters are disfigured. It can be seen in his recent novel *The Enchantress of Florence* where the Mogor d’Amore wants to tell stories, Qara Koz also wants to tell stories, and otherwise they would die. The distortion can be seen in Akbar who prefers imaginary things to real things.

Saleem’s identity is fluid and mysterious. Nilufur Bharucha says in the essay “Real and imagined worlds”: Salman Rushdie as a writer of the Indian Diaspora gives “that Saleem is the illegitimate son of the Englishman Methwold – “a parting gift to the new nation and symbolic of the continuing hold of the colonizer over the decolonized world” (57). Saleem is born at the exact moment of India’s Independence. Moreover, he is blessed with the powers of telepathy and a mysterious sense of smell. He narrates his life history as his body begins to crumble. However his account parallels the history of postcolonial India. Nicole Weickgenannt Thiara observes *Midnight’s Children* that “through Saleem’s perspective the novel offers an exaggeratedly idiosyncratic and often purposely flawed analysis of Indian history in the twentieth century” (17). Saleem’s deformity becomes a boon for he considers himself a historian and “eye-or rather nose-witness”. He says that ‘my new, all-knowing memory’ (MC 88), telepathy and his ‘powers of sniffing-out-the-truth’ (MC 307) are parody of traditional histories. He is self reflexive. He pays attention to his mistakes. He is doubtful about the nature of reality and truth. In this way he is different from conventional historians. Nevertheless he attempts to construct history. He gives data, motives, facts, interpretations and the ‘banal chain of cause-and-effect’. This leaves source material for historians in future:

> It is possible, even probable, that I am only the first historian to write the story of my undeniably exceptional life–and–times. Those who follow in my footsteps will, however, inevitably come to this present work, this source–book, this Hadith or Purana or Grundrisse, for guidance and inspiration. (MC 295)

The novel covers up one hundred years of Indian history. It covers different periods of Indian history such as: the periods of British rule, the struggles for independence, horrors of partition, the development of the two nations–India and Pakistan, Indo–Pakistan Wars, the partition of Bangladesh and Indian political development in the 1970s.

As noted above, Rushdie has characterized a unique and mystic character in all of his novels. For instance, some of his characters are identifiable with political figures. On the other hand he draws characters that have several human traits in the actual world. Therefore his characters are mixture of several personalities.
Magic Realism prevails predominantly in depicting such characters. It is used such a way that it looks removed from reality at the same time contemplating reality. Uncle Hanif in *Midnight’s Children* is successful as a film maker when he switches over to the fantastic and unrealistic mode of storytelling in his film, “The Lovers of Kashmir”. In the same manner Saleem rejects Padma’s demand for realistic ‘What nextism’ for a bizarre mode of storytelling. In *Midnight’s Children*, all the children are possessed with magical powers. The female characters too have to possess with magical charm. In the narration, Saleem addresses his stories to Padma, the female listener who sometimes interferes, comments and criticizes. She plays a vital role in the novel. She critiques the storytelling. “I must intercept myself. I wasn’t going today because Padma has started getting irritated whenever my narration becomes self conscious, whenever, like an incompetent puppeteer, I reveal the hands holding the strings”. (MC 72)

Padma is a servant and mistress to Saleem. She is a good homemaker of a typical Hindu family. There are female characters that are masculine and threatening. Naseen who is shy, gentle and obedient, gets transformed after marriage. She becomes a typical cult of mother construction in Indian psyche. She takes control over kitchen and goes to the extent of not serving food to Dr. Aziz to the point of death. Indira Gandhi who is the mother of Emergency has been called ‘widow’.

We the magical children of midnight, were hated, feared, destroyed by the widow who was not only Prime Minister of India but also aspired to be Devi, the Mother Goddess in her most terrible aspect, possessor of the shakti of the Gods, a multi –limbed divinity, with a centre parting and schizophrenic hair. (MC 522)

As noted above, some characters refer to political figures in *Midnight’s Children*. After the publication of *Midnight’s Children*, characters in post-colonial Indian Writing in English have been handcuffed to the concept of nation, religion, history, community and race. In an interview, Anita Desai observes that “*Midnight’s Children* gives her the courage and artistic room to move into the public sphere in her own fiction”.

Saleem’s body disintegrates towards the end of the novel. Rushdie presents another character which functions as Saleem’s alter-ego. Shiva is the genetic son of Ahmed and Amina Sinai. He is raised in extreme poverty. He strikes a chord with the Puranic God of destruction who is the husband of Parvati. The character of Shiva represents a deviation from the Shiva myth “Shiva the God of Destruction, who is also most potent of deities, Shiva, greatest of
dancers; who rides on a bull; whom no force can resist” (MC 264). The fictional character Shiva is fallible and a criminal. His action brings the end of the race of midnight’s children.

Like Midnight’s Children most of the characters are disfigured in The Moor’s Last Sigh. They are deformed in two ways – Psychological and Physical. For instance, Aurora, Abraham, and Vas Co Miranda are mentally twisted. Moor, Raman Fielding, Chhaggan, Sammy Hazare are physically crooked. It appears that Rushdie has described such characters as incomplete, “imperfect” in order to enhance the expressivity of his characters. He uses defamiliarisation and the figure of the Grotesque to address and complicate the reader’s attention. He draws the attention of the readers and alters their conception of reality. It is done by juxtaposing opposite traits of a real/imaginary, fact/fiction, whole/incomplete, sane/insane situations and characters in most of his novels.

His characters are complex to comprehend. He mystifies them by intricately weaving such as Abraham Zogoiby, his father; Aurora, his mother, Uma Saraswati, Moraes’ lover, his sisters; his grand-parents; his grand-uncles. Rushdie is quite an expert at exploring human values. Rushdie draws our attention to psychological aspects of characters in The Enchantress of Florence. The mentality of Akbar and his inclination to imaginary things as well as human beings depict more psychological rather than physical. Ursula K le Guin reviews The Enchantress of Florence as:

Rushdie’s Akbar is imperial, intelligent and very likable, a marvellous spokesman for his author. Akbar tried to unite all India, “all races, tribes, clans, faiths, and nations” - a powerful dream indeed, though doomed to perish with him. What winds were blowing in the late 15th century to waken that emperor’s syncretic vision, even as Europe began to free itself from the church’s control of ideas? “If there had never been a God, the emperor thought, it might have been easier to work out what goodness was.” Goodness might not lie in self-abnegation before an Almighty but in "the slow, clumsy, error-strewn working out of an individual or collective path”. Lord of a theocratic, absolutist society, he glimpses harmony not as the enemy of discord but as the result of it: “difference, disobedience, disagreement, irreverence, iconoclasm, impudence, even insolence might be the wellsprings of the good”. (Guin)

Though storytelling is the motif of the novel, Akbar is depicted as a moral cynosure of the book. The novel is drawn towards the character Akbar. Rushdie makes him a universal brain to think
the issues that are concerned with the author’s earlier works and his life. Akbar wants a harmonious religion. He is haunted by the act of twin girls who preferred death to help the other religious person.

The select novels function to alter our identities according to the ever changing context. Identity has always been answering the question ‘who am I?’ It is personality oriented as seen in Ghosh’s *The Hungry Tide*. In *The Hungry Tide*, the refugees shout in unison to the onrushing police, “Who, indeed, are we? Where do we belong?” (HT 254). But identity is also about our participation with others. It suggests our involvement with others. In other words, we actively engage or choose to identify with a particular group or identity. In this case we have choices to make which calls for our awareness. The novels draw our attention to this identity and how it is regulated according to the various factors of society.

