Indian fiction in English emerged out of almost six decades of intellectual and literary gestation that had begun in 1930’s with the triumvirate of R.K. Narayan, Mulk Raj Anand and Raja Rao. It is with their advent that the actual journey of the Indian English novel begins. The early Indian novels which were merely patriotic gained a rather contemporary touch with their arrival.

The nineteen thirties were the beginning of the fertile era in Indian Writing in English. The political scene dominated by Gandhiji, the Satyagraha movements, the Round Table Conferences and various other social and cultural factors ignited the spirit of the Indian writers that earned international renown. The novelists, Mulk Raj Anand, Raja Rao and R. K. Narayan form a trilogy of early Indian Writing in English and with their advent ushered a new era in this field. Under the profound Gandhian influence, Mulk Raj Anand’s Untouchable (1935), Coolie (1936), Two Leaves and a Bud (1937), The Village (1939) take up the issues concerning the exploitation of the underdogs and the have-nots of the Indian society and treats them with the sympathy and respect due to human beings. The sweeper, the peasant, the plantation labour, the city worker, the sepoy; all emerge alive from his novels, anguished, wretched yet human and vividly portrayed in spite of their sufferings.
R. K. Narayan too began his career as a writer in the same year 1935 with Swami and Friends. His other works The Bachelor of Arts (1936) and The Dark Room (1935) appeared in quick succession but the next publication of The English Teacher (1945) came after a long gap.

The third of the great trilogy is Raja Rao. His novels are few and of them only Kanathapura (1938) is published in the first half of the twentieth century. Kanathapura is simple in plot, structure language and philosophy. The novel set in the 1930’s in Gandhiji’s golden decade, when the spark of genuine nationalism and awakening, typically Indian in its yoking of social and spiritual values, swept through out the country, razing all barriers-communal, religious and intellectual.

I

Untouchable (1935), the shortest of Anand’s novels, is a poignant recordation of a days experience in the life of Bakha. Born into a family of sweepers, one of the neglected communities of the traditional Hindu caste structure, he is a sweeper with a difference. He is young, intelligent and sensitive and thus more prone to suffering. Like all the untouchables, he is condemned to live in a world where “the day is dark as the night and the night pitch-dark”. Surprisingly, his presence in the midst of dirt has not stained the innocence, purity and responsiveness of his heart.

The day begins, like all his days, with bullying from his father, Lakha, and loud shouts from the sepoys reminding him of his duty. His sister Sohini’s tribulations are no less severe. She has to wait for hours to get a pail of water
from the well. The low caste-men are not allowed to draw water, for their touch meant pollution even to water, the great purifying element. They have to depend upon the charity of somebody. If men like Pandit Kalinath draw water for them, it is not out of mercy on their part, but as an occasional cure for their constipation. If he favours Sohini by offering the bucket of water, it is meant more than sympathy and less than consideration for her.

Bakha often thinks of retaliation against the injustice and exploitation meted out on him and the lower castes but his father, Lakha pacifies him. His is the voice of servile humility and he cannot entertain any thought of retaliation against a high caste man. The difference in the reaction of Bakha and Lakha to the exploitation is the difference of the old and the new generations. Belonging to an older generation, he is apt to accept the law of untouchability with less resentment than Bakha. For Bakha it is a curse which has to be fought and destroyed.

In the afternoon, Bakha attends the marriage of his friend Ram Charan’s sister – the girl of a higher caste whom he couldn’t marry. Ram Charan the washerman’s son, Chota the leather-worker’s son, and Bakha forget for once the caste discrimination and differences and share the sugar-plums, and plan to play hockey in the evening. The only comfort Bakha derives is from the house of Havildar Charat Singh when he goes to receive the promised hockey-stick. When the havildar asks him to bring coal from the kitchen for his hookah, he simply cannot believe himself. Anand gives a graphic description of Bakha’s reaction—his excitement and admiration for the man
who has such a unique gesture and also the furtive circumspection that the Havildar, after all might not be in his senses. He reflects:

He might be forgetful and suddenly realize what he had done. Did he forget that I am a sweeper? He couldn’t have done, I was just talking to him about my work. And he saw me this morning. How could he have forgotten? (Untouchable 39)

Bakha is only partly the prototypical ‘untouchable’, for he is also himself, a unique individual, even in some measure an exceptional ‘untouchable’. The many things that happen to him in the novel could have happened with anybody. The dramatic telescoping, the juxtaposition, the linking up, of so many events in the course of twelve hours is of the novelist.

Bakha’s quest is a quest for identity, in a world which refuses to recognize him as anything more than dirt. At the end of the novel we find that he has succeeded to some extent. In the presence of Gandhi, people seem to forget all their differences of caste and creed and high and low. Gandhiji’s concern for the untouchables adds new dimension to the outlook of Bakha. He has become altogether a different man for he has seen a new world. There is a noticeable growth in the consciousness of Bakha and his adoration for the Englishmen stands shattered under the impact of Gandhi-touch.

Anand’s treatment of untouchability has both a merciless clarity and tonal objectivity which transfers a whole range of inherited feeling associated with the practice from the victim to the social structure and its moribund quality. Towards the conclusion, we begin to wonder as to who are the real untouchables. Is it Bakha and his men or the people who insulate themselves with petrified traditions? Thus the attention of the readers is shifted from the
exploited individual to the exploitative system which denies man his simple
natural sense of worthiness.

Anand’s picture of Bakha has a clear ring of authenticity about it. Thus
E. M. Forster remarks:

Untouchable could only have been written by an Indian, and by an Indian who
observed from the outside. No European, however sympathetic, could have
created the character of Bakha, because he would not have known enough
about his troubles. And no untouchable could have written the book, because
he would have been involved in indignation and self-pity. (Preface to
Untouchable p.vi.)

Untouchable is the novelist’s shortest novel, and the unities in it are
admirably preserved, as in a classical play, for Untouchable covers the events
of a single day, twelve hours from dawn to dusk to be precise, in the life of the
‘low-caste’ boy, Bakha, in the town. Anand achieves the maximum effect by
strictly observing the classical unities and this economy and the severe
discipline with which he organizes the material is not equally evident in Coolie.

In any satisfactory work of art, form and content are inseparable parts
of a single whole. Thus the form of a structure of a work of art should
correspond to the requirements of the theme and the elaboration of that theme
in that work of art. There must be a close correlation between the formal or
technical side of a work and its subject-matter. Anand’s first novel is a great
success because in it the unities of time and place have been observed, in
addition to the unity of action.

Untouchable strikes us as the picture of a place, of a society, and of
certain persons not easily to be forgotten: a picture that is also an indictment
of the evils of a decadent and perverted orthodoxy.
II

From the plight of the social outcaste, in Untouchable Anand in Coolie (1936) turns to the lot of another class of the underprivileged in modern Indian society. But in Coolie the range and scope of the novelist’s fiction widens, his canvas expands and there is the orchestration of the themes barely touched upon in Untouchable. Coolie (1936) is the odyssey of Munoo, an orphaned village boy from the Kangra hills, who sets out in search of a livelihood. His several roles include working as a domestic servant in an urban middle-class household in Shamnagar, as a worker in a pickle-factory and a coolie in the bazaar in Daulatpur, as a labourer in a cotton mill in Bombay and as a rickshaw-puller in an Anglo-Indian household in Simla.

The central theme of the novel is the refusal to a simple, landless peasant of the basic right to happiness. Delineating the miserable past of Munoo, the novelist writes:

He had heard of how the landlord had seized his father’s five acres of land because the interest on the mortgage covering the unpaid rent had not been forthcoming when the rains had been scanty and the harvest bad. And he knew how his father had died a slow death of bitterness and disappointment and left his mother a penniless beggar, to support...a child in arms. (Coolie p-6)

It is not that Munoo was a below-average child. He was full of zest for life and quite promising. Describing his intelligent activities that could be compared to any of the bright children the novelist delineates:

...was a genius at climbing trees. He would hop on to the trunk like a monkey, climb the bigger branches on all fours, swing himself to the thinner offshoots as he were dancing a trapeze, and then, diving dangerously into space, he would jump from one tree to another. (Coolie p-7)
Poverty leads Munoo to begin his tryst with destiny at the age of fourteen. He begins working as a domestic servant in the house of Babu Nathoo Ram at Shamnagar. The lady of the house Bibi Uttam Kaur underfeeds and humiliates him. Ultimately he is forced to run away from this house after realizing his position in this world. The novelist remarks:

He realized finally his position in the world. He was to be a slave, a servant who should do the work, all the odd jobs, someone to be abused, even beaten. (Cooie p-33)

But the Shamnagar episode is only the beginning. It is his stint at Sir George White Cotton Mill in Bombay that exposes Munoo to the full forces of modern capitalistic machine. The British management offers no security of tenure and retrenchment is carried out frequently. The British foreman is at once the recruiting authority, a landlord who rents out ramshackle cottages at exorbitant rent, and also a moneylender—all rolled into one. The Pathan doorkeeper practices usury with even severe methods. The Sikh merchant exploits his position as the only provision store-keeper in the colony to his full advantage. M.K. Naik observes:

The ill-paid, ill-housed, under-nourished and bullied labourer is broken, both in body and mind, as Munoo finds his friend Hari is, though his own youthful vitality saves him from this ultimate fate. (Mulk Raj Anand p-41-2)

It is not only capitalism and industrialism that exploit the likes of Munoo, but communalism too does not spare them. A worker’s strike is easily broken. Casual rumours of communal disturbances divert the objective of the workers from their rights to communal issues.

The novelty in this work is the depiction of the relationship shared between the colonizers and the colonized. The relationship which has
exploitation at the core is depicted with its dimensions of prejudices, embarrassment and inhibitions on both sides. Thus the theme of the exploitation and the underprivileged is presented in depth in Coolie and the picture is drawn with vividness, but the temptation to lay on the colours too thick is on the whole avoided.

The social panorama against which Munoo moves gives Anand an opportunity to deal with a cognate theme such as the relationship between the Indians and the British in pre-Independence days, a relationship in which the element of exploitation is mixed with prejudices, misunderstandings and inhibitions on both sides.

The setting in the novel moves briskly from the Kangra hills to the plains of Bombay and back to the Punjab hills. The novel depicts the people belonging to different cross sections of society from the landless peasants to the aristocratic Anglo-Indian and British and its varied spectacle from the scrupulous to the mean. This too is depicted in a period of about two years. So zealously has the novelist attacked the social system that M. K. Naik finds its impact to an extent of crippling the art of the novel. He remarks:

A sensitive and intelligent rustic adolescent, uprooted from the heaven of his native hills and thrown into the maelstrom of the varied urban world would undergo nothing short of a total transformation of personality within the space of two years, which can actually constitute an age in terms of development at that impressionable period. Of this transformation there is no sign in Munoo. The change brought by puberty and the loss of vitality consequent on the onset of the disease are duly noted, but the inner development of Munoo is totally neglected. Things happen to him and, he reacts to them, but strangely enough, the growth of the mind is nowhere shown. The only explanation possible is that Anand is so busy painting his picture of social inequality that the artistic danger in leaving his protagonist a static and passive victim escapes his notice altogether. (Mulk Raj Anand p-45)
The novelist has a dual role to perform. He has to tell a tale and also with it convey his philosophy forcibly, without in any way mitigating his artistry. He tells us of the class-conflict between the rich and the poor, of the individual’s right to work and of the worker’s right to share the produce. Anand’s art, owing to the tension between humanism and his radicalism, is ever on the point of being impaled on the horn’s of a dilemma; but his fidelity to the fact of life and to the interior modalities of the human personality saves him from being a mere propagandist. Even his socialist view of art serves as an alembic rather than as a screen between the detail and the pattern of the felt life. But the artistic balance is rather precarious, and in this novel, the novelist seems to fall a prey to his political instinct. He portrays exploitation at various levels, including the one which thrives in the name of Trade Unionism and thus universalizes the theme. By over-emphasizing the sincerity and integrity of the Red Flag Union and showing Onkar Nath, who happens to be the President of the Indian Trade Union Congress in an unfavourable light, Anand the propagandist seems to have taken precedence over Anand the artist.

Anand’s portrayal of these characters lacks objectivity. They are not full-blooded characters but only skin-deep and transparent. Yet they do conform faithfully to the quaint image into which a ruled nation forces the personality of the ruler. The comic epiphany orders into a viable focus the subversive feelings which the folk-mind entertains in respect of the pretentious superiority of the master-race. In a country’s fables of identity, low-mimetic
images of power constitute a kind of counter-myth, and Anand seems to be sub- 
consciously operating at this level in his delineation of the English characters.

The novel cannot be said to possess the unity of which we expect from a 
well built plot as Anand pays more attention to the content of his novels than to 
the form. Anand makes no special effort to build up or construct his plot as a 
true craftsman should do. Having decided upon a theme Anand proceeds to 
invent a plot to develop, to expand, to elaborate and to illustrate that theme; 
but, while inventing a plot, he does not take pains to bind the plot into a unified 
whole. The theme in Coolie is poverty and unemployment. An offshoot of this 
theme is the contrast between the rich and the poor. This theme has been 
comprehensively and exhaustively dealt with by Anand in this novel.

The plot which Anand has built in this novel does not have organic 
unity. The plot here consists of long strings of incidents, events, situations and 
episodes. The incidents and the events involve persons, individuals, groups of 
people who have certainly been made to live and who are integral to these 
incidents and events. But the incidents and the events have not been closely 
inter-woven and do not even follow one another according to logic of cause 
and effect. The incidents happen just by chance and without any design either 
on the part of the characters or on the author. For instance, while Munoo does 
get a job in Babu Nathoo Ram’s house as a domestic servant in accordance 
with a plan formed by Munoo’s uncle, the rest of the story is a matter of chance 
happening. Munoo meets Prabha Dyal and Ganpat just by chance; he happens 
to receive the help of circus elephant-driver just by chance: he saves the life of
a child in Bombay just by chance, thus becoming acquainted with Hari; he comes to know Ratan just by chance; he is knocked down on a road by a passing car just by chance and is taken to Simla. The only unity about this string of chance-happenings lies in the fact that the protagonist stands at the centre of all these happenings, so that it is the personality of the protagonist which imparts to the novel whatever unity it does.

The chapter dealing with his life in Bombay is by far the longest chapter and it depicts not only the plight of Munoo but also of Hari, Lakshmi, Ratan and thousands of other workmen. The last chapter deals with Munoo’s experience in Simla where he dies a premature death. In each of these sections of the novel we meet a different group of characters and the only common character in all of them is Munoo. The characters we come across in the second chapter are forgotten when we come to the next chapter. It is only Munoo who imparts some kind of unity to the novel. Thus the real theme of the novel is the experience of Munoo and his reactions to these experiences in different places. But the incidents and the happenings of the different chapters of the novel have not been interwoven into an artistic design or pattern; and no device has been employed for a close inter-linking of the various events of the episodes. The incidents and the events do not follow one another logically and are the result of mere chance and accident. Actually chance and fate play too prominent a role in the novel. Munoo is a passive character. Things happen to him and he has no role in determining the course of events.
The novel has succeeded in serving the purpose which the author had in writing it. The wretchedness and the misery resulting from the poverty and the exploitation of the unemployed and the under-privileged by the capitalists and also the affluent middle-class have most effectively been conveyed to us through the experiences of Munoo and also through the experiences of others at various places and in various contexts. Munoo the domestic servant at Babu Nathoo Ram’s house; Munoo, the factory worker in Daulatpur; Munoo as a mill-worker in Bombay; and Munoo as a rickshaw-coolie in Simla – in short, Munoo as a victim of the social system in the country has been portrayed in detail and most convincingly. Others belonging very much to the same category are Tulsi, Maharaj, Ratan, Hari, Lakshmi and Mohan. They all belong to suffering and their exploiters are Bibi Uttam Kaur, Ganpat, Jimmie Thomas, the Pathan gate-keeper, the Sikh shopkeeper and the Sahiblogs of Simla- have been depicted in a realistic manner as the tyrants and the blood-suckers. Besides, there are thousands and thousands of other coolies whose wretched existence has been described.

Munoo, by temperament is the kin of Bakha. He shares with Bakha his sensitivities, imagination, love for life and fellow-feeling for others. But the difference between the two is that the problem of Bakha is peculiarly Indian, Munoo’s is of a more universal nature. Bakha’s experience is limited in time and space whereas, Munoo’s life is painted on a large canvas and his struggle for survival takes him through the cross-section of the country. If Bakha is an untouchable, Munoo too, is an untouchable in a different sense: he is poor.
Coolie is about double the size of Untouchable, and the action is spread over some years and moves from village to town, from town to city, and from city to Bombay, and from Bombay to Shimla. The pace of writing, as in Untouchable, is swift, and has scenes follow in quick succession. Thus Coolie is a picaresque novel presenting the journey of the protagonist and the cross-section of India. It highlights the pains and predicaments of poor working people. If the Untouchable is the microcosm, Coolie is more like the macrocosm that is Indian society.

III

The next work of the novelist to come in chronological order is Two Leaves and a Bud (1937), which presents the theme of the exploitation of the underprivileged with the far greater concentration than Coolie, since in the earlier novel the scene shifts from one stratum of society to another, while in the latter work, the entire tragedy is unfolded against the background of the tea-plantation which is a microcosm in itself, a world in which British officials and their Indian subordinates on the one hand and the coolies on the other are ranged in two separate camps of the exploiters and the exploited. Thus the issue of racism looms large over the novel than in any other works of Mulk Raj Anand.

The starting point in his novel too is a village, as in the case of Coolie. But here we travel from a village in the Punjab to a tea-estate in Assam. The protagonist in this case is a middle-aged man by the name of Gangu. He travels from his village to Assam in the company of his wife Sajani and his two
children, Leila and Buddhu. Ganga begins to work as a labourer on the tea-
estate and becomes a victim of the exploitation which is going on there. It is
double exploitation. There is exploitation of the labourers by their foreign
masters, but there is also the exploitation by certain well-placed Indians.
Among the British masters some are really good men, while some are evil. The
worst of the evil Britishers is a man called Reggie Hunt, who is the assistant
manager of the tea-estate where Gangu has found employment. Reggie Hunt is
hated by the labourers and not much liked even by the fellow Britishers. The
devil of a man, he tries to seduce Gangu’s daughter Leila who is now a
charming, grown up girl. Thwarted in his nefarious attempt he fires at Gangu
killing him on the spot. At the trial this villain is acquitted of the charge of
murder and even of culpable homicide.

Gangu’s exploitation begins when he is lured to the tea-estate with a
grand promise by Sardar Buta who recruits labourers for the tea-estate, with a
promise of receiving a plot of land free of charge. Once he reaches it, the
promised land turns out to be a prison where he just receives starvation wage
and is compelled to live in unhygienic conditions and undernourished, he and
his wife fall a prey to disease of which she even loses her life. On his
intervention when the British Assistant Manager attempts to molest his
daughter, he is shot dead and ends up by paying with his life rather than
beginning a new one.

Gangu is a victim of the exploitation by the forces of capitalism and
here too the exploiters are the British colonizers. The British attitude towards
the Indians is revealed by the treatment meted out on them by the British tea-estate officials namely Croft-Cook and Reggie Hunt. M. K. Naik observes:

For them the Indian labourer is just a piece of property, a sub-human being with no rights and all duty, whose only utility is to be a serviceable tool in the vast machine of the plantation. (Mulk Raj Anand p-47)

The British officials totally mistrust the Indians. Every coolie is for them a potential agitator. Even a simple quarrel between the two coolie women is magnified as an uprising and severely dealt with, and when the coolies come peacefully to seek redress, they are branded as revolutionaries and shot down. The consequence of utterly failing to understand the difficulties of the coolies is resorting to suppression as the panacea to all issues that arise in the relationship between the colonizers and the colonized.

Besides the British feeling of superiority is represented the deep-rooted feeling of inferiority in the colonized Indians. Such a feeling is not limited to the illiterate coolies who have been the victims of the feudal Indian structure since generation but even the educated middle-class Indians. Thus Babu Shashi Bhushan Bhattacharya cannot assert himself in the presence of a kind doctor like de la Havre. De La Havre rightly summing up the situation observes:

If only the British had begun by accepting these people from the very start on terms of equality, as human beings...But there it was, the British had exaggerated the worst instinct in their own character, and called out the worst in the Indian. (Two Leaves and a Bud p-154)

In the picture of race-relationship the novelist presents an effective counter-balance to Reggie Hunt through the young doctor de la Havre. He is depicted as sensitive, fair-minded Englishman, as opposed to the shrewd, sly and selfish Reggie Hunt. He can analyze the problems of the coolie and of the
Indo-British relationship in all its aspects, such as the historical, the economic, the political, the sociological and the psychological; at the same time he can put himself in the coolie’s place and feel for him. Thus de la Havre is, indeed one of the finest portraits of one aspect of British character in Indian fiction in English.

Gangu, the protagonist of the novel is comprehensively sketched. He rightly represents the class of the pre-independence peasants. He is credulous enough to believe the exaggerations of Buta regarding the plantation to which he is being lured and simultaneously he is aware that Buta is laying it on thick. Years of misery have converted him into a meek, passive and abject fatalist. But the instinct to live is still very strong in him. This instinct is clearly stated in the delineation by the novelist wherein he observes:

He gripped the handle of his spade with an unwavering faith and dug his foot into the sod made by a furrow, and sensed the warm freshness of the earth that would yield fruit. In the white emptiness of his mind there was the sudden pulsation of a wild urge to live. (Two Leaves and a Bud p-146)

The characterization is sharp and angular- Reggie Hunt and de la Havre are two extremes and the pointedness of the indictment of an inhuman system blurs the lines of humanity in the picture.

Structurally the novel is unified and well-developed. It opens with Gangu’s arrival at the tea-estate, with the thought, “Life is like a journey” in his mind and by the end of the novels the journey is ultimately over. In spite of its wealth of character and episode, the novel maintains its unity, as every detail is woven round the central theme of Gangu’s exploitation.
The two strands of the plot, consisting of the life and the fortunes of the Indians and those of the English, run concurrently, but they are never closely interwoven into a texture of the novel. The novelist devotes his energy to a faithful representation of facts on the physical plane of occurrence.

Similar to the previous works Two Leaves and a Bud may be regarded as a brilliant piece of naturalistic fiction. It has little or no use of irony, which alone could compass the whole range of feeling from the sublime to the ridiculous. It leans rather on pathos, making it do the work of irony. Comparing it with the previous novels of the novelist, Iyengar states:

If Untouchable, since it explores the impact of caste cruelty on the adolescent mind of Bakha, has a sort of piercing quality that is akin to the lyrical; if Coolie with its enormous range and multiplicity in action and character, has an almost epic quality; then Two Leaves and a Bud may be said to be essentially dramatic novel and certainly it culminates in a tragic clash of interests and destinies, and what is fine is put out, and what is dark is triumphant. (Indian Writing in English p-343)

The logic and the intellectual framework of the novel triumphs over the human content. The atmosphere of suspicion and strife, the racial intolerance and the antagonism shares similarity to Forster’s A Passage to India. It is evident that in portraying the unpleasant colonizer characters, the novelists’ writing is infiltrated with hate and disgust. But the novelist narrates this unvarnished tale of plantation life in the thirties with some unsavoury aspects of the contemporary age.