Rusdie has problematised the issues of identities in *Midnight’s Children, The Moor’s Last Sigh* and *The Enchantress of Florence*. *Midnight’s Children* can be considered a novel of comic Buildungsroman and we can identify Saleem with India. He is an epitome of Indian history. As earlier noted, Saleem’s disintegration can be an allegorical representation of India’s falling apart. Saleem does not know who he is. His identity has been broken into pieces. This is evident from his own life. At the beginning of his life, he thinks that he is the son of Ahmed and Amina Sinai, soon after he believes that his parents are Wee Wilhi Winkie and Vanita. But finally he realizes that Vanita has cheated her husband with Wilhaim Methwold. Later Saleem picks for himself a series of mothers and fathers. For instance, he includes the European doctor Schaapsteker, Nadir Khan, his uncle Zulfikar, Hanif, and Picture Singh. This confused mixture about heritage speaks a volume about Indian culture and strikes a chord with Amartya Sen’s idea. Commenting on the heterogeneity of India, Sen says:

India was not a ‘Hindu country’ even before the arrival of Islam. Budhsim was the dominant religion in India for nearly a millennium…Ravi Shankar, the magnificent musician and sitarist, may be contrasted with Ali Akbar Khan, the great sarod player, on the basis of their particular mastery over different forms of Indian music, but never as a ‘Hindu musician or a Muslim musician’ respectively (though one does happen to be a Hindu and the other a Muslim). The same applies to other fields of cultural creativity, not excluding Bollywood—that great ingredient of Indian mass culture. India’s cultural life does indeed bear the mark of the past, but the mark is that of its interactive and multi–religious history. (Sen 56-57)
Saleem is influenced by everybody. His identity has several persons’ contributions. He says, “I have been a swallower of lives; and to know me, just the one of me, you’ll have to swallow the lot as well. Consumed multitudes are jostling and shoving inside me” (MC 4). The wordplay shows Rushdie’s construction of identity. The words/phrases like “one of me”, “swallow”, “multitudes” can mean the fluid identities and the ever changing person. In other words Saleem is not a single person but there are multiple Saleem(s) within one Saleem. His identity or self has never been complete or whole. His identity is challenged by everyone. Sometime in the middle of the novel, he forgets himself and (re)members and thinks that he is a thing or a person. He says:

Who what am I?” My answer: I am the sum total of everything that went before me, of all that I have seen, of everything done—to—me. I am everyone everything whose being—in, the world affected was affected by mine. I am anything that happens after I’ve gone which would not have happened if I had not come. Nor am I particularly exceptional in this matter; each ‘I’, every one of the now–six–hundred –million – plus of us, contains a similar multitude. I repeat for the last time. To understand me, you’ll have to swallow the world. (MC 370)

Saleem has hybrid identity as the term defined by Homi Bhabha. Saleem suits well as Homi Bhaba views on locality, “This locality is more around temporality than about historicity: a form of living that is more complex than ‘community’; more symbolic than ‘society’; more conotative than ‘country’;…more hybrid in the articulation of cultural differences and identifications” (292). Saleem fits the explanation of locality by Bhabha. There can be found parallel identities between Saleem and Rushdie. The autobiographical element in the novel is that Rushdie himself is constituted by several identities. For instance, he is both Indian and English. In the religious sense, he is an Indian–Muslim. But he is culturally different. The swallowing takes place mutually. Amy Lee observes this novel that it is “with its self-awareness, deliberate patchwork approach to the identity of a people who have undergone transformation beyond return, starts a wave of self understanding and identification among Indian writers who write in English” (280).

Patrick Colm Hogan views Midnight’s Children which comprises Rushdie’s political thought of ‘the opposition between “practical identity” and “categorical identity”. According to Hogan the Categorical identity refers to self-concept (sex, ethnicity, race, religion, nationality), vacuous and geographical regions and historical epochs. “To categorize oneself as Indian involves an imagination of a community of Indians but to imagine oneself as muslim or christian, male or
female, white or black or Asian, does also” (84). This point contrasts categorical identity with practical identity. According to Hogan practical identity is the entire complex of habits, expectations, abilities, routines that integrate one’s daily activities with those of a community. Practical identity is experiential, local, proximate, networks of direct interconnectedness. In other words, it calls for active engagement/interactions with others.

The imagination of National identity is described in a detailed manner by Rushdie in *Midnight’s Children*:

“… a nation which had never previously existed was about to win its freedom, catapulting us into a world which although it had five thousand years of history, although it had invented the game of chess and traded with Middle Kingdom Egypt, was nevertheless quite imaginary; into a mythical land, a country which would never exist except by the efforts of a phenomenal collective will – except in a dream we all agreed to dream; it was a mass fantasy shared in varying degrees by Bengali and Punjabi; Madrasi and Jat,… India, the new myth – a collective fiction in which anything was possible, a fable rivalled only by the two other mighty fantasies; money and God” (MC 150)

The crux of the above Rushdian quote can be found in most of the select novels’ collective theme. The deliberate attempt of such theme is evident in Amitav Ghosh’s *The Hungry Tide* and *Sea of Poppies*. Partha Chatterjee objects Benedict Anderson because Anderson believes that ‘nationness and nationalism as cultural artifacts’ has been developed from the America and Europe. On the other hand Chatterjee believes that nationalist discourse in India has split the world into an outer (material domain) and an inner, (spiritual domain). According to Chatterjee the nationalist elites have used the colonisers discourses and concepts of ‘the modern liberal–democratic state’ (10). He goes on to say that in the inner, spiritual or cultural domain, the educated people have attempted to create a modern cultural identity; “here nationalism launches its most powerful, creative, and historically significant project to fashion a “modern” national culture that is nevertheless not Western. If the nation is an imagined community, then this is where it is brought into being” (6).

Rushdie has extended the theme of *Midnight’s Children* in *The The Moor’s Last Sigh*. Most of the characters in *The The Moor’s Last Sigh* search for their roots in the postmodern world. This novel is Rushdie’s another fictional reconstruction of history of India which forms an example of what Hayden White has called the imaginative task of historicization. According
to White, the fictional history helps to interpret the existing canonical historical narratives. In line with this Mona Narain says of *The Moor’s Last Sigh* that “Rushdie’s alternative accounts of India and the origins of its various ethnic groups use the fictive quality of historiography to produce alternative interpretations of the past” (56). Justyna Deszcz observes this novel as ‘Rushdie’s reworkings of the fairy tale correspond to the complex status of the genre in contemporary culture’. Deszcz considers it as “a consistent fairy–tale poetics underpinning Rushdie’s fiction” (29). *The Moor’s Last Sigh* draws a parallel between Spanish and Indian Nationalism.

Like many of Rushdie’s protagonists the Moor in *The Moor’s Last Sigh* is a narrator who wrestles with handicaps. He has a deformed, hammer–like right hand. Moraes is born by the curse of two witch–grandmothers. He has unusual ageing. He lives ‘double–quick’, ageing–and growing–twice as fast as ordinary human beings. The fading secular–pluralist India is allegorically exhibited through Moraes. He is an embodiment of decayed Indian, “the semi–allegorical figure of decay” (MLS 303). This embodiment of Moor both in the novel and in Aurora’s *Moor’ paintings* depict pluralist and hybrid India. The secular identity of India is torn into pieces by the effect of Emergency. This is told by the narrator himself that “Before the Emergency we were Indians. After it we were Christian Jews” (MLS 235). At the end of the *The Moor’s Last Sigh*, Moraes Zogoiby flies to Granada, but he longs for “the place, language, people and customs [he] knew […]”; and these, for most of us, are the four anchors of the soul” (MLS 383). However, after reaching Granada, he feels that he, “was a nobody from nowhere, like no–one, belonging to nothing”, but he convinces himself of: “That sounded better. That felt true. All my ties had loosened” (MLS 388). Moraes wants to put an end to the boundaries of the self. Regarding his identity, Michael Hensen and Mike Petry say:

Later Moraes will no longer be sure of anything, except of finding comfort and strength in the Japanese painter he has met. She, the painter, celebrates rootlessness and the autonomy of the self; yet she eventually dies and Moraes has to find another way of claiming his personal identity: after having undergone the change from the (over) celebrated hybridity of his parental home to the somewhat simplistic concept of a “mono–identity” a La Raman Fielding, he arrives at the final conclusion: “The need for flowing together, for putting an end to frontiers, for the dropping of the boundaries of the self (433). (360)
In *The Moor’s Last Sigh* Rushdie draws the interrogation of identity, the very notions of self through the character Moaies. The novel has so many signs, complex narratives which creates a lost paradise of certainty. The novel has uncertainty in abundance. The narrator plays with complexity which woos the readers to find clear understanding in order to cheat them on face. Thus, the novel plays hide and seek making the disorganisation of our ways of seeing, a constant questioning of point of view and the way language constructs that point of view. It provides several possible alternatives to the fixed identity. As Judith Butler reminds as, “the deconstruction of identity is not the deconstruction of politics; rather it establishes as political the very terms through which identity is articulated”. (quoted in Kirkland 25)

Maddena Gonzalez views *The Moor’s Last Sigh* as a novel of escaping identity. According to Gonzalez the novel shows how voluntary exile from identity is the only means to redefine that identity as an unfixed, constantly evolving notion, rather than a prison of pre-ordained meaning. Gonzalez says, “Exile is identity in Rushdie’s world, but the most productive sort of identity, not just the physical, geographical exile around which the book is organised, but mental, intellectual exile from fixed and constraining truths” (99). Rushdie draws the identity of minority. As noted earlier the novel is aftermath of *Midnight’s Children* where the narrative history of India highlights the minority, “Outcasts, peculiar christians” (98), but not about Hindu or Muslim majority. It talks about the histories of the Catholic/ Portuguese/ Jewish spice–merchant class of southern India and its Malabar coast. This develops further hybrid identity. It uncovers the sedimental origins.