IV

After having described the plight of the landless peasant in Coolie and Two Leaves and a Bud, Anand sets for himself a far more ambitious task in the trilogy dealing with Lal Singh. The three novels, The Village (1939), Across
the Black Waters (1940), and The Sword and the Sickle (1942) constitute a trilogy in which the protagonist is the same throughout and the action of which covers a period of several years. The protagonist is Lal Singh, the youngest son of a Sikh farmer, living in a village called Nandpur, which however may be regarded as symbolizing any Indian village. In these three novels he tries to deal with the theme of tradition versus modernity on a much more extensive scale. The novelist follows the career of his protagonist over half a dozen years, and the fact that unlike the passive Munno and the aged and ineffectual Gangu, Lal Sing is a fiery rebel against old world values.

The Village (1939) is a vivid picture of life in a typical Punjabi village during the early decades of the twentieth century, seen through the eyes of the young protagonist, an insider turned outsider, as he is a rebel against all the village mores which he finally escapes by running away from home. The simple peasant cheated at the fair by the quack who tempts to buy the “Elixir of Life” is for Lalu an archetype. Lalu smart, intelligent and progressive diagnoses this complex disease and the various forms it takes and is exasperated to find that the patient did not even know that he is ill, let apart his seeking the appropriate cure for his malady.

Lalu finds the rustic a victim of all-round exploitation by numerous agencies - the landlord, the money-lender, the trader, the lawyer, the religious leader, the Government official, and also the unjust laws and policies of the British Government. Delineating the despair of Lalu, M.K. Naik observes:
What exasperates him is the fact that the rustic, grown fatalistic, abject and passive, refuses to better his lot by modernity. (Mulk Raj Anand p-58)

His aged father thinks that the “machine is the devil”, and the age of Science is for him “the age of darkness”. Lalu hates the dirt, the stench and the squalor of the village and thinks that if a fire could come and burn the wretched hovels to the ground. He would like to see the village rebuilt with brick, as the houses of the mechanics near the Power House were built. His elders are actually afraid of education and sincerely believe that education is not only useless but positively harmful for a peasant’s son, for “learning spoilt the boys and enfeebled them, and made them useless for work in the fields by giving them the air of babus”. (The Village p-26)

The repudiation of modernity taking a dangerous form is depicted through the unquestioning submission to traditional religion, blind faith and superstition. The custodians of religious values in the community have degenerated into hypocrites. Mahant Nandgir, the religious guru of the village, is a confirmed glutton, drug addict and lecher, who yet masquerades as a religious teacher; and so strong is the hold of religion on the minds of the people that they accept him as their religious head, though they know him in his true colours.

The Mahant consolidates his position by exploiting the credulity of the common man, as in the incident where a victim of snake-bite is apparently cured by the recitation of the mantras. Superstition and blind faith are not the only ills from which true religious faith suffers. Religion and ethics have, for
most people, come to mean doing lip service to God and fanatically vigorous observance of empty forms and rituals. Thus Lalu remarks:

They were always forbidding you to do this and that, these elders, always curtailing your liberty. Always frustrating your desires. You couldn’t even laugh in their presence. You had to join your hands gravely and say, “I fall at your feet.” And they were ridiculous fools, ugly, uncouth lumps of flesh, wide-eyed, open-mouthed simpletons, saying prayers and mentioning the name of God all day, even as they lasciviously eyed the young girl passing in the bazaar. (The Village p-55)

Lalu rebels against the village mores through the form of eating meat from a Muslim shop in the town and cutting off his long hair which his Sikh religion enjoins him to wear. Condemning the age old conventions Lalu observes:

The Katch, Kara, Kripan, Kesh and Kanga might well have been necessary when Guru Govind Singh was fighting Aurangzeb. Then it was said he enjoined his men to wear shorts because he couldn’t get clothes; bangles and swords for symbols; and long hair because he couldn’t get barbers to shave them, and combs to tidy their hair. Such provisions were dictated by necessity and common-sense. But as every one with a grain of intelligence said, what was the use of observing these conventions now and that there was no further need for them? There was no religion in doing so. (The Village p-28)

It describes Lal Singh’s career till the time of his joining the British Indian army in order to get away from the environment in which he has incurred the enmity of many people and the displeasure of his own father and other relations because he has committed the impious act of having his hair cut off even though he has tried to make amends to this act. But misfortune still dogs him when his brother murders the son of a landlord in the village on account of a feud between his family and that of the landlord, and when his brother is hanged for having committed the murder. Lal Singh’s father dies broken-hearted and Lalu sails away from India to fight with the British soldiers against the enemy in World War I which has broken out. Thus the incident of
this first of the three novels relating to the protagonist contains an account of
the kind of life which is lived in the typical Indian villages of the Punjab. There
are family rivalries and enmities; there are religious traditions and prejudices;
there is even a murder which is not something very unusual in the villages of
the Punjab. Joining the army too was nothing unusual even in those days. Thus
the whole account is most realistic even though some of the incidents are
melodramatic. The incidents are quite exciting, and some of the situations are
very dramatic and moving.

The novel presents critically the characters and situation in which the
miserly landlord, Sardar Harbans Singh; the lascivious priest, Mahant
Nandgir and the sly money lender, Chaman Lal are fully realized. But the novel
depicts characters such as Nihal Singh, the father of Lalu who in spite of all his
errring and pathetic clinging to traditionalism and his obstinate rejection of
modernity, is a noble figure having qualities of scrupulousness, integrity,
tenacity, courage and faith that is very characteristic of any Indian peasant.

The Village is, thus, a memorable picture of pre-independence Indian
rustic life, drawn with understanding and objectivity. The weaknesses of
traditionalism are exposed through the observer who is alive to modernity and
its possibilities for a fuller and happier life; yet the saving graces of the old
world values are not forgotten.

V

The second novel of the trilogy Across the Black Waters (1941) holds a
unique place not only among the novels of Anand but in the entire gamut of
Indian Writing in English. It opens with the protagonist along with his
regiment disembarking at Marseilles to fight in Flanders, and concludes with his becoming a German prisoner of war. The entire action of the novel takes place in Europe and Lal Singh and his comrades are shown in actual action. Yet it would be unfair to term the work as only a ‘war-novel’. Besides painting an authentic picture of war it also presents a complex mosaic of several other themes which recur in Anand’s works - themes such as the contrast between the Indian tradition and Western modernity, the relationship between Indians and white men and the exploitation of the lowly by those in power and authority.

The moment he sets foot on the soil of Europe, Lalu starts comparing what he sees of European life with its Indian counterpart. His observation at first mostly corroborates his pet belief in the general superiority of the modern West over the East. He concludes that there is more equality in this land as he sees two sweepers drinking wine by two Tommie sans also a woman. He admires the cleanliness and the attention paid to hygiene in the hotels and the houses of the villagers, in direct contrast to the Indian conditions. Labusiere’s farm with its “clean red and fat pigs”, “hefty, small horned, well polished cows”, “milked by machine”, “mettlesome horses with dark, velvety winter coats;” and the spotlessly clean sheds, stables and barns fill him with great admiration. The novelist narrates:

If it was typical of Vilayati peasant households, then all his righteous indignation against his own village folk had been justified and his aspirations to live as European farmers lived a great ideal. He wished some of the old fogies of his village were here, for then he could show them how true had been his talk about reforming the village. (Across the Black Waters p-177)
Lalu notices the general freedom from inhibitions and the zest for life exhibited by the Europeans and compares it with the scene at home. The author delineates:

Lalu could not keep his eyes off the smiling pretty-frocked girls with breasts half showing, bright and gleaming with ...happiness.... Such a contrast to the sedate Indian women who seemed to grow old before they were young, flabby and tired...Why even the matrons here were dressed up and not content to remain unadorned like Indian wives, who thought that there was a greater dignity in neglecting themselves after they had had a child or two. (Across the Black Waters p-14)

Allied to this theme of the contrast between the East and the West is that of the actual contact with them. As Lalu comes into contact with both the British and the French, the theme of race relationship takes on a new dimension in the Lal Singh trilogy. Variations appear on the constant theme of the unhappy relationship between the Indian and the white man. Mr. Hercules Long, Deputy Commissioner, so hectic in his efforts to “ameliorate the lot of the peasantry” and so comic in his disastrous encounter with the buffalo, in The Village is a far more complex figure than the Englishman neatly divided into sheep and goats in the earlier novels. In The Village, the sensitive and humane Capt. Owen saves Lalu from prison and admires his skill at hockey; in Across the Black Waters the Captain continues to befriend Lalu, who almost hero-worships him. Lalu’s sojourn in France makes him shed many of his pet illusions about the white man. When he sees the French farmer’s wife who had lost her eldest son in the war break down, narrating the feelings of the protagonist the novelist writes:

He did not know until this moment that sahibs and mems were also human. They had always seemed like gods, distant and self-assured...But from the sorrow of this mother with tears trickling down her cheeks at the memory of her dead son, he knew that these people were also susceptible to sorrow as
well as to joy, and to every kind of inward tumult, that they also broke down when they were struck by the hand of fate. (Across the Black Waters p-197)

Though the relationship between the Indian and the white man is much more harmonious here than it was in the earlier pictures of it, one unpleasant feature of it is present here too. Among the exploiters of the poor Indian, the white man continues to top the list. The Indian soldiers in the trenches often sullenly asks himself why should he fight this “bitch of a war” in a foreign land for a “dirty Sarcar” which asks him to risk his life but does not even bother to tell him for what cause. The relationship between Major Peacock and the Indian soldier is typically described as one of the few officers who could talk Hindustani well and who remembered the names of the sepoys, he was yet somewhat un-understanding of the sepoy heart. He was an old style officer who lived to a formula, to the extent to which the contacts between the sahibs and the sepoys at work and play had assumed certain traditional modes, his attitude evoked a workable response and the rest did not matter.

But by the very nature of his lowly position, the common Indian soldier suffers more at the hands of his immediate superiors who are his compatriots than he does at those of the British officers, who are remote like Gods. Lalu’s own tormentor is Lance-Corporal Lok Nath, a coarse and brutal officer. Lok Nath is jealous of the fact that Lalu has a smattering of English, is intelligent and sensitive and has won the favour of Capt. Owen. He loses no opportunity to pick on the young man, and the only language he employs in dealing with all his subordinates in general is the language of choicest abuse.
Lok Nath is not a solitary example of a power-drunk tyrant. Young Suhab Singh, son of Subedar Major Arbel Singh is even worse. A friend and former class-mate of Lalu’s, Subah soon brings home to him the truth of Henry Adam’s shrewd observation: “A friend in power is a friend lost.” The moment he is promoted Jemadar, Subah starts lording it over all, but over Lalu in particular, detailing him for fatigue duty.

As a war-novel, Across the Black Waters can easily challenge comparison with other well-known works of fiction set against the backdrop of World War I with all the gory and gruesome incidents. Thus when “tall, lemur-like Hanumant Singh,” who has fever, funks and refuses to fight, Subedar Suchet Singh shoots him in cold blood. Old Kirpu’s reaction to the news that Lachman Singh is to receive the posthumous award of the Indian Order of Merit is:

A life pension addressed to Havildar Lachman Singh, Village Pool of Blood, Tehsil Purgatory, District Hell—Wah, don’t speak of it” (Across the Black Waters p-187-88)

The novelist describing Lalu’s reaction as he gets his first taste of battle avers:

He would have to kill if he did not get killed first...Anyhow, whether he killed or did not kill he would have to go there where the enemy was...Involuntarily he trembled. Then he tried to remember the tactics of bayonet fighting, like a schoolboy recalling his lessons just before entering the examination room. And like the frightened schoolboy, he felt he had forgotten, and the dread loomed before his eyes, occupying the hollow of his body which shook against his will. (Across the Black Waters p-128)

A realist to the core, the novelist scrupulously avoids offering a prejudiced picture of war, or an entirely one-sided treatment of his major
themes in the novel. Even in the holocaust there is a silver lining of Lalu’s friendship with the French farmer’s family and the affection he receives from them. Besides the tragic absurdity that war is, there are absurdities of a less somber kind, as when an Indian soldier crawling by a German trench is surprised by the enemy:

\[\text{Behold, the brother-in-law though to take his hand to his head and salaamed the Germans. They beckoned him...He thought his end had come. So pointing to our trenches he abused the Angrez sahibs and made a sign as if he meant to cut the throat of the whole Angrezi race. Whereupon the German’s were pleased and gave him sweets and coffee. Then, by using gestures, he told them that there were other traitors like him in the Hindustani Army and got permission to go and bring them back with him. The Germans feasted him...on meat and wine, and allowed him to creep back. (Across the Black Waters p-246)}\]

Similarly Lalu’s rapturous adulation of all things Western is tempered by old and wise Kirupu’s ironic comment on them, which lower the temperature considerably. Even Lalu himself admits that “he was inclined to forget the good things at home”, after the first flush of his admiration for the brave new world has passed. Again, the cold and distant Major Peacock is counterbalanced by Capt. Owen, who is all sympathy and understanding for the Indian soldiers. Even the fiendish Corporal Lok Nath is harsh and malevolent.