Bunch of English–medium  misfits, the lot of you. Minority group members. Square – peg  freaks. You don’t belong here. Country’s as alien to you as if you were what’s – the word lunatic. Moor Man.  You read the wrong books, get on the wrong side in every argument, think the wrong thoughts. Even your bleddy dreams grow foreign roots”.

(MLS 166)

There is a charge on the minority in the contemporary academic Indian historiography. This point is drawn in *The Moor’s Last Sigh* which focuses our attention to the image of Mother India. But histographical accounts focus the attitude of Hindu nationalists who portray Muslims as enemies for creating the Mother bad. In other words “Muslims are responsible for both the mother’s desecration and her horrific dissection”. (Hansen 113)

Tanika Sarker says:
Partition – always described by them as the result of Muslim culpability – comes to acquire new and more terrible meanings when it is filtered through the grid of this theological understanding. It is no longer a human disaster or a territorial division: it is the mutilation of a sacred body, an act of desecration committed by Muslims. [...] The map of India becomes the divine idol – at once sacred and vulnerable [...] The sacralty of an integrated and aggressive yet perpetually threatened female body is the organizing principle that holds the edifice together. The argument loses its power, its charge, if the country is allowed to be seen as a piece of land with flesh – and – blood people living within it. (Sarkar 277-9)

In *The Moor’s Last Sigh* Rushdie describes the violence of the communal riots after the demolition of the Babri mosque in Ayodhya in 1992. This portrayal is effected by Moor’s murder of Fielding. But Moor realises later that he has killed the wrong man. In the communal riots Hindu nationalists kill Muslims as the enemies of Bharat Matha. Several identities are invoked in this novel. At the same time they are questioned. It updates *Midnight’s Children’s* politics. The novel proceeds from re-affirming the Nehruvian idea of India as secular nation. It highlights the crisis of Emergency, and the religious unrest of 1990s. The chief characters are Moraes and his mother, Aurora who exhibit these ideas.

In connection with this, Madelena Gonzalez emphasises Rushdie’s notion of identity:

Rushdie consistently organizes the concept of identity around confrontation and interaction with other identities in order to further self discovery, for, as well as the idea of similarity, identity contains the notion of the “other” or the strange, in other words, the “id”. (101)

The general concept of history and the issues related to democratic India is based upon the two majority group Hindu and Muslim. Rushdie attempts to bring home the fact that India is also made up of minorities. He also shows that this fact is conveniently sidelined by recent history in India.

In *Midnight’s Children* Saleem Sinai considers himself as the forerunner of freedom from imperialist rule and the legacy of its past history. He says, “There are so many stories to tell… such an excess on intertwined lives, events, miracles, places, rumours, so dense a commingling of the improbable and the mundane” (MC 9). Rushdie deliberately makes the reader shuttle
between past, present and future by presenting the variety and multitudinous of India and her people. The interplay of the personal and national histories enable Rushdie to reminisce backward and forward (re)imagining himself in the persona of Saleem who says, “I am the sum total of everything that went before me, of all I have seen been done, of everything done—to–me” (MC 383). As noted above, Saleem never sees himself as a complete whole, but as a splintered bit of his fractured self. In short he has no stable identity. He assumes the simultaneous identities of a human being and a narrator capturing within himself the tensions and traumas of the postcolonial Indian reality. Saleem sees himself as part of the society and his self undergoes a transformation from being a character whose consciousness as an individual determines his whole existence, to being a character whose social existence determines his vision of the world. Saleem by incorporating the myth of freedom envisages a new India which is trying to come into its own terms.

Rushdie harps similar themes in The Enchantress of Florence which can be viewed as a historiographic metafiction. The novel is self–reflexive as it is a story about story telling. Moreover, it deals with real historical events and figures. Historicity is imposed upon certain characters in the novel. This is another tool used by the writer to impart subjectivity to his narrative. The titular enchantress Qara Koz, the story teller Mogor dell’ Amore, and the mirror, maid of Qara Koz, are all such characters. In Qara Koz, the princess whom history forgot, Rushdie has created one of the most enigmatic and romantic female characters since Sheherazade. For, it is around that one strand that Rushdie has woven his entire story and has created the elaborate web which eventually ensnares all his characters and his readers. Through the portrayal of the fictional character Qara Koz, questions are raised on mob mentality: “Did the crowd enhance one’s selfhood or erase it?” (EOF 176). Also on the inability of the East and the West to see each other clearly: “We are their dream”, Akbar’s imaginary queen tells him, “and they are ours”. (EOF 60)

In The Enchantress of Florence, there is the voice of the omniscient narrator, inside which we can hear the voices of many characters such as Mogor dell’ Amore, Akbar, Machiavelli, Argalia, Qara Koz. But they are never overcome by the omniscient narrative voice. It is through the voices of the characters that the story proceeds. Mogor dell’ Amore reminds the reader of the importance of story–telling in our life. Akbar is having a futuristic eye on the need of democracy and religious tolerance. Moreover, it is through him that the truth about the foreigner’s identity is revealed.
In a conversation with NPR’s Robert Siegel, Rushdie expresses the blurring of imagination and reality which help to construct fictional narrative. He has created historical characters who have imagined other characters.

“It comes out of the old Pygmalion idea of men who invent women to fall in love with who then escape them”, Rushdie says, “In the case of the Emperor Akbar, who is the character in the novel who invents the queen for himself, it came out of the fact that in India today, if you ask people who was the queen of the great emperor Akbar, they all say Jodha. If you look at the historical records, she didn’t exist” Rushdie calls it a “curious legend” of the Hindu queen. “To show his tolerance, he did not ask her to convert to Islam and indeed continued to observe her religious practices alongside his own”, Rushdie says, “It’s a happy legend for India because it’s a myth of inclusion and tolerance”. (quoted in Shivram Bharati 40)

Rushdie gives life to Akbar who speaks of the contemporary issues in his time which are relevant today. He symbolises the postmodern man of faith. He believes in religion in public but doubts in private. Rushdie’s fictions function on the interplay between real and unreal. They blur the distinction between the historical narrative and historical fictional narrative. This is exhibited in The Enchantress of Florence which blends history and fiction in its own words, “the visionary, revelatory dream–poetry of the quotations not yet been crushed by blinkered, prosy fact” (EOF 10). The psychological exploration of the character Akbar reveals his longing for religious tolerance. Through the character Akbar, the novel expresses certain hope in religion where there is always difference and violence. On the other hand the religious faith can be sorted out without violence. The novel seems to exhibit Rushdie’s interest in monolithism and stortelling. Akbar experiments with faith.

May be there was no true religion. Yes, he had allowed himself to think this. He wanted to be able to tell someone of his suspicion that men made their gods and not the other way around. He wanted to be able say, it is man at the centre of things, not God. It is man at the heart and bottom and the top, man at the front and back and side, man the angel and the devil, the miracle and the sin, man and always man, and let us henceforth have no other temples but those dedicated to mankind. This was his most unspeakable ambition: to found the religion of man. (EOF 102-103)
In *The Enchantress of Florence* various discourses such as travelogue, psychoanalysis, myth, occult and history are integrated into its text. It is a multivocal discourse about story telling, imagination, mob psychology, female sexuality and power. The novel is a nuanced blend of romance, historical detail, picaresque adventure, political intrigue, poetry and magic. Rushdie’s tale is a running commentary on the dilemmas of the modern world. The novel asks questions about identity, existence and reality. Homelessness is a theme not to be maligned, but to be praised. The theme is the relationship between the East and the West, how each perceives the other, how in the end there are more similarities than differences. In this fictional world, stories and storytelling have a central role to perform. The narrator in this novel is aware that his life depends on his skill, charm, and persuasiveness as a storyteller. The novel is a story about the story. Commenting on the storytelling aspects of the novel, Meenakshi Bharat says:

> If stories are associated with identity then, as Mogor’s story is, it quite often means a building up of ‘history’, a compulsive tracing of genealogy. Stories of blood, of family trees more often than not, turn out to be double-edged swords that are not only responsible for the attribution of identity to individuals, especially to important personages like emperors and princesses (the likes of Akbar, Qara Koz, Gulbadan and even the hidden princess or the non-existent, imaginary Empress, Jodhabai) but they can also be imprisoning and reductive, paradoxically implying a denudation of identity”. (318)

The characters are imagined, yet given “space” and relationship. As noted above, painters disappear into their own paintings. The storyteller feels himself fading away to nothingness when kept from telling his story. Women appear as mere echoes and mirrors of someone or something, to add to the tenuous atmosphere created by questions of identity and reality. Rushdie shows us that story has power: the power to enthrall, the power to rend apart and the power to create. On the other hand, storytelling is also a dangerous activity. It is subversive. Stories function as signifiers of identity. These stories not only take “the individual identity into account but also widen out to embrace other public/political demarcators of identity, to make an announcement of “nationality”” (319). Storytelling reveals national identity. Stories can display the source land such as: Greek, Persian, Hindu. They are related to national characteristics. The novel expresses:

> “‘Thereby, replied Birbal, ‘I do beilieve, hangs the tale’
The emperor turned to the foreigner with a sigh of resigned curiosity. His unexpected affection for the stranger was soured by the distaste of emperors for outsiders who know too much. ‘The Hindustani storyteller always knows when he loses an audience’, he said. ‘Because the audience simply gets up and leaves, or else it throws vegetables, or, if the audience is the king, it occasionally throws the storyteller head-first off the city ramparts. And in this case, my dear, Mogor–uncle, the audience is indeed the king’.

Amartya Sen argues in *The Argumentative Indian Writings on Indian Culture, History and Identity* that contemporary India has had great histories where single culture/religion/race do not claim its source. Questioning and argument has kept the differences and diversity in harmony in India right from the ancient times. According to Sen democracy in general is associated with the tradition of public reasoning. Commenting on the argumentative tradition of Ashoka, Sen says:

The association of Ashoka, who ruled over the bulk of the Indian subcontinent… since he was strongly committed to making sure that public discussion could take place without animosity or violence. Ashoka tried to codify and propagate what must have been among the earliest formulations of rules for public discussion… He demanded, ‘restraint in regard to speech, so that there should be no extolment of one’s own sect or disparagement of other sects on inappropriate occasions, and it should be moderate even on appropriate occasions’. Even when engaged in arguing, ‘other sects should be duly honoured in every way on all occasions’. (16)

Akbar is an embodiment of all human nature. He is the beginning and an end. “What followed from this was that human nature, not divine will, was the great force that moved history” (EOF 387). He is the perfect man but he knows that he is not a perfect man in his heart. The novel presents Akbar as ‘less godly’ but he is a rational man who wants answers for several questions. Like Chanakya, and Gangasagar in Ashwin Sanghi’s *Chanakya’s Chant*, Akbar’s aim is to have united Bharat irrespective of differences concerning: caste, religion, geographical, and linguistic. He does not bother about low quotidian irritations but focuses himself in meditation in thinking ‘the high things’. He is contrasted by his son the Crown Prince, who is also less godly but presented to be God fearing and is easily irritated by trivial things. Imagination and interpretation are not fixed. The centrality of Akbar’s all forces has been his imaginary sweetheart Jodha. Jodha is to Akbar, as, “companion, helpmate, erotic tiger, no man could wish for more. As far as Akbar is concerned, she is his masterpiece of his imagination. Time has
changed everything when Qara Koz, Lady Black Eyes has started visiting him. Once again, through imagination from the stories Akbar has developed much more powerful imaginary figure than Jodha. The desire for different historical persons or the desire for imagination takes its fresh sprout. Akbar is trapped in the fluidity of time. Omniscient narrator says,

He was bent on the sounds of the future and she was an echo from the distant past. Perhaps that was what lured him, her nostalgic gravity, in which case she was indeed a dangerous sorceress, who would drag him backwards in time, and consequently backwards in every way, in his ideas, his beliefs, his hopes. (EOF 389)

Rushdie has foregrounded the well-established argumentative tradition of India in *The Enchantress of Florence*. The character of Akbar is described as an analytical person in the novel. He questions everything such as identity, religion, caste, myth, the existence of life itself. He does this through continuous argument with experts in such fields as well as through personal meditation and contemplation. In fact, the contemplation dominates and makes him to create an imaginary character in the mind to have colloquy with those unanswerable questions. This kind of argumentative tradition goes back to the tradition of ancient India.

Akbar is seen in the beginning of the novel a bundle questions. He has sought answers through the mutual talk between Jodha and himself. Jodha could quench the thirst of his desires regarding the mysteries of the world. In the end of the novel the semi–historical figure, Qara Koz has taught him all answers. Qara Koz has understood what Jodha has lacked. Akbar and Qara Koz has become ‘a single person’. He has learnt to be silent in his mind and heart. She has taught him a philosophy of silence.

Akbar has realized after listening to the historical stories and various angles of historical representation of the West by Mogor that there is no much difference between East and West. In the West or the East only ‘the right of the Victor matters not the intrusion of divine right’. He asserts Mogor’s statement that “The curse of the human race is not that we are so different from one another, but that we are so alike” (EOF 392). This is well exemplified by Aswin in *Chanakya’s Chant* where the mentality of people looks high and low irrespective of all castes, religions, and ethnicity of ancient Bharat is paralleled by the same trend in the modern days.

Rushdie tries to bring the female *shakti* through Jodha, and later through Qara Koz. The entire novel is about the deep engagement with two female characters (*shakti*) and how they influence the East and the West. Similarly Aswin tries to bring the female shakthi through
Chandininini as Suvasini wanted through Chanakya. Then two novels portray the development of women in all fields especially political and history in the present time. The travel motifs of all the characters seem to generate a new genre of ‘travel novel’. They seek identity as they go. The language is multilingual. The border is merged.

India with her multi-religious, multi-lingual and multi-cultural has not followed the great tradition of reasoning and discussion. The contemporary India has lost the status of secular democracy as exhibited in Midnight’s Children and The The Moor’s Last Sigh. Rushdie has tried to carry the torch of the argumentative tradition of India in all of his novels. This is well exhibited through the character of Akbar in The Enchantress of Florence. Rushdie’s novels present the death of the argumentative tradition and religious tolerance. On the other hand India has indulged in violence where religious fundamentalism forms its root. Akbar’s objection to God is “that his existence deprived human beings of the right to form ethical structures by themselves”. He has formed a new religion Din-i-Ilahi as he is deeply interested in religious and philosophical matters. The purpose of his religious policy is to show his final belief that every religion has got some truth. In order to maintain this he wants to bring complete religious toleration in the country. His attitude to this might have come because of his Sunni father, Shias mother and Bairan Khan (his protector) and is influenced by his tutor Abdul Latif who used to have liberal religious views. Akbar always wants to ensure religious peace and harmony, security to his Empire. He has practiced his ideas by constructing buildings where Muslims, Hindus, Christians, and Jains are allowed to worship. All people are allowed to celebrate their faiths, festivals irrespective of differences of their religion.

Commenting on Akbar’s religious tolerance and argumentative tradition, Amartrya Sen says, “Akbar not only made unequivocal pronouncements on the priority of tolerance, but also laid the formal foundations of a secular legal structure and of religious neutrality of the state, which included the duty to ensure that ‘no man should be interfered with on account of religion, and anyone is to be allowed to go over to a religion that pleases him’” .(18)

In the novel, Akbar learns many things from the young ruler, Rana of Cooch Naheen. When Rana says knowing fully well that Akbar would kill him, ‘the words worship and argument’ mean the same thing’ (EOF 43). Akbar builds a new house of worship in order to honour Rana which would be a place of argument as above mentioned, “a house of adoration, a place of disputation where everything could be said to everyone by anyone on any subject, including the non-existence of God and the abolition of Kings” (EOF 45). The place of worship
becomes ‘a debating chamber in which the adoration of the divine was re-imagined as an intellectual wrestling match in which no holds were barred’. (EOF 97)

Akbar has wanted reasoning, arguments which will suit the peaceful existence of everybody and every religion. “Akbar had decided that this revolutionary temple would not be a permanent building. Argument itself – and no deity, however mult-limbed or almighty– would here be the only God”. (EOF 98)

On the other hand, Tana and Riri, two sisters have sung megh malha, the song of the rain in order to cure the burns of Mian Tansen (the great Hindu musician in Akbar’s court). The song by them removed the bandages from his wounds and the rain has washed his skin. Knowing this Akbar has invited Tana and Riri to his court, but they have refused to agree. They have responded to Akbar by drowning. The reasons of their death is,

As strictly observant Brahmins they had not wanted to serve the Muslim King, and feared that if they refused then Akbar would treat the rebuff as an insult and their families would suffer the consequences. To avoid such an outcome they had preferred to sacrifice their own lives. (EOF 246)

This incident haunts Akbar till the end of the novel. However, his ideas about religion fringes on the core of secularism and the argumentative tradition. Although the roots of secularism can be traced before Akbar, “the politics of secularism received a tremendous boost from Akbar’s championing of pluralist ideals, along with his insistence that the state should be completely impartial between different religions” (Sen 18). Midnight’s Children and The Moor’s Last Sigh on the other, show how the valuable, great argumentative tradition and the soul of secularism suffer at the ferocious hands of religious fundamentalists, vote mongers and other political gainers.