Across the Black Waters has a well-controlled, taut structure in which the major themes are blended together harmoniously, and the central figure of Lalu gives unity to the entire picture. The novel holds a unique place in the entire gamut of Indian fiction in English.

\[\text{VI}\]

The Sword and the Sickle (1942) is in continuation of the previous novel Across the Black Waters, shows Lal Singh coming back from a German prison
after the war and getting discharged from the army without any benefits; is
united to his old flame Maya; becomes associated with a communist set-up, and
ends again in prison. The setting of the novel is the second decade of the
twentieth century in India, one of the most seminal periods in modern history
that witnessed the star of Tilak set and the sun of Gandhiji rise, leading to a
new and intense phase of the freedom struggle.

The novelist here adequately handles the theme of the exploitation of the
peasantry by various agencies. A new touch added to the work is the
depredations of feudalism, which was a factor largely absent from the earlier
pictures. The episode of Chandra’s death is typical. He is ill and therefore
refuses to do forced labour for the Nawab of Nasirabad. He is then dragged
before the Manager of the estate, flogged and forced to cut wood. He collapses
and dies. When under Lalu’s leadership the peasants protest, they are literally
hounded out and one of them is shot. So strong is the hold of the feudal
tradition on the mind of the peasants that they rally round the ‘Count’ Kunwar
Rampal Singh, not so much because they subscribe to his revolutionary
socialistic ideology, but because obedience to the princely patriarch is deeply
ingrained in them. The usual other exploiters are also very much at work: the
repressive laws, Government officials, landlords and money-lenders among
others. The age-old limitations of peasant characters noted earlier are again
understood here - its fatalism, its ignorance and stupidity and its abjectness in
the face of oppression.
But the resistance movement organized by the Count and Lalu has its impact and a definite change is observed in the peasants. Describing the change the novelist delineates:

They had become different from the broken, demoralized, backboneless creatures who would abjectly catch hold of the feet of a policeman and grovel in the dust with joined hands, completely unlike the gentle, kindly men with bottomless souls who were for ever sunk in the misery to which they always resigned themselves. The new movement seemed to have given them a new faith. (Across the Black Waters p-279)

The significance of the change is brought out in the episode where the peasant Sukhua turns like the proverbial worm that attacks his landlord, shouting, “The old days have gone...The old days have gone.” (Across the Black Waters p-330-31)

The Count seeing a future full of hope remarks:

Once we have abolished the notion of our superiority, we shall begin to see that they are human beings; once we have broken the barriers that subsist between them, there will arise a new morality among them, a new sense of right and wrong. (Across the Black Waters p-248)

The protagonist himself is a good example of this new sense. The peasant lad has undergone a sea-change as a result of his experience and his contact with the wide world. In his own career, he exemplified the impact of modernity upon tradition. In a passage of evocative self-analysis Lalu avers:

What was the destiny of man without a sense of right or wrong! Throughout his life he himself had struggled to perfect himself, if not according to the pietistic ideas of his father, who told the beads of a rosary every minute of the day, or like his brother Dayal Singh, who quoted the works of Guru Nanak, but according to his own ideas of well-being and those which he had found good in the teaching of the Church Mission High School. He had been in revolt against the limitations of his own nature as well as the prejudices of religion in Nandpur, and he had sought to perfect himself in the face of evil though he had suffered. He had struggled, and always would go on struggling to remove his own ignorance and all the defects in his own nature. And since self-perfection was not enough, he would try to cleanse the blurred minds of all the peasants, to open their eyes to the iniquities which were practiced on them. (Across the Black Waters p-247)
The novel is not without its ambivalences as on one hand the novelist would like us to take the Count seriously as he puts into his mouth many of his favourite ideas and theories, regarding the nature of the Indian peasantry, feudalism, the effects of the British Raj on the Indian economy and other matters; on the other, he introduces a strong note of irony in his description of the activities of the Count and his followers. The Count himself seems to enjoy the irony in the situation in which he, a representative of feudalism, finds himself at the head of an anti-feudalistic campaign. Hints are continually dropped, suggesting that revolutionary and altruistic zeal is not the only motive behind his actions – personal vanity, love of power, and a sense of the absurd which revels in the incongruity of his own situation perhaps being far more potent factors. This impression of persistent irony is confirmed when one considers the portraits of the Count’s followers. For an organization committed to revolution they are surprisingly ludicrous bunch of clowns. They include the small, bookish and over-serious Professor Verma, described as “quick witted buffoon”; Comrade Ram Din, who according to the Count, “looks like a camel”; Comrade Nandu, “murderer and hunter”; Pandit Ram Kumar Mishra, whom the Count introduces as a man beaten by his wife with a broom because he “went to bed with a cobbler woman”; and the monkey of this strange menagerie – Comrade Gupta, with his “fair, monkeyish face, with rare blue eyes, which were brimming over with mischief”. M.K. Naik, over this characterization reflects:

When one remembers that the farce of the ceremonial slapping of Gupta by order of the Count is an almost monotonously regular part of the assembly when the Count holds his communist court, one begins to have serious
misgivings about the effectiveness of the role of these characters in furthering the central concerns of the novel. (Mulk Raj Anand p-74)

An equally persistent irony is present in the novel in the portraits of Comrade Sarashar and the sanctimonious Congress leader, Sirjut Ladli Prashad Tiwari. Gandhiji and his associates too do not escape the irony of the Count and his associates. When Lalu and his friends go to see the Mahatma, they manifestly go to mock and not to pray. They are “amused at the incongruity of the European lifestyle in the house of Pandit Motilal Nehru and the deliberate simplicity cultivated by the mahatma’s followers.” (Across the Black Waters p-201)

The contrast between the gardener using a machine to spray water on the flowers beds and the members of the Mahatma’s entourage plying primitive spinning wheels nearby too attracts attention in its contradiction. Lalu finds the Mahatma’s talk of suffering, self-discipline and non-violence, and the solemnity in his tone as he speaks about cows, irritating and ridiculous, though the force of the great man’s personality, his sincerity and his sense of humour do not fail to impress the young revolutionary. These ludicrous details do more harm than any good to the work; neither to the thematic concern nor to the structure of the novel. If the intention is to show the protagonist faced with the dilemma of choosing between revolutionary violence and Gandhian non-violence, what possibly is gained in presenting both these in ludicrous light? Does the writer wish to present a hero hopelessly confused by the welter of the post-war situation in India?
The Lalu Maya relationship is another element that proves negative to the structural imbalance and the artistic integrity of the novel. The love story, which has its beginning in the The Village, is an integral element in that novel, since it is one of the factors in Lalu’s rebellion against the village. The continuation of this episode in The Sword and the Sickle starts promisingly, as Maya elopes with Lalu and they get married, thus crowning atleast one part of Lalu’s rebellion with success. But then Maya is forgotten for a long spell, which is only broken by her complaints and her quarrels and reconciliations with her husband. The story of Lalu and Maya is totally unconnected from the major concerns of the novel. Similarly the lengthy speeches of Comrade Sarashar and others in the novel too is another indication of the artistic failure of the work. Thus M.K. Naik, on The Village trilogy remarks:

The Village trilogy thus makes an excellent beginning and continues along the lines of sure artistic progress in Across the Black Waters, until it comes to a heavy cropper in The Sword and the Sickle. What starts by promising to become a memorable picture of the development of an Indian peasant’s cosmos, ends up in chaos and confusion. (Mulk Raj Anand p-76)

Government against the people, the people themselves cut up into divisions, the play of political and personal rivalries, the clash of ideologies, the pull of selfish greed and the pull of idealism and the need for sacrifice form the ingredients of the need for a revolution, is the picture presented in The Sword and the Sickle.

The Lalu trilogy, although it lacks the concentrated power of the Untouchable, the vast comprehesion of Coolie, or the propagandist edge of Two Leaves and a Bud, is an impressive work nevertheless, taking within its
purview the vastly distant Indian village and a French farm, covering local and national issues in the backdrop of the global war.

VII

The novelist in The Big Heart (1945) deals with a totally novel theme than the ones raised in his earlier works. He presents a low class Indian youth boldly championing modernity against tradition and losing his life in the process. It creates a special niche in the heart of its creator since it presents an intimate picture of a segment of society to which Anand himself belongs.

This novel again depicts a conflict between two classes of society, though the conflict here is not between the untouchables and the caste Hindus but between a class of artisans and a class of capitalists. However, this novel does resemble Untouchable in so far as the action here also covers one single day. The capitalists, Murali Dhar and Gokal Chand, have set up a factory to produce the copper products which traditionally were produced by coppersmiths with their manual labour. Many of the coppersmiths are rendered unemployed as a consequence of the factory being established by the two capitalists. In a state of desperation one of the coppersmiths by the name of Ralia begins to smash the machines in the factory and, on being stopped in this destructive action by his friend Ananta, batters Anant’s head against a broken machine, killing him on the spot. Ralia is taken into custody and his protest, though murderous and violent fails miserably. The machine appears as the victor over manual labour. Ananta is the hero of the novel and his fate is made to appear perfectly tragic. He is an innocent victim of a protest which too had
its justification though not in the form it took. Anant in this novel fights a two-fold battle. He has to fight against the prejudice of his fellow coppersmiths, against the installation of machinery and he fights also against the two factory-owners who seek to exploit the manual workers. A romantic element enters the novel when Ananta’s love for, and devotion to a woman called Janki, who is suffering from tuberculosis, becomes an ingredient in the plot of the story. Thus here, again we find the hero devoted to his mistress as well as to a cause. A side-interest in the novel is split or the division among the coppersmiths themselves. The better-off among them exploit the weaker members of their fraternity.

Once again the realism of the whole picture is one of the great strengths of the novel. In the novel, again we have a multitude of characters, all of whom have been made to live – the coppersmiths, the communists, the religious reformers and the capitalists.

The confrontation between the old and the new is not only a feature of the environment of Billimaran; it is also a factor which seems to govern the lives of all those who live there. Most of the older inhabitants here try to cling to the old. The novelist writes:

Caught in the mousetraps where they are born, most of them are engaged in the bigger cage of Fate and the various shadows that hang like thunder clouds over their heads. (The Big Heart p-9)

Those who have ventured to leave Billimaran and sought to better their lot in the wide world outside have either been worsted and have returned home beaten, or have made good but left for good. The older generation pursues its
ancestral vocation, bending over furnaces and crouching in the doorways; most of the younger set is employed in factories with their polished and intricate machines. The older generation believes:

...this is the iron age, the age of Death, which is to culminate in the doomsday. (The Big Heart p-11)

For the young men in the factory, however, the “iron age” is “the machine age.” Celebrating it they sing:

We are the men who will master it,
We are the new man of the earth of all the evil old ages.
(The Big Heart p-11)

The novelist subjects both tradition and modernity to extremely close scrutiny in the novel. Though his humanistic creed with its firm faith in Science as one of the chief instruments for producing a better world makes him show a distinct preference for modernity against tradition, he does try to give tradition its due by showing what is worthwhile in it, even while exposing its weaknesses. The narrowness and obscurantism, the defeatism and fatalism of the tradition-bound life in Billimaran are shown with stark realism.

Ananta is the most emancipated member of his community. He has been to Bomaby and Ahmedabad; is acquainted with trade union movements, and all this together with an inborn rebelliousness and natural high spirits makes him a sworn foe to tradition, in all its forms. Janaki calls him the “machine man”, and he glorifies the machine as a wonderful gift given by Science to modern man. Sharing his vision of the West as one of an industrial utopia to Janaki, he reveals:

I should like to go to Vilayat one day and see what conditions are like there...I should like to see those steps which walk, and railways which run in
the bowels of the earth. I should also like to go and see the giants of Roos...They have learnt to grow wheat in the snow-fields and extract power from the coal in the earth without any one having to go into the mine. In all those things the earth is coming to be more and more like heaven. (The Big Heart p-78)

Unlike his comrades who blame the machine for taking away their traditional occupation and therefore regard it as an unmixed evil, Ananta believes that the machine is only a neutral tool, to be put to the right use by man. Simplifying the acceptance of machines Ananta avers:

When one is married off to a girl and she brings in her dowry with her, one does not refuse the bedstead because it is too high to get on easily. If one has a heart and really capable of love, one likes a polished bridal bed better than a broken old string charpai. Like the fashionable Vilayati bride we have accepted the dowry of the machines she has brought and make use of them, provided we keep our hearts and become the masters. Machines don’t think or feel, it is men who do. (The Big Heart p-32)

Another aspect of modern machine civilization he approves of is the freedom it brings from old moral taboos. He recalls how in Bombay no one was worried about his liaison with Janaki, which has brought him so much opprobrium in a small town like Amritsar.

Since Ananta is no intellectual, his well-nigh visionary faith in the machine is complete, though he is not unaware of the seamy side of industrialism. In his simplicity and native optimism, he however, believes that these evils can easily be overcome, once the proletarian revolution gets going. It is left to the poet, Sardar Puran Singh, to expose the other side of the shield. He points out how the machine has become a tool in the hands of exploiters to tyrannise over the under-privileged, how it can be “a death trap which alters the whole character of man” and what are the difficulties and dangers in adopting the machine for a traditional community.
Anand's rebellion against tradition and his militant championship of the machine would not perhaps have resulted in tragedy, but for certain contributory causes which spring from the limitations of his own character. He is betrayed by much that is “false within.” He flaunts his atheism and his disregard for moral taboos in the face of his community and becomes notorious as a “whore monger, flesh eater and drunkard” – a reputation of doubtful value to a would-be Messiah of a new dispensation in a tradition bound society. Quick-tempered and excitable, he lacks the tact and patience to carry reluctant comrades with him. Lacking moral authority, he is also wanting in the intellectual resources which would have enabled him to achieve his mission against so heavy a set of odds. To make matters worse, a tragic misunderstanding about the money he receives as wages for work done from Khushal Chand leads his comrades to suspect that he is in the pay of the enemy.

The Big Heart emerges as a memorable presentation of the theme of the clash between tradition and modernity; and several factors contribute to the effectiveness of the picture. To begin with, Ananta is an unforgettable portrait. In spite of his many limitations, he impresses us as a Triton among the minnows. The zest for life, the high spirits and the love of mischief of this youth of a ‘giant frame’ endear him to children; his generosity is so great as to be a subject for fun, his sympathy for the poor and his zeal for reform are as strong as everything about him. His sudden death at the hand of his friend is the stuff of Shakespearean tragedy, for both destiny and character have a share in it;
and the final sense of the terrible waste of unrealized potential it leaves is also pure tragedy. Furthermore, the suggestion in the last chapter that though Ananta is dead, his mission will be carried on by Janaki and the Poet is also indicative of the birth of a new order in the death of the old – a characteristic of the true spirit, which is something far more than sheer pessimism.

Similar to Untouchable, The Big Heart too has a fine, well-knit structure; and as in earlier work, the entire action here also takes place on a single day. The Clock Tower, which rivals the two temples on the other side of Billimaran, tolls the hours of this last fateful day in Ananta’s life with measured strokes, heard at intervals throughout the whole narrative. We first meet Ananta working in his shop in “the sombre half dark of the dawn”; when he goes to the tank to take his bath, the Tower-clock stands at a quarter to seven; “an hour and half later” he is “outside the house of bungalow of the famous Amritsar leader, Sheikh Abdul Latif”. As he is taking the finished cauldron to the merchant, he hears the Tower-clock strike “huge gong notes of the hour” and from the way the shaft of sunlight was falling across Billimaran, he concludes that it is now eleven; the lunch with the friends at the shop, the abortive visit to Makham Chand’s grainshop and the siesta in the Kali temple occupy the afternoon; when the Sub-Inspector of Police arrives on the scene of Ananta’s murder, he notes the time in his book, “quarter past six” and finally, in the last chapter:

The relentless fury of the sun had burnt itself over Billimaran by the time the Clock Tower struck the half-hour past seven. (The Brave Heart p-21)
Not only does the narrative move swiftly towards the final catastrophe; during the course of its rapid movement, it also throws out suggestions indicating the inevitability of the tragedy at the end. Ralia’s ultimate attack on the machines is well prepared for in an earlier episode which shows him abusing the machine age in the filthiest language; and Ananta’s destiny of being a victim of misunderstanding is indicated much earlier in the episode in which, in trying to help two beggar boys, he is unwittingly responsible for depriving them of the leftovers they are fighting for. Again, the fact that Ralia breaks the machine with a hammer taken from Ananta’s shop is both ironical and symbolic of Ananta’s own contribution in other ways to the final tragedy. Ananta’s own contribution in other ways to the novel is thus seen to be more than a stock romantic device.

Highlighting the drawback of the novelist M.K. Naik avers:

The only possible flaw in the otherwise well-ordered structure of the novel is once more Anand’s penchant for resorting to direct statement, as if he occasionally feels the inadequacy of the fabric of situation and character in externalizing his vision. (Mulk Raj Anand p-85)

The novel adopts a rational attitude to the incursion of the machine; it is the last will and the testament of the tradition and modernity, Gandhian distrust of the machine as Frankenstein, conflict between communism and capitalism and the predicament of man, telescoping entire socio-economic-political situations, seeking total transformation of man.

Similar to the end of Untouchable, here also the Poet holds forth with distressing frequency and at elaborate length on Anand’s favourite topic of exploitation, modernity, the humanist faith and like. Notwithstanding this, The
Big Heart is a notable achievement. Set firmly in Billimaran, it is true of many other times and climes also. Hence, the extract from Byron’s speech on the Luddite movement in 1812 which forms the motto to the novel fits the narrative admirably. The Big Heart has thus both a local habitation and a universal name.

Anand is famous chiefly as a writer of sociological novels. His novels deal with some of the most glaring social evils which include untouchability and the exploitation of labour. Anand’s picture of poverty and of the wretchedness and the misery caused by poverty are most vivid and poignant. By vividly and forcefully describing the suffering of the people, Anand appears before us an uncompromising critic of the whole class of the perpetrators of injustice and cruelty. Every novel of his seems to have been designed by him to arouse the social conscience. There is hardly any ugly or depressing aspect of fiction which has not been attacked by Anand in his novels. He is the leading practitioner in India of the novel of protest. His novels aim at denouncing social evils of all kinds and it is this aspect of his fiction that has won him the esteem and admiration of the novel reading public in India.

In addition to exposing the social evils which are eating into the vitals of the Indian society, Anand has always advocated, by implication if not in explicit terms, the need of national integration. Almost all the major novels of Anand reflect his strong opposition to orthodoxy which includes communal discrimination and caste prejudices.
It is by his portrayal of the human character that a novelist is chiefly judged. Anand is a great creator and delineator of characters. He is able to infuse life into all the characters who figure in his novels; and the number and the variety of the characters in his novels is multitudinous. Anand does not write fanciful stories and he does not indulge in fantasies. Nor are his characters figments of imagination. The stories correspond to the facts of Indian life, and the characters are real human beings, men and women of flesh and blood, by no means puppets manipulated by the author. And therein lies the real greatness of Anand as a novelist. He is a writer of realistic and convincing stories, and he is a delineator of characters who strike us as real and convincing human beings.

As Anand forte lies exposing social evils in Indian life of the past and the present, it is logical for him to portray his heroes as rebels who become alienated from their environment because of their radical and revolutionary views. Alienation of Anand’s early characters like Bakha and Munoo is obvious and inevitable as all his heroes are youthful and energetic, sensitive, and somewhat idealistic persons possessing an awareness, to a greater or lesser degree, of the follies and the injustices which are rampant in a tradition bound and caste bound society. Bakha and Munoo win our sympathy because they are helpless victims of injustice, and because their alienation is chiefly the result of social barriers. But the characters in Anand’s subsequent novels, characters like Nur, Lalu Singh and Maqbool constitute a more complex hero-type who combines the vigor of Bakha and Munoo with a certain difference. In these
later characters we find a paralyzing moodiness, a fear of loneliness, a sense of
guilt and an inclination to believe in superstitions. These tendencies inhibit
opportunities in these heroes for clear thought and direct purposeful action.
Another feature of Anand’s characterization is his mature humanism and his
sympathetic understanding of the characters he has created. What
distinguishes Lalu Singh, the hero of The Sword and the Sickle, is the intensity
of his inner life, despite his confusion and his periods of despair. Lalu Singh’s
self-awareness has an important bearing on the question of awareness. In the
earlier novels, alienation resulted chiefly from social barriers, imposed on the
individual from the outside. But the sense of alienation which Lalu Singh
experiences is more complex because of his human isolation and rootlessness.
He has returned to India, from the war to find both his parents dead and the
family property dispersed; and there are, of course other handicaps which he
suffers from too.

Anand has made use of the technique of the stream of consciousness in
some of his novels. The thoughts passing through a person’s mind do not
necessarily possess continuity or any logical interconnections. Such thoughts
are always random. However Anand does not go the extreme of describing the
thoughts of his characters in such a way as to confuse and bewilder us. Thus
the thoughts passing through Bakha’s mind in the novel Untouchable are
continuous, coherent and logical. If an intellectual novelist tries to render the
stream of consciousness of a simple minded character like Bakha, the novelist
runs the risk of falsifying the ill logical logic of his character’s mind by
inserting into it his own intellectuality. While writing Untouchable, Anand was confronted with the problem of maintaining an artistic detachment to make sure that his own experiences did not intrude into Bakha’s stream of consciousness. Thus Anand follows in his novels the conventional modes of narration.

Anand possesses an unusual command of the English language. It is certainly needless to point out that he is one of the great Indian masters of English language. He has developed a style of his own. He has been advised by Gandhiji to avoid decoration and embellishment of all kinds in the writing of a language and Anand has shown his capacity to express himself effectively through a style which is shorn of literary ornamentation and embellishment. His style is not ornate or flamboyant but it is certainly forceful and highly expressive. When occasion demands Anand can become rhetorical and bombastic.

Alongwith R.K. Narayan and Raja Rao, Anand is credited with establishing the basic forms and themes of modern Indian literature written in English. At the core of his writing is a humanist philosophy that incorporates elements of socialist, political and economic theory. His sociologically conscious works have shed keen insight in Indian affairs and enriched the country’s literary heritage.