Similar theme of identity as mentioned above can be found in The Great Indian Novel. The novel as Tharoor’s own acknowledgement recasts ‘the political history of twentieth century India’, from the dawn of the century to the post-Emergency period, ‘through a fictional recasting of events, episodes and characters from The Mahabharata’ (GIN 5). The overall spirit of the narrative is summarized by the phrases of Gunter Grass in front cover of the novel which suit other select novels as well: “Our past and present and future problems are much more crowded than we expect… I think in India, some stories should be kept alive by literature. Writers
experience another view of history, what’s going on, another understanding of ‘progress’… Literature must refresh memory” (back cover of GIN).

*The Mahabharata* has been in several versions. It does not have a single version. Moreover it is (re)written from time to time. This epic invites freedom to write. Thus Tharoor has attempted to (re)write the epic in a novel form. However he has made several changes to fit the actual historical personages and events in order to design the characters of the epic to suit in the contemporary Indian political scenario.

… the yoking of myth to history restricted some of my fictional options: as the novel progressed, I was obliged to abandon novelistic conventions and develop characters who were merely walking metaphors. Draupati, thus, became emblematic of Indian democracy, her attempted disrobing a symbol of what was sought to be done to democracy not so long ago. (Tharoor, *Yoking of Myth to History* 19)

Tharoor is courageous enough to deconstruct Indian hagiology, concerned with the lives and legends of mythical figure. He rewrites India’s great epic, history and myth. In the novel deconstruction has been done to every important Indian mythical–political figure: Bhishma-Gandhiji, Dhritaraschitra–Nehru, Pandu–Subash Chandra Bose, Vidur–Patel, Karna–Jinnah, Duryodhana–India Gandhi, Yudishtra–Morarji Desai. Tharoor not only portrays them with irreverance but also makes them illegitimate offspring. He exhibits a common thread of creative sensitivity with Rushdie in fictionalization of contemporary India.

He uses heavy dose of fantasy, parody, metafiction, satire, humour and paradox. He demythifies *The Mahabharata* by deglamourizing it and by superimposing the contemporary political history on the epic structure. In *Midnight’s Children*, Rushdie uses the oral tradition of narrative of India making Saleem Sinai to narrate the story. In the case of *The Great Indian Novel*, Tharoor makes Ved Vyas to dictate the story to Ganapathi who is also an audience. Moreover Ved Vyas comments on the nature of the historical development while narrating the story. This element of self-consciousness strikes a balance with Saleem in *Midnight’s Children*. Commenting on this novel, T.N. Dhar says, “VV calls his account a selective recall of the past with the help of his memory, which approximates Saleem’s version of memory’s truth, but unlike Saleem, he is more explicit in stating that his account has been prompted by his need to have lessons for the future”. (212)
The Great Indian Novel’s metafictionality is quite substantial, too. There is the constant self-conscious probing of the art of fictionalization, as is displayed in Midnight’s Children, The Moor’s Last Sigh and Red Earth and Pouring Rain. Ved Vyas holds his omniscience in doubt. He self-consciously avers that he has planted his informants/spies in places where he could not be present. The reader’s expectation is frustrated. The entire fictional narrative/endeavour is deconstructed at the end of the novel. “… I have told my story so far from a completely mistaken perspective. I have thought about it, Ganapathi, and I realize I have no choice. I must retell it” (GIN 418). Tharoor does not claim a new version of history. On the other hand he suggests some possible multiple interpretations of history.

It is my truth, Ganapathi, just as the crusade to drive out the British reflected Gangaji’s truth, and the fight to be rid of both the British and the Hindu was Karna’s truth. Which philosopher would dare to establish a hierarchy among such verities. (GIN 164)

Tharoor’s The Great Indian Novel reiterates pluralistic historiography of Midnight’s Children, The Moor’s Last Sigh and The Enchantress of Florence. It may seem to be a Western concept but it is an Indian phenomenon which forms both the source of strength and weakness of its people: “How easily we Indians see the several sides to every question”! We give too much importance to discourse and relativism, and have an instinctive awareness of the subjectivity of truth” (373). The actual/historical Gandhi has tried his level best through his efforts in organising the Indian resistance against the British. On the contrary, Gandhi is not related to the lives of people and to the realm of culture as he is worshiped in the west. His dogma and charisma are more valued by Westerners than Indians. However, he is recognised for awakening public awareness against the British through non-violence. He has accepted the punishment. He has had the strength of a mother. “No dictionary imbues the word with the depth of meaning Gangaji gave it. His truth emerged from his convictions: it meant not only what was accurate, but what was just and therefore right. Truth could not be obtained by ‘untruthful’ or unjust, or violent means” (GIN 48). Gandhi has read Vedas, Manu, Tolstoy, Ruskin, the Bible, the Gita and has developed some bewildering matters between temporal and spiritual. “His manner had grown increasingly other-worldly while his conversational obligations remained entirely mundane, and he would often startle his audiences with pronouncements which led them to wonder in which century he was living at any given moment”. (26)

These attitudes of Gandhi have led him to perform deep-rooted Hindu tradition. In connection with this, T.N. Dhar says, “Gandhi consistently exploited Hindu symbols for galvanizing people
against the British; this made the leaders of other communities conscious of the dangers of the rising tide of Hindu influence to their identity”. (221)

Although Gandhi has never offended the minorities, his attitudes have made some political leaders to be alienated like Jinnah. This has paved a clear path to the conflict between the Hindus and the Muslims which has caused great division of the country. Tharoor seems to reiterate this point in *The Great Indian Novel*, “Karna was not much of a Muslim but he found Gandhi too much of a Hindu” (GIN 142). *The Great Indian Novel* is principally an allegorical piece of work though the novelist does not mention it specifically inside or outside the novel. Tharoor exhibits excellent finesse when he subjects the dominant political persons of independent India to extreme satirical treatment by giving them an allegorical garb of mythical character.

Like Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children* and *The Moor’s Last Sigh*, *The Great Indian Novel* has exposed the dark days of emergency declared by Mrs. Indira Gandhi. Tharoor makes a direct satire of the political situation. The practices, dreams, traditions of the Great Indians, Ashoka, Akbar, and Gandhi have been forgotten. On the contrary, the policy of divide and rule is part of our nation which has gathered prominence during the colonial period. This policy of divide and rule has fragmented and disintegrated the country into small pieces as evident and displayed in Ashwin Sanghi’s *Chanakya’s Chant*. Commenting on *The Great Indian Novel*, A. Sudhakar Rao says,

> The Indian experiment according to the novelist is a colossal failure at every turn, in every field of activity. This includes much highlighted planning and other socio-economic programmes aimed at the welfare of the masses who are below the poverty line. He insists upon the re–discovery and re–interpretation of contemporary political history with a view to discipline and chasten the entire system by the imposition of age old “Dharma”. (82)

Indian tradition of storytelling has been displayed in *Midnight’s Children, The Moor’s Last Sigh, The Enchantress of Florence, The Great Indian Novel* and *Red Earth and Pouring Rain*. Vikram Chandra has attempted to mix myth and history of India which touches the global matters of the West and the East. Chandra emphasises that globalization is connected to the East. It cannot be attributed to the West alone. Chandra’s *Red Earth and Pouring Rain* deals with history of colonial India up to the Sepoy mutiny as well as the representation of Globalisation in the early 1990s in America thereby depicting a change in cultural identity. This
setting of the novel has various effects on the identity of most of the central characters. Commenting on the novel and its effect on identity Paul Jay observes, “Abhay and Sanjay share the role of narrator in Red Earth and Pouring Rain, and by the end of the novel their disparate experiences with colonization and the West become the vehicle for Chandra’s exploration of how the long history of globalization covering virtually the entire history of India, perpetually conjures new, hybrid identities” (102).

Sanjay insists his identity—both English and Indian nationality. “It is precisely because I’m an Indian that I’m English” (MC 505). There is a mix of national as well as cultural identity. On the other hand, Chandra mocks the diversity of Indian culture which claim superior position in India:

They all come here, Brahmins and Rajputs and company men. Here, touch—this—and—don’t—touch—that and untouchability and your caste and my people and I—can’t—eat—your—food is all forgotten; this is the place that the saints sang about, littlemen. Here, anybody can touch anybody else, nothing happens. (REPR 210)

The above quote tells a volume about Indian culture and cultural practice. Sanjay’s insistence on bicultural identity and Chandra’s focus on Abhay’s attempt to absorb Western culture allow to form their own Indian culture. In this regard Dora Sales Salvador says of Sanjay and Abhay that they are “interstitial (gap between spaces full of structure and matter the emphasis is mine) characters living between two cultures and two languages, and as such they act as bridges between two worlds. Being aware of the fact that they are crossing borders, all [two] of them at times sense that they live in deterritorialized spaces and feel a deep sense of alienation” (128). The novel depicts multiple identities as well as the power of storytelling. This power helps to transcend limitations and serve to attain a level of mythical understanding.

The hybrid identities are the crux of Amitav Ghosh’s The Hungry Tide and Sea Of Poppies. Sherry Simon observes in an essay, “Hybridity and Translation”:

Hybridity takes on special importance in contexts where there is a heightened and historically anchored consciousness of cultural and linguistic mixing. Indeed, both translation and hybridity have become key terms in accounting for the ways in which divided, recovered or reconstructed identities are configured within the wider cultural forums in which they wish to participate. In this sense, both translation and hybridity are
alternatives to ideas of assimilation (loss of identity) and multiculturalism (the multiplication of discreet and separate identities). (51)

According to Sherry Simon, two different national languages in colonised countries take the form of ‘interlingual or mixed expression’. This relationship makes other vernacular languages or the language of colonised countries to compete with English or standard languages. Ghosh’s Sea of Poppies displays the relationship between the English language and other dialects of India which form a plurality of modes of expression. In this sense, Sea of Poppies tries to convey a sort of multilingual and hybridity identities of colonial India.

Alessandro Monti says in a well researched essay, “Babooing Languages, Shaking the Pagoda tree” that Ghosh’s Sea of Poppies ‘deploys an unchecked and unruly feast of languages’. According to Monti, the novel displays hybridized tongues, the mixture of pidgins, such as “the Lascari spoken by eastern sailors, or the highly idiolectic prattle of the Anglo–Indian circle” (196). On the other hand, the novel forms a platform for intimations of social avatars, or rebirths which is exhibited through the characters of Deeti and Kaluva and the symbolic representation of Zachary Reid, the mulatto freedman from Baltimore. He does not wish to show his original identity to anyone in the novel.

Analysing and commenting on Zachary Reid, Monti says that Reid moves from his initial position as a carpenter to heterogeneous worlds of the Ibis and within the fringes of the Anglo–Indian community. Monti goes on to say that the progress in such worlds make him “competence in a new language, be it the mongrel Lascari pidgin or the crazy bhat spoken by the Anglo–Indians” (195). Monti concludes:

This unruly polyphony of languages defines the unequal surface of hybridisation – however, instead of imposing chaos it lays bare as it were the authoritarian globalisation operated by colonialism. The external frame of disorder and babelic communication conceals a stern purpose of profit and intercontinental exploitation. The issue concerning the abrogation of a metropolitan standard in language is handled astutely by Ghosh. (195)

The novel presents people with different priorities because some are slaves, others are forced by individual histories like Paulette and Nob Kissin. In connection with this Bibhash Choudhury says that the novel has cultural embeddedness which contributes to define/situate/understand the characters of the novel. Choudhury goes on to say, “There is, in a way, an inclination on the part
of the characters to carry-forward aspects of cultural history, which they recognise as significant to their personalities and even in moments of extreme crises, these aspects leave their mark in the narrative”. (165)

The aspects of language, translation and its limitation have been attempted in his Tsunami prediction novel, *The Hungry Tide*. The novel emphasises the issue of memory, identity, displacement and the problematic nature of language. The problematic nature of language is exhibited everywhere in the text. For instance, Fokir recites the legend of Bon bibi to Piya which has to be translated to her by Kanai. The legend is about the mythical tiger goddess of the tide country which is ‘perfect’ in music. “Suddenly the language and the music were all around her, flowing like a river, and all of it made sense… although the sound of the voice was Fokir’s, the meaning was Kanai’s, and in the depths of her heart she knew she would always be torn between the one and the other”. (HT 360)

Ghosh emphasises communication can take place even without languages. On the other hand he also stresses the possibility of creating a “deep communication” in the novel. The heterogenous and hybrid nature of language is brought out in *Sea of Poppies*. The problematic nature of language, the untranslatable nature of regional languages and the limitation of translation are the key focus of *The Hungry Tide*. The novel exhibits how ‘nation’ in the Indian context may be understood by diversified linguistic, religious and socio-political identities. Ghosh shares in an interview to the UN Chronicle his views on language:

The only real barrier to a complete uniformity around the world is not the image but language. Images can be exchanged between cultures, but the domain where globalisation has truly been resisted is that of language. We can send e-mails, which can be instantly translated, but that is shallow communication. For any kind of deeper, resonant communication, language is essential. All such communication is always deeply embedded in language. (quoted in Dattaray 143)

Polyglot communities are seen both in Calcutta and the *Ibis* in the novel. The people who travel in the ship have conversation/everything from pidgin and Bhojpuri with the comical mixture of English. To bring this out Ghosh has researched Sir Henry Yule’s *Hobson–Jobson*, the 19th century Anglo–Indian dictionary and has drawn words, phrases, technical terms and sea-phrases of 1811 English and Hindustani Naval dictionary. Apart from the experimentation of language Ghosh has focused attention on the relationship between humanity and nature. Christopher
Rollason observes, “Neither human nor natural ecosystem in Ghosh’s novel appears easy to place or interpret” (170). Ghosh himself asserts in a 2004 interview: “I wanted to write a book that is grounded in nature”. (ibid)

This intention is revealed through the character Nirmal who expresses his intimation with nature. He writes in his journal: “No one knows better than I”, he notes, “how skilful the tide country is in silting over its past… perhaps I can make sure at least that what happened here leaves some trace, some hold upon the memory of the world” (HT 69). Ghosh does not treat nature and geographical surroundings like Wordsworth who has considered nature as God and has worshiped it for its ‘beauteous forms’. On the contrary, Ghosh views nature as disastrous, ‘chaotic and havoc–friendly’. The Hungry Tide represents nature as hungry tide for human lives. It stands for destructive side of nature. Nirmal has recorded the uncanny and unfriendly nature of nature. Kanai reads this recording from the writings of Nirmal in the novel:

A mangrove forest is a universe unto itself,…Mangrove leaves are tough and leathery, the branches gnarled and the foliage often impassably dense. Visibility is short and the air still and fetid. At no moment can human beings have any doubt of the terrain’s utter hostility to their presence, of its cunning and resourcefulness, of its determination to destroy or expel them. Every year dozens of people perish in the embrace of that dense foliage, killed by tigers, snakes and crocodiles. (HT 7-8)

Ghosh unravels the complex issues of regarding the politics of wildlife conservation, conflicts between class and caste, and urban–rural politics. As mentioned in the third chapter, Ghosh has explored the ambiguities and injustices of environmental governance. Both of his select works The Hungry Tide and Sea Of Poppies demonstrate the obstacles to a radical “democratization of everyday life as well as the necessity of a solution to rural inequalities”. Similarly, both novels hinge on Ghosh’s perennial concern with unraveling the politics of boundaries and borders. This idea has been dealt with elaborately in the third chapter. Besides this, The Hungry Tide functions as a powerful metaphor which mocks the boundaries of human beings.