VIII

A contemporary to Anand is R.K. Narayan, whose first work Swami and Friends (1935) was published in the same year in which was published Anand’s
Untouchable. He published his first novel, Swami and Friends (1935), and in a quick succession appeared Bachelor of Arts (1936) and The Dark Room (1938); thus forming a trilogy of sorts. After a long silence comes The English Teacher (1945). The three novels Swami and Friends, Bachelor of Arts and The English Teacher form a trilogy.

Swami and Friends (1935) was Narayan’s first novel and it was at once hailed by competent critics as a great work of art. Graham Greene called it “A book in ten thousand” and Compton Mackenzie avers, “I have never read any other book about India in the least like it.”

The novel describes the life of boys in South India schools, and much of R. K. Narayan’s personal experience has gone into the making of the novel. We get a vivid portrayal of thoughts, emotions and activities of school boys. The plot revolves round the activities of Swami, the hero of the novel and his friends Mani, the mighty good for nothing, Shanker, the most intelligent boy of the class, Somu the monitor, Samuel, the short-statured, and so called the Pea, and Rajam, a late arrival, intelligent and charming, the son of the Police Superintendent.

Swami is a boy of ten years, a student of First Form (A) in the Albert Mission High School. He is not a bright student rather an average one and every Monday is a black Monday for him, for he does not like to go to school after the delicious rest and the vagabondage of Saturdays and Sundays. At school he is constantly rebuked by his teachers for his unsatisfactory work, and at home he is ever on the watch for the departure of his father so that he may
run away and loaf about. But he is quite happy in the company of his friends, particularly, Rajam and Mani. They exchange visits, or loaf about happily even in the hot sun.

Ebenezer, a teacher of the school, is a fanatic Christian and one day, quite early in his school career, Swami comes into clash with him. Unable to bear the abuses hurled on the Hindu deities by this fanatic Christian, Swami tries to heckle him and consequently gets beaten and his left ear injured. He, however, avenges the insult by delivering to the Head Master his father’s complaint against the teacher. There is further trouble. His very close friend, the powerful Mani, who is in the habit of bullying the new-comers, takes it into his head to bundle up Rajam, and throw him into the river Sarayu. Swami agrees to help his mighty friend in his dangerous plan. Luckily for him the proposed fight does not take place. Fear on both sides brings the two enemies together and in no time they turn fast friends, eating biscuits and sitting on the bank of the river.

When Rajam arrives, the M.C.C. (Malgudi Cricket Club) is formed with Swami and his friends as members. The advent of Rajam marks a crisis in Swami’s life. Swami falls in love with the boy, and is distressed that his other friend Mani has to fight with the newcomer just to put him in place. The party at Rajam’s house where the young man order’s his cook about just to show-off his importance; the excitement of asking Rajam to the house and the way Swami sets about this, educating his grandmother as he goes along - every reader recollects. The crisis in their relation is reached when Swami, without
intending it, lets down his team by not turning up for the crucial match between the M.C.C. and the Young Men’s Union. The result is that Rajam is very angry with him and the friendship between the two comes to an end. Soon Rajam’s father is transferred, and he is to leave the town. Swami goes to bid him farewell at the station.

With a copy of Anderson’s Fairy Tales in his hands Swami reaches the station in time but hesitates in approaching Rajam. A little later before the train starts, Mani discovers him standing in the crowd and takes him to Rajam, but the train steams off. With great difficulty Mani succeeds in handing over Swami’s present to Rajam who acknowledges it by waving his hands towards Swami.

The final chapter is quite touching but the scenes in the school are full of fun, very natural and convincing. When two boys quarrel they withdraw straightway all diplomatic relations and if they have to talk to each other do so as at the international level through a third party. The fact that the boys are actually standing face to face and can easily hear each other, without the message having to be received and transmitted by the third party is simply irrelevant. One day when the work for the day was over, Swami, Mani and Rajam, adjourned to a secluded spot to say what was in their minds. Swami stood between them and acted as their medium of communication. They were so close that they could have heard each other even if they had spoken in whispers. But it is customary between enemies to communicate through a medium. Mani faced Swami steadily and asked, “Are you a man?” Rajam
flared up and shouted, “Which dog doubts it?” Swami turned to Mani and said ferociously, “Which dirty dog doubts it?” The novelist delineates:

“Have you the courage to prove that you are a man?” asked Mani. Swaminathan turned to Rajam and repeated it.
“How?”
“How?” repeated Swaminathan to Mani
“Meet me at the river, near Nallapa’s Grove, tomorrow evening.”
“- Near Nallapa’s Grove,” Swaminathan was pleased to echo.
“What for?” Asked Rajam.
“To see if you can break my head”
“Oh to pieces”, said Rajam. (Swami and Friends p-44)

Swaminathan’s services were soon dispensed with. They gave him no time to repeat their words. Rajam shouted in one ear and Mani in the other.

The novel is remarkable for the author’s understanding of child psychology and for his depiction of the carefree, buoyant world of schoolboys in a most realistic and convincing manner. It renders peoples and their actions as they appear to boys at the school-stage. Swami is one of Narayan’s immortal creations. Besides displaying Narayan’s skill in characterization, the novel also brings out the brilliance of his humour. There might be some looseness in construction, still the novel is creditable first achievement and, it fully displays Narayan’s peculiar genius.

Swami is the central figure in the novel, and the action has been looked at throughout from his point of view. To this extent, one would be justified in calling him the hero of the novel, but he is an unheroic hero, one who has nothing heroic in his character. By and large, he is a passive character, like railway Raju in The Guide, a character who does not act but is acted upon, who has no control over his circumstances, but is controlled by them.
Swami rarely initiates action himself, but acts upon the suggestions made by others. He is easily taken in by the story of the coachman that he can easily turn twelve paise into six rupees, and so produce the hoop for which he yearned. Thus he is easily fooled and robbed. Later in order to recover the money, he acts upon the suggestion of Rajam and Mani by decoying the coachman’s son by pretending to be hostile to Swami. The result is that he is abused and beaten by Mani, and all to no avail. The coachman’s son is more than a match for them, and easily robs them of a top. Swami had not liked the idea of meddling with the coachman’s son, he was afraid of him and would not have liked to keep away from him, but he could not say ‘no’ to Rajam and the result was his discomfiture at his hands. This is so because he is a passive character who does not act himself but is acted upon by others. Similarly, the initiative for founding the M.C.C. is taken by Rajam, he simply accepts it and acts according to the dictates of Rajam. His running away from the school, from Malgudi and from home, is again a sign of passivity. Unable to face harsh reality he takes the much easier course of escape, and when hunger, fatigue and terrors of the forest are too much for him he decides to return home. Passive and unheroic he is a slave to the circumstances. He drifts about and makes no effort to master them or to chalk out a definite course of action.

The fact is that though a boy of ten years, he is essentially a child. On the face of it Swami and Friends is a straightforward school-boy story, a story of boys for boys. Family relationships, particularly Swami’s relations with his doting granny and to lesser extent with his constantly exasperated father,
Swami’s friendship, his quarrels, his teachers, his idleness, his homework, his examinations, his running away, make up what seems the fairly orthodox material of a school-boy. Swami is basically a child, he has a more individual and spontaneous existence than a school-boy. He has begun to look at the adult world around him, he tries to understand it also to come to terms with it, but still his responses to it are his own, rash and impulsive. Thus he is again and again involved in troubles while his friends, who are more mature, are not. He absents himself from the class and indulges in a spree of smashing window-panes. The result is he is in trouble and when the Head-Master canes him, he acts rashly, catches his hand, and runs away from school. Equally rash and impulsive is his response at the Board High School with the result that life in Malgudi becomes impossible for him, and he decides to run away.

A child’s imagination is highly excitable and poetic. Things petty and insignificant in themselves are exaggerated beyond all proportions. The result is that the child is prone to hero-worship and is terrified by purely imaginative terrors having no basis in reality. Thus for Swami both Rajam and Mani are heroes, he admires them and follows them. He really believes that Mani can and will break heads with his club, that Rajam is superior being to whom all homage is due, and that when two boys fight in the school compound, they are likely to murder each other, and is very much surprised when they are easily parted by the Head Master. He has all the credulity of a child, believes the coachman can multiply money by his tricks, and further that if he prays to the gods, they will turn his pebbles into coins. He is frightened by the threats of the
coachman’s son, and goes about in terror of his life, as is obvious by his reactions to his presence in the father’s club. Swami is in panic at the sight of him, and imagines that he would either stab him in the back, or collect his friends and assassinate him.

Thus the novelist depicts great penetration and skill in depicting the rainbow world of childhood and early boy-hood. There is hardly anything about child-life which has not been depicted in this novel. Not only is the child’s world vivified, but Narayan has revealed the world of the adults as it appears to the children.

Narayan has always been a student of human-relationships. In his early novels he deals with such simple relationship as the relations between students and teachers, between friends and class-mates, or relationships within family, between the father and son, husband and wife etc. Swami and Friends is his first novel and the novelist has explored relationships of simpler kind.

Swami’s relationships with his friends have been explored in great detail. Swami’s friendship with Mani and Rajam, is personal and human, and they are seen together even after school hours, and in the vacations. They exchange visits and loaf about at ease even in hot summer sun. Swami’s relationship with Somu, Shanker and the Pea is scholastic and impersonal. It is limited only to school-hours, and they drop out of his life in the beginning of the next session. Only Swami, Mani and Rajam remain together and when at the end of the novel, Rajam leaves Malgudi, Swami and Mani are left together.
A definite thematic pattern can be traced in Swami and Friends. It can be termed as the quest for identity. Each of Narayan’s novels depicts the struggle towards maturity, the education of the central figure, who is not at all heroic, but an ordinary human being with common human virtues and weaknesses. As the action proceeds he strives to achieve maturity and each stage in this struggle is defined carefully, minutely and precisely. The impression created is that of ordinary individual living his humdrum day to day life, struggling with circumstances, growing wiser and maturing through his struggle. Thus at the end of the novel he is entirely changed. He has grown and matured from a rash and impulsive child into a boy whose responses would be more patterned, controlled and disciplined.

The plot of the novel is loose and episodic. Swami is not a picaro but in its construction the novel is largely picaresque. There is a string of episodes and incidents, and the only unity they have is provided by the fact that they all cluster round Swami, the chief protagonist. The stress is more on the incident rather than the character and most of the characters remain thin, shadowy figures. There are a number of incidents and their order can be easily changed as in most cases the logical unity of cause and effect is lacking. However none of them is superfluous for each serves to illuminate some one facet or the other of Swami’s character.

Further, the action is not confined merely to the boys’ world but is equally concerned with the domestic world of Swami. The action moves from the home to the school and from the school to the playground. Later, the scope
of the novel is further widened by bringing in the Indian struggle for freedom and showing its impact on Malgudi, particularly the world of Swami and his friends.

Another important feature of the novel is the invention of the fictional locale of Malgudi. It is neither a village nor a city, but a town of modest size. The river Sarayu flows by its side. Just beyond it are Nallappa’s Grove and Memphi Forest. There is a trunk road to Trichinopoly. Within the town there is a Market Road, a municipality, a Town Hall, club and two schools – the Albert Mission School and the Board High School. The town appears and reappears in successive novels of the novelist and provides unity and continuity to his work.

The irony and criticism against the colonial system is mutely uttered in Swami and Friends. The dexterously etched characters teamed with unique style, which was truly innovative, offered Swami and Friends a dimension which is not just original but also matchless. R. K. Narayan’s stylized language and ironical humour sets the mood of this fiction, which further takes this novel to greater heights of mellowness.

After a gap of two years appears the second work of the novelist, The Bachelor of Arts (1937).

X

His second novel The Bachelor of Arts (1937), is a mature work and deals with a later stage of life in a young man’s career when he is about to leave college and enter life when he is neither a boy nor a man, but somewhere
in between. It is divided into four parts. Part I, divided into five chapters, gives us a vivid account of the college life of the hero, Chandran. Practically every aspect of college life is covered up to illuminate the personality of the hero. Chandran is a brilliant speaker, and thus is appointed the secretary of the College Historical Association, by Raghavachar, the professor of History. These extra-curricular activities come in the way of the studies. However, it goes to his credit that somehow he manages to pass the B.A. examination.

Part II deals with the young man in search of a job, and his several frustrations. Within the six months of his becoming a graduate, Chandran is faced with the problem of finding a job for himself. Unable to find a job, he passes the time by sleeping for long hours or walking on the banks of the river. During one of his walks he sees Malthi, a beautiful girl of about fifteen years and instantaneously falls in love with her. The parents of the girl are prepared to accept the proposal of Chandran’s marriage with their daughter, but the horoscopes do not tally and the proposal is ultimately dropped. Chandran is very disappointed and upset by this incident that he falls ill and is confined to bed for several days. On recovering from this severe blow, he goes to Madras for a change.

Part III describes his aimless wanderings in Madras and other parts of South India. He does not go to his uncle’s house in Madras but puts up at a hotel for the night. He visits the house of a prostitute in the company of a degenerate youth. But disgusted, he sets out for Maylapore and sees the magnificent Kapaleswar temple. The peace of the temple attracts him and he
turns a sanyasi. He then visits several South Indian villages and districts on foot and lives on alms. After eight months of these purposeless wanderings, he gets tired of his new role and returns to his parents in Malgudi.

Part IV, deals with Chandran’s marriage and settling down in life. On return to Malgudi he finds that all his friends are scattered and possibly already settled in life. He also accepts a humble job secured for him by an influential uncle, forgets Malthi, and marries another girl, Susila, and is full of thoughts of his wife. Thus the novel ends on an optimistic note and gives us the message of the continuity of life – of life flowing on in spite of setback and shocks which threaten to block its way.

It appears, as if nothing ever disturbed his life. Malthi who had once upset him much is totally forgotten. The wayward, irresponsible and care-free graduate of olden days is now a responsible man with a sound profession to provide him the wherewithal of life and a wife to look after his house-hold affairs.

The novel with its detailed characterization and deftly knitted style stands apart as a journey from fantasy to reality. The very concept of the gradual growing of a boy and then becoming busy with worldly affairs is beautifully depicted with utmost tenderness. The novel is also remarkable for its skilful mingling of humour and pathos. It is a great work of art and well-deserves the attention that has been given to it.
The Dark Room (1938), Narayan’s third novel is a moving tale of a
tormented wife. Ramani, the office secretary of Englandia Insurance Company
is a very domineering and cynical in his ways and hence governs his house
according to his sweet will. As he is always irritable, the atmosphere in his
house is always gloomy and his wife, children and servants always remain in a
state of terror. His wife Savitri is a genuine symbol of traditional Indian
womanhood, very beautiful and deeply devoted to her husband. Ramani does
not respond to her sentiments even with ordinary warmth. Though they have
been married for fifteen years, his wife has received nothing from him except
rebukes and abuses. Even the children receive more rebukes from him than his
fatherly love.

All goes well, till there arrives at the scene a beautiful lady, Shanta Bai,
who has deserted her husband and joined Englandia Insurance Company.
Ramani succumbs to her beauty and coquettish ways. This upsets the peace of
his family life. Seeing no other method of correcting her arrogant and erring
husband, Savitri revolts against him and in despair leaves the house to commit
suicide.

She goes to the river and throws herself into it. The timely arrival of
Mari, the blacksmith and burglar, who, while crossing the river on his way to
his village, sees her body floating on the river, rescues her and saves her life.
Persuaded by Mari’s wife Ponni, she goes to her village and embarks upon an
independent living of her own by working in a temple. The feelings of home
sickness and tormenting anxiety for her children, however soon make her
restless. She realizes the futility of her attempts to escape from her bonds with the temporal world and returns home.

Ramani is depicted as a man who has little else to do other than roam about in Malgudi in his Chevy, and is shown to have little concern for his children. The little children are too scared and prefer not to come in his way. He believes that the man of the house is always right and has the liberty to do anything he wishes. He also believes that having a status as big as he had in society it was okay to have a few flings outside his marriage.

For a modern day reader it does turn out to be surprising the way Savitri is shown to be a dutiful wife. The author has nearly given the impression that she is the perfect prized wife that every man must have given the fact that wife accords such high regard for her husband. Yet at the same time, the underlying message for woman’s emancipation becomes evident as the story progresses. The character of Savitri depicts a change as the novel progresses. The reader first sees a dutiful wife and a caring mother in her, who later rebels against her husband’s actions. These traits are blended well as she returns home and realizes that life is meaningless without husband and children.

The work leaves the readers with some thought provoking questions. What is more important for a married woman: her identity or the welfare of her family? Can Savitri’s return to her home be regarded as her rebirth given the fact that she had strong bonds with her old life through her children? Is it impossible for a woman to attain freedom? Is she really helpless?
The Dark Room offers a feminist view of the contemporary South Indian society. The very essence of the autobiographical tone is not there in the dark room. The story of a middle class female set against the backdrop of South India, the dark room echoes the frustration of a tormented wife. The main female character Savitri retires to the dark room which is there at the house whenever the frustration, disgust, pain and torment becomes too much to bear. The dark room here acts as the catharsis whilst aiding the main character to vent out her frustration. The dark room epitomizes Savitri’s revolt against her husband’s inhuman nature.

Ideally the title therefore matches with the symbolism of the novel. The novel is also full of different feelings of life like hypocrisy, deception, kindness and desperation. Thus the novel deals with the sorry fate of Indian womanhood. It suggests no solution to the problem, still it clearly brings out Narayan’s concern for the Savitris of our country. Its plot is more coherent and well-knit than that of the earlier novels, the characterization is excellent and there is skillful blending of humour and pathos. The novelist has not preached any sermons but has vividly and realistically presented a slice of life as he saw it.

XII

The novel The English Teacher (1945) is a love-story different from the conventional ones, delineating the domestic life of Krishna, a lecturer in English, in the Albert Mission College, Malgudi. At thirty years of age, he feels bored with life in absence of his wife and daughter. They arrive after a few
months, along with his mother. Krishna and Susila lead a happy life for several months. But as the house is not up to the mark, and so on an ill-fated day they go house hunting. As ill-luck would have it, Sushila is stung by a flea, develops typhoid and dies after a few days.

It is a great shock to Krishna. He is much upset, and loses all interest in life and in his work. The only comfort to him is his little daughter, Leela, who now takes up most of his time and attention. He frequently wanders about a lotus pond, where he meets a sanyasi who can communicate with the spirits of the dead. Through him Krishna is able to communicate with the spirit of his wife, is thrilled, and regains his interest in life.

Krishna now meets the head-master of a new Children’s School. He is very much impressed by his educational theories, gives up his job in the college to serve the new institution. That very night he can commune directly with his wife. For the first time an ineffable bliss descends upon his soul.

The description of Krishna’s married life – the first few years of happiness, the excoriating agony during the weeks of Sushila’s illness, ‘the last journey’ to the cremation ground – is one of the most moving and flawless pieces of writing in modern English fiction. Not a word is wasted, and not a word rings false. The second half of the novel, on the other hand, takes us to unfamiliar regions. Krishna’s numbed misery and his anxiety to be mother and father both to Leela are understandable enough. But the experiments in psychic communication with Sushila with the help of the medium introduce a “whimsical or fanatical” element into a story that has so long been
transparently true to life. The eccentric headmaster of the ‘pyol’ school and his termagant wife and wild children make for further variety. Automatic writing and attempts at psychic contacts with the dead are not altogether uncommon: and the soil of India doubtless breeds every type of idealist and eccentric, waif and vagabond. Nevertheless it is difficult to feel that the first and the second halves of the novel blend naturally and make an artistic whole. The theme of the novel is obviously the death of Sushila in the first half and her resurrection in the second half. He is one of the few writers in India who take their craft seriously, constantly striving to improve the instruments, pursuing with a sense of dedication what may often seem to be a mirage of technical perfection. There is a norm of excellence below which Narayan cannot possibly lower himself.

Thus Krishna, the central character of The English Teacher (1945) undertakes an emotional, intellectual and spiritual journey during the course of the novel. He learns and changes during the course of the novel in a way which could not have been predicted at the beginning. The journey takes him from a lifestyle which he found unsatisfactory to finding a set of values and a way of life that he feels he can believe in wholly.

Krishna’s change comes about not as a result of any grand plan or ambition, but as a result of his response to a series of challenging circumstances which arise once he begins to take steps away from the cloistered and protective environment of his school. This day-by-day, unforeseen-event by unforeseen event progress is reflected in Narayan’s
approach to the novel itself. Narayan gives the impression that he has no pre-planned plot in mind when the story opens, but instead focuses on a meticulously detailed depiction of Krishna’s experience, keeping to the observable surface reality of his perceptions, thoughts and feelings, without digression or analysis or interpretation. This rigorous unadorned focus on observable phenomena results in some stunningly beautiful writing.

Although Krishna’s journey takes place as a result of a series of unpredictable events, a number of recurring themes are being worked out in the course of the novel. These themes might be said to be Krishna’s progress from predictability to unpredictability, from the academic world to the real world of life and death, from adulthood to childhood, and from a western mentality to an eastern mentality.

Krishna repeatedly finds himself being drawn out of situations which ought to have been predictable and ordered by events which are spontaneous and unpredictable. It is clear that he finds spontaneity and unpredictability to be stimulating and life-enhancing, while predictability and order, although providing a cushion of comfort and security, is ultimately stifling and deadening.

The turning point of the story arises from Sushila’s unpredictability. When they go to look at the house we could not possibly predict that she would go for a walk on her own, get stuck in contaminated lavatory, and then become ill. When they prepare for the journey it might have seemed that Narayan was preparing for a plot in which something bad happened to their child while they
were away, but in the event the important incident is not something that could have been guessed beforehand, either by the reader or by Krishna, but an unpredictable event which arises on the spur of the moment. Krishna’s intention was that their visits to view houses should proceed in an ordered, predictable, rational way, but Sushila brought unpredictability to the occasions, resulting in moments of beauty, such as the walk by the river, but also in the awful tragedy of her becoming infected by a fatal illness. She brings reality into his life which was previously protected from reality by the enclosed ordered world of the school, and later she initiates the most unpredictable event of all, the psychic communion with him from beyond death.

The episodes of Sushila contacting typhoid and the headmaster’s belief in a prediction made by astrologer fail to provide Krishna with anything rational to believe in, they do bring him face to face with the reality of life and death, and confronting the realities of life without retreating into the safe cerebral world of literature and philosophy is an important component of his journey. His unsatisfying immersion philosophy is a sterile literary approach to life is shown in a number of ways through the incidents of his wearily facing the fact that he is reading Milton, Carlyle and Shakespeare for the fiftieth time and the love poem he tries to write to his wife is simply a copy of a poem by Wordsworth. Now he is discovering how ordinary people encounter the big issues of life and death, not as seen through the perspective of literature or philosophy, and not in a way that would imply that some profound universal conclusions could be drawn, but as they actually experience it in everyday life.
Narayan as we can identify him with the character of Krishna, is writing at the level of those ordinary people. He does not adopt the position of a novelist presenting the reader with fictitious characters which he has created, and which are under his control, as for example Charles Dickens does, but in the guise of Krishna he places himself firmly among the ordinary people and breaks down the boundaries between real life outside his novel and the life within the novel. Just as Krishna faces life without illusions, so Narayan seems to create his novel without the usual illusions of the novelist, such as pre-planned plot and fictitious characters. In an outburst with one of his students Krishna remarks of literature:

Don’t worry so much about these things – they are trash, we are obliged to go through and pretend we like them, but all the time the problem of living and dying is crushing us. (The English Teacher p-438)

In coming to terms with the death of his wife, literature, philosophy and rationalism are no use to him. They are all illusions, and the journey he is on involves leaving illusions behind. Krishna avers:

Living without illusions seemed to be the greatest task for me in the life now...humanity, nurtured in illusions from beginning to end! The twists and turns of fate would cease to shock us if we knew, and expected nothing more than, the barest truths and facts of life. (The English Teacher p-387)

In the final chapter the issues of the novel come to a head with Krishnan’s resignation from his post as English teacher and his psychic reunion with his wife. In his attack on the system he is rebelling he criticizes not English literature itself but India’s adherence to an educational system which stifles the spirit of its students and alienates them from their native culture.
Narayan’s writing style, which is inseparable from the observations of Krishna, the first person narrator, has been showing us this all along. The truths Krishna wants to discover cannot be found in Shakespeare, Carlyle, or Plato, it is found only among real people leading real lives, it is ‘the law of life’.