Indian Writing in English is a fountain from which arises several literary genres. They are richer in content/context as well as wider in range. The major concerns of the Indian novelists are such as: human relationships, social issues, power relations, and gender equalities. As mentioned above, they focus on history, alienation and psychological issues, language and linguistic barriers, and ecological concerns. The Hungry Tide and Sea Of Poppies reveal the
intimate and integral relationship that people have with their land, their space, their home and their culture. These novels also display how land, space, home and culture are intruded upon and disrupted by natural disasters, existential problems, and situational problems. The representation of nature and culture, and nature and its interface with culture appear to be the chief concern of Ghosh in *The Hungry Tide* and *Sea Of Poppies*. The representation of culture requires to be understood in terms of its intersection between race, ethnicity, nation and class. This is exhibited in *The Hungry Tide* and *Sea Of Poppies*. However, Ghosh attempts to focus on the diasporic experience, existential problems, ecological concerns and identity crises of the various characters in the novels. He problematizes how the environment creates a world of reality which makes the characters to strike a balance to live in harmony in a society. Brinda Bose sums up which suits the entire novels of Ghosh, especially *The Hungry Tide* and *Sea Of Poppies*:

In Ghosh’s fiction, the diasporic entity continuously negotiates between two lands, separated by both time and space—history and geography—and attempts to define the present through a nuanced understanding of the past. (19)

Indian Fiction in English has kept History and politics interacting so as to borrow mutual ideas. The literary portrayal of history and politics and historical characters and their relevance in contemporary context are contentious. The select novelists try to unite factual/official past and imagination where personal, national identity and memory get into play. As discussed in the previous chapters, these authors do not attempt to present truth or a reliable historical narrative rather to render a world of historical narrative stories. They serve life and appeal to our personal thirst for truths. Franklin Rudolf Ankersmit, professor of intellectual history and historical theory at the University of Groningen, shows the comparison between the historical narrative and the fictional narrative. He says that while “at times a general account of historical reality may be given in a historical novel, the historical novel essentially shows us historical reality as seen through the eyes of (fictitious) people living in the past” (25). He draws our attention to “the truth–creation” that taking place in the historical fictional narrative. He concludes that “the historian argues for ‘points of view’ on the past, the historical novelist applies them”. (26)

The previous chapters have shown how the select authors juxtapose local history with events of world and several versions of local history in order to create a coherent tapestry of narrative that brings to focus not only the fictionality of history but also the veracity of fictional narratives that claim to have historical events as their backdrop by presenting multiple alternative fictional universes. History is full of sediments/residues of the impressions of past events from
which histories can come up as distorted and unclear but never a perfect one. In *Chanakya’s Chant* Ashwin Sanghi presents a postmodern Chanakya who is as brilliant and cunning as Chanakya of Ancient India. The difference lies in appearances not in intellectual capabilities. The novel presents Pandit Gangasagar Mishra, “Kanpur’s foremost Professor of history” (CC 13), as ‘handsome, with aristocratic features, a broad forehead, and an aquiline nose”. In comparison with Chanakya, he is ‘extremely fair skinned’ but rather short. In contrast, Chanakya is presented as a ‘hideous-looking man’, pockmarked skin, and crooked features and black skinned (CC 40) and with crooked teeth. He is always clean-shaven leaving a lock of hair as usual custom of most Brahmins in the Kingdom. He is serious, and never has shown a smile or emotion on his face. The similarity between Gangasagar and Chanakya are that they are Brahmin, intelligent and short.

Ganga, being a poor Brahmin boy, loves rice pudding. Agarvalji, who is one of the wealthy patrons of his family, often invites Ganga’s family to his. Ganga is good at studies. When he is put into a new school, within a few months, he helps the headmaster in grading papers. His favourite subject is history. In later days, only his close associates know that Ganga is “not interested in teaching history”, but “interested in creating it” (CC 14). He draws advice from Mahatma Gandhi who visits Agarwalji’s home. Ganga asks Gandhi how he could fight the British because they have guns and policemen on their part. Gandhi’s saying has pierced so deep as a nail in an olive tree that, “Strength does not come from physical capacity. It comes from an indomitable will. I can see that you have it, son”, (CC 20). This motivates Ganga that one day he would also possess the power to make or break empires like Chanakya. Ganga received all sorts of training and all sorts of way of life. Once he is trained by Agarwalji’s trusted treasurer Marwari *munim* in bookkeeping and accountancy, Marwari *munim* has tested Ganga his mathematical knowledge asking ‘what is two plus two’ and denying Ganga’s answer ‘four’. He answered to the repeated question, “It’s whatever you want it to be! (CC 22). To this answer, Marwari *munim* says the answer is correct and praises his understanding the beauty of the account. Therefore Ganga has received good things about life from people like Gandhi and the other side of life from Agarwalji and Marwari *munim* which become a strong foundation for his political strategy.

Ganga is trained by Agarwalji whose blood is full of profit. He has “vowed to himself that he would work overtime to acquire the raw cunning of his mentor” (CC 23). Ganga’s character has become multifaceted, complex, even other characters in the novel find very difficult to understand. The characters would expect him to do one thing or guess that
Gangasagar would do this particular thing but just opposite he would do. His actions would reveal his overall master of all actions in the past, in the present and in the future, in fact the future actions are entirely controlled by Ganga. This not only surprises and makes his close associates wonder but also angers his enemies who are unable to encounter him. Ganga speaks a little and thinks carefully, does everything without haste. The author uses brief, concise syntax to the dialogue of Ganga. They become quotations for life especially, to be tricky, strategic. He is in every way a modern Chanakya, the inscription on the granite has blessed him and bestowed with all the qualities of Chanakya. He determines political actions whether they are victory or failure, how to become ruling party or oppositional party as well as who is to become. One of the characters tells him that he is real Chanakya. Ganga, in his deathbed sends a letter to Chandini the Prime Minister, in that letter he accepts that he has done what Chanakya has done and fulfilled the wish of Suvasini, (CC 441). “One should keep one’s friends close and enemies even closer” CC (346).

As mentioned in previous chapters, there are two parallel narratives. One has the time setting and action-taking place in 2300 BC. This plot and story line match in all aspects such as characters, political strategy, corruption and everything the history had in Chanakya’s time. The fictional Chanakya is different from actual and historical Chanakya with the relation to representation. On the other hand, the author presents Chanakya with all the possible emotions, love, jealous, anger, cunning with staunch determination which is shown in detail in the fictional narrative. Commenting on the characterization of Chanakya in Sanghi’s work in his review Winnowed says:

On the flip side, Chanakya and Gangasagar appear to have superhuman intelligence and cunning when compared to those around them. They both win every round and that too with ease. The people around them are made out to be either duffers or in awe of Chanakya and Gangasagar. [online]

Chanakya is presented as the most powerful kingmaker of Mauriyan Empire. He is the son of Chanak, the great teacher of Princess who is killed by King Dhananda for supporting Shaktar. His real name is VishnuGupta. After his father’s death, he calls himself Chanakya. He wants to take revenge on Dhananda. Katyayan, a minister in Dhananda’s Cabinet and a loyal friend of Chanak, has arranged and sent Chanakya along with a letter to the Dean of Takshila University. The Omniscient narrator says that Chanakya has untied the Shikha hair, and cries in
front of the chopped head of Chanak. The narrator says that, “he would make others cry. They would pay for what they had done. His tears would be paid for in blood”. (CC 10)

Chanakya has received help, teachings and the virtue of simplicity from many people like Katyayan, Acharya Pundarakaksha, and Dandayan. He gives his opinion about politics when asked by Pundarakaksha. He is guided by Dandayan about life. Dandayan, the insightful yogi is fond of him for Chanakya has had “an opinion on almost every major issue”. (CC 43)

Dandayan and Gandhi – though the character of Gandhi did not appear throughout the novel, his spirit about united India, renunciation follow throughout the novel which is often reminded by Gangasagar. Dandayan changed Chanakya’s aim/revenge attitude towards Dhananda to Alexander the Great, the Macdonian by diverting his attention from Dhananda. He says to Chanakya that Dhananda would have a natural full and asks him to “focus on the bigger purpose and the rest of (his) manifesto will follow as a matter of course” (CC 44). Chanakya used to have a sentiment that ‘a debt should be paid off till the last pana” (CC 43), but Pundarakaksha has jokingly told him that the debt would be paid completely only through the realization of a united homeland” (CC 43). This becomes a significant aim in life as far as Chanakya is concerned. He thinks of United Bharat. He expresses his views to his new admirers in Takshila University. He says,

It’s unfortunate that the concept of Bharat – the common abode and cultural heritage of us Indo–Aryans–has been subjugated by petty rulers and kingdoms. Our scriptures, traditions, culture, prayers, and deities are common. Why is it, then, that we refer to our homes as Magadha, Ghandhar, Kashi, Kuru, Kosala, Mallayrajya or Panchala? Why don’t we say that we’re citizens of Bharat? It’s this fundamental divisiveness that will bring about our downfall in the future. (CC 43)

When some of the students ask Chanakya about the truth which can be considered as a sacred duty of a king, Chanakya answers them that a king doesn’t need truth but he needs something to tell the people. He says, a good speech is not one in which you can prove that the king’s telling the truth, it’s one where no one else can prove he’s fibbing” (CC 45). Once again ‘information management’ takes place.

Both the characters are interested in history as well as creating history. Chanakya realizes the future fulfilment of Suvasini’s wish and Ganga realizes the fulfilled wish of female shakthi. The entire novel is about the emergence of female shakthi in contemporary society in India. Chandragupta and Chandini Gupta are identical names one is male and another is female.
Chand-moon. The name ‘Chandra’ can be used to both for male and female. They are coming from poor family. Their parents are honest persons. They wholeheartedly offer them in the hands of Chanakya and Ganga respectively to mould and turn them to achieve their aims that is to have united Bharat/India.

The women of Sanghi’s *Chanakya’s Chant* act as a driving force—a kind of Freudian Id—in the consciousness of the protagonists. It is they who play the role of the female *shakti*—the primordial energy—that lives and moves the dynamic flow of history. The contemporary allusions, therefore, cannot be ignored. [online]

Chandragupta is a very intelligent boy who takes a role of a king in mock role-play in children’s game. He spontaneously gives impressive judgment. In the mock case, the seller of the well draws water from the well which is sold to the neighbour. The seller also insists that he sold the well not the water. To this issue Chandragupta answers wittily, “You sold the well, not water. This would mean that you’re wrongly keeping water in someone else’s well. Please empty it! Next case!” (CC 88). He follows the instruction of his mentor. Similarly Chandini is a poor girl from slum. She is good at studies. She is courageous. She is sent to have a good education in London. She comes back to India and indulges in party works. She does all sorts of low-level party works obeying Ganga’s saying/Chanakya’s “To be master one has to propose to be servant”.

She is ready to go to school in the diseased and dirty area in Bihar. She is often reminded by Ganga the Gandhian motto which is renunciation and sacrifice. “The power of renunciation, Chandini, Remember our history lessons and Mahatma Gandhi?” (CC 147). Although she has all these qualities, she covers up her pregnancy, Geoffry’s affair, Shakar’s affair with Ganga. Ganga has Geoffry and Shakar killed to have Chandini independent to lead united India. She is willing to have a family life but is denied. Ganga gives reason. She disagrees with Ganga and breaks her relationship with him. But she fulfils the wish of Ganga. She has been shot twice for this position. Chanakya and Ganga take a sort of Godly position when they know the past, the present and future. They pull the strings of puppets. They determine the destiny of the events of history, lives of friends and enemies.

Agarwalji is always money–minded. He is worried about money getting lost in “stenostys”. He doubts Ganga and wonders at his intelligent. He does not like Ikran getting popular. Ikrambhai’s character is stereotyped as a Muslim thus picturizing him as someone who is very rude, arrogant and corrupt. But when he is recognized and given position he changes
himself. He sacrifices his own life for the sake of public. But Agarwalji and Gangaji’s opinion about him has not changed. Ikrambhai adopted Chandini as his daughter, though his religion does not accept it. Ganga has made use of Ikrambhai’s notorious as deterrent in the eyes of the public as well as to get the Muslims’ votes. But he calls him as poisonous when Agarwalji has started envying Ikrambhai’s popularity. The strategist conversation goes like this:

‘Have you heard of atropine?’ asked Gangasagar.

‘No. What is it?’

‘It’s a poison. It is extracted from a plant called Deadly Nightshade.’

...I’m simply telling you that this dangerous poison–atropine–is also used as an antidote to nerve agents. Even though it’s a poison, it can fight a bigger menace when it’s used in small doses’.

‘So Ikram is the poison that’s to be used in small doses?’

‘Unfortunately, he’s now past the expiry date on the label’. (CC 78)

Apparently, the character of Gangasagar seems to reflect and repeat history in terms of creating a united India. While this has always been floated by the dominant political alliances in India as a noble cause the price that the people have been is quite evident. The Indian narrative is replete with anecdotes of animalistic violence that broke out during the partition. The partition narrative has been used as a scaffold against which the ideas of “division-leads-to-violence” dictum are preached. This is always pitched against the natural need for the autonomy and self-ruling of the states. It has become a norm in India to say that unity is strength while division and self autonomy are weaknesses. However, what is apparently a unity is ridden with multiple suppressed voices and more need for disunity. The unity creates a binary between what is high and low, the rulers and the ruled, the Brahmins and the so called Dalits. This division serves only to maintain the status quo that has existed for many thousands of years. Instead of liberating the Dalits from their years of oppression, this unity in a sense makes them depend on the upper-class to reshape their identity that is not much different from the caste-torn ancient India. In the modern India, this has disadvantaged the so called “other communities” that languor, uncomfortably, in between these binary opposites. This only helps to create a new class of out-castes that have to resort to violent methods to justify their position, thus reinforcing the illusion of unity. Thus Sanghi’s fiction lays bare the corrupt, politically correct but ethically
compromised India of today over which the image of Gangasagar, the quintessential political strategist, looms large.

Chanakya says:

‘My dharma tells me that I need to unify Bharat under Chandragupta. If I need to use religious differences to create unity, so be it. The ends justify the means.’ (CC 325)

Gangasagar says: ‘In India’s untidy democracy, politics and business shall always need each other. The former is about power but needs money to realize it; the latter is about wealth but needs power to create and sustain it’. (CC 57)

In this manner, the contemporary picturing of the ancient Indian characters serves to exhibit or to recast the internal contradictions that exist in present day India. The ancient history presented in the novel, instead of reinforcing the events of the past, highlights and even questions the veracity of the narrative and intelligently contemporizes the events of the life of Chanakya. In this sense, the historical characters in Sanghi’s fiction are more relevant than actual history. The familiarity of the historical events that shape the novel draws us form the soporific familiarity that the readers suffer from the discrepancies of contemporary political discourse. It de-familiarizes [to use the Brechtian concept] the readers to look not only at history but also the contemporary life as something which cannot be accepted as a given but something that has to be put under the test of fire. In this context Sohini Chakravorty observes:

Ashwin feels that history and historical figures will never lose their relevance and that’s why these characters are being reinvented in various literary works. “The central tenets of politics remain the same, so Chanakya's politics will still find resonance in the contemporary set up”, he explains. Is it easier to work around characters that readers are already familiar with? Certainly not. Treading on historical facts and weaving a fictional story around them is a challenge. “Initial work is on period research where the historical markers are absolutely non-negotiable. Once that is established, a writer can take creative liberties in terms of chronology to suit the story.” (Chakravorty)

When one appreciates the extent to which Sanghi has journeyed to create a rich and complex fiction, it is also true that his language that is used to represent the events in the fiction is something that a discerning scholar cannot ignore. While Sanghi’s language cannot be compared to the language of Rushdie [which is a hybrid] or Amitav Ghosh [whose narrative is ridden with various dialects of India rendered in English], Sanghi himself avers that he is of the old school
abiding by the purity of the language. However, where relevant he is conscious of the
dynamic flow of language which changes over time. Commenting on language Ashwin Sanghi
says:

*He credits the changed attitude of the Indian publishers to the growth of Indian fiction. 
However, commenting on the frequent usage of Indian English he says, “I am a part of 
the old school where I feel that purity of the language should be retained. But English is a 
constantly evolving language where new words are being added to the dictionary so I 
don't see any harm in experimenting with the language. Only poor editing standards need 
to be improved”.* (Chakravorty)

Thus Salman Rushdie, Shashi Tharoor, Amitav Ghosh, Vikram Chandra and Ashwin Sanghi
tread newer grounds in creating a complex re–rendering of history in their fictional works to
expose similar complexities of contemporary Indian history. Their fictions, despite using 
historical figures and events, serve as parallel and alternate history at once to foreground the 
narrative achievements of these authors. The next chapter will deal with the findings from the 
select novels in a manner of History–Fiction conclusion.