Thus The English Teacher, as an autobiographical novel, completes a trilogy along with his other two novels Swami and Friends and The Bachelor of Arts. It depicts the protagonist bearing the sweet and the bitter fruits of life.

There is a streak of the ruffian and the cad in Ramani of The Dark Room – and indeed in many respects he is much in contrast to Krishna of The English Teacher. Savitri of The Dark Room is not simply a Sushila of The English Teacher who has reached the thirties: she lacks the ineluctable poetry of Sushila, the capacity to be at once a goddess and a woman, the eternal feminine and the womanly woman. Ramani blows hot too often, and Savitri sulks too readily.

Swami and Friends, Bachelor of Arts and The English Teacher are, for all practical purposes, trilogy of Malgudi on Sarayu. The Dark Room, which appeared between the Bachelor of Arts and The English Teacher, is a novel apart, a study of domestic disharmony. On closer scrutiny, even the characters in these novels seem to achieve a sort of transmigration from body to body, name to name and ultimately to blur the sharpness of the distinctions under the haze of general acceptance. Swami is also the Bachelor of Arts; he is presently

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Krishnan the English Teacher – though he couldn’t be Ramani, of The Dark Room.

Narayan’s novels are characterized by Chekhovian simplicity and gentle humour. He told stories of simple folks trying to live their simple lives in a changing world. The characters in his novels were very ordinary, down to earth Indians trying to blend tradition with modernization, often resulting in tragic-comic situations. His writing style was simple unpretentious and witty, with a unique flavour as if he were writing in the native tongue. Many of Narayan’s works are rooted in everyday life, though he is not shy of invoking Hindu tales or traditional Indian folklore to emphasize a point. His easy going outlook on life has sometimes been criticized, though in general he is viewed as an accomplished, sensitive and reasonably prolific writer. He almost always writes about India in some way, and usually puts cultural influences about Indian life in his works and literature.

XIII

Among the Indian novelist writing in English, Raja Rao in his debut with Kanthapura (1938) breaks new ground by adopting a free form that develops out of native ingredients of experience, to the expression of an essential Indian sensibility. Besides the very syntactical innovation introduced by Raja Rao in the language of fiction, the important thing about Kanthapura is the approximation of the fictional form to the totality of the regional experience.
The novel begins with the graphic details of the place, which is just a village of South India, and the people inhabiting the same. The social climate of the village is roughly divided into the Brahmins and the Pariahs. It is a traditional village which becomes the microcosm of the universal rural conditions all over the country. The villagers are believers of the Goddess Kenchamma who they believe is their protector. Moorthy, a village young man imbued with the ideals of Mahatma Gandhi wages the struggle for independence. The novel has a moral theme and moves on from one issue to another. Among the social problems discussed is that of widowhood, the problem of labour exploitation, both localized and of foreign source, the British Raj.

In the village Bhatta, a Brahmin and Waterfall Venkamma are on one side looking at the whole issue of untouchability with considerable misgivings. They fail to understand the idea of removal of untouchability. Moorthy is the first Gandhian to mix freely with the pariahs of the village that proves to be an eyesore for the village Brahmins. Bhatta the moneylender and the land-owner cannot tolerate this form of pollution and therefore gets Moorthy excommunicated through the Swami. But Moorthy does not budge and despite the appearance of the police, Bade Khan and the Jemadar, in the village he goes on propagating the Gandhian ideals. Now life is not the same in the village. Women have started spinning Khaddar on the spinning wheel. They are even prepared to cooperate with the men in the struggle against the authorities.
There is the Skeffington Coffee Estate owned by an Englishman and this becomes the place of the battling forces, the natives and the authorities. The issue of addiction to toddy has also been raised by the novelist. Moorthy also raises the issue of the exploitation of the coolies by the Britishers. A real fight takes place and the passive fighters among the volunteers of Gandhi bear the brunt. Thus Kanthapura comes before us as a novel of revolt against the traditional follies of the villagers, the exploitation both local and foreign and the vice of drinking. It is the fight for the ideal as conceived by Mahatma Gandhi.

The novel is a work in which the fictional form is endowed with the freedom of the romance, the amplitude of the epic and the symbolic centrality of the fable. It is ‘itihasa’ and ‘purana’ both unified into a ‘kavya’. As ‘itihasa’ it is packed with historical action while as a ‘purana’ it is full of legendary memory and archetypal imagery. But above all as a ‘kavya’ it integrates historical action and racial consciousness in such a way that its temper is at all levels equal to that of the Indian life itself. Basic to Raja Rao’s achievement in the novel is his total awareness of the Indian tradition and the Indian personality, through which the narrative action and its dramatic tones are transformed into a symbolic organization of the materials of Indian life.

The novel also avoids the mistake on Indian experience, by not isolating the individual traits of the Indian tradition, but by viewing them as an organic totality in a living human consciousness. The three levels of action represented in the novel – political, social and religious – are all related not only to a
conceptual but an operative condition of the Indian personality. Reality in India, rooted as it is in the spiritual consciousness, does not yield itself to the easy dichotomies on which Western experience is based, at any rate, in terms of cultural analysis or aesthetic isolation.

Raja Rao calls his novel a ‘Sthalpurana’, a legendary history, restricted to a specific locality. In the foreward of the novel, he observes:

There is no village in India, however mean, that has not a rich ‘Stalapurana’, or a legendary history, of its own. Some god or god-like hero has passed by the village – Rama might have rested under this peepal tree, Sita might have dried her clothes, after her bath, on this yellow stone, or the Mahatma himself, on one of his many pilgrimages through the country, might have slept in this hut, the low one by the village gate. In this way the past mingles with the present, and the gods mingle with men to make the repertory of your grandmother always bright. One such story from the contemporary annals of my village I have tried to tell. (Kanthapura p-4)

Thus the sense of place dominates with the Kenchamma Hill, Skeffington Coffee Estate, the Temple of Kanthapurishwari, the river Himavathy and Cauvery – all geographical realities and not mere artistic contrivances.

The novel is rooted in the deep-seated custom and authority, superstition and ritualism of Indian folk-life. Moorthy, the village Mahatma, Bhatta the pontifical Brahmin, Bade Khan the policeman, Range Gowda, the patel of the village – are all individuals as well as representative symbols. Around this tenor of life and concourse of humanity, the action of the novel gets threaded.

The story is narrated by a grandmother who herself had taken part in the momentous struggle for freedom. The woman narrator with all her antics and garrulity is a symbol of the Indian sense of past. She is a superb mythmaker, who combines art and acumen, and the narration accordingly
takes a meandering course flowing backwards and forwards, “mixing memory with desire”.

Kanthapura is a penumbra of a village significantly called Kanthapura, with its life and politics, its entrenched orthodoxy and extreme conservatism. The action of the novel dates back to the 1930’s when the tremors of the Gandhian revolution were shaking the whole village to the very roots, and the spirit of nationalism was a ground-swell of such contradictory states of popular emotion and sentiment that the whole structure of the imperialistic bureaucracy lay shattered under its impact.

The very description of the village is brilliant and evocative and there is a physiographic authenticity in all the details given. The novelist narrates:

High on the Ghats is it, high up the steep mountains that face the cool Arabian Seas, up the Malabar coast is it, up Mangalore and Puttur and many a centre of cardamom and coffee, rice and sugarcane. (Kanthapura p-9)

This is where Kanthapura is situated. At a distance beyond Bebbur Mound and Bear’s Hill, there is the Skeffington Coffee Estate, symbolizing the impact of industrialization on this little bucolic village. And across it flows the sacred river Himavathy. In the main street Promontory is the Temple of Kanthapurishwari, the centre of the people’s life and later a rendezvous when the villagers are relentlessly hunted down by the “Red-men” in the fight. The benign and bounteous Kenchamma is their goddess “who protects the village through famine and disease, death and despair.”

The novel is thus a fluent and colourful presentation of the village and its changing moods and its unchanging spirit. It projects a spatial image of
India, binding the differing sinews of the country’s complex religious and social custom into a knot of time so intense as to indicate duration rather than passage in the human consciousness. The novel acquires an atemporal significance because the past enacted by it annotates the present and projects it into the future. The legendary heroes and heroines are linked up with the historical personalities. Thus Mahatma Gandhi is Prince Rama resisting the demonic rule of Ravana, the “Red-man”. He is again the Divine Krishna, in human incarnation, “engaged in killing Kaliya, the serpent of the foreign rule.”

The novel also picks up the “puranic” spirit and rhythm, and there is a deliberate naiveté and old-world whimsy in all its narrative progression and digression. The classical stories and legends are originally inserted into the novel, thus leading it an “itihasic” and “puranic” flavour. Raja Rao deftly manipulates several devises, such as weaving into the narration the classical stories and legends, the digressions and episodes, recalling the “puranic” strain. For instance the Kenchamma legend is celebrated with much gusto; it also lends the story a fitting bucolic atmosphere. And Sidda’s serpent-lore is full of hyperboles, which again is in its purport typical of the classical episode. The descriptions have a classical flavour and saliency. The narration is never angular; there are breathless involutions and elaborate passages of lyrical beauty suffused with epic vividness and powerful imagery symbolizing seasonal renewal and cyclical return.
The action of Kanthapura is essentially a projection of time on the canvas of space. It represents duration in time which is singularly unaffected by the physical changes introduced by the passage of time. It is the still-point at which changes dissolve into a pattern and detail subsumes change into a design. The village and its topography remain apparently the same. The hill and the river, the land and the sky and even the racial experience in its larger sense, remain what they have always been. The human configurations of experiences are subjected to the alterations of time. But the spiritual personality of the evolutionary life represented by Kanthapura continues in the perennial growths of “being”.

In characterization, Raja Rao maintains the balance between their individuality and their representative nature. There is no dichotomy between people, but rather a fusion of all human differentials into the steady flow of a single racial personality. As on all communities, in Kanthapura too there are good and evil characters, heroes like Moorthy and petty persons like Bhatta. But Raja Rao’s attitude to his characters enables him to present all of them as sharing a common nature from which none can be excluded. Moorthy, the reformer, is not so much a stormy zealot as a forward-looking young man in search of a “usable past” consistent with the modern outlook and who, as such, cannot effect a harsh and abrupt break with tradition. He is still the devout Brahmin wearing the yagnopavita and visiting the pariah colony to spread the message of the universality of equality in religion. Similarly in the delineation of Bhatta, Raja Rao does not present him as entirely black, but as
a complex enough individual in him his essential humanity can converge upon
a focus, albeit through a self-exhausting indirection. The characters conform
to the reality of the village life. The characters have not been probed from
within which is the modern trend. They do not have much depth and flatten
themselves. The characters have the outer coating of social dust which sticks
to them and the ones which try to change in the light of modernization still
carry it indispensably.

Raja Rao’s penchant for the regional Kannada, its rhythm and spirit,
interpolating themselves into the English idiom create a unique literary style
which claims some distinctness and international appeal. Clarifying in the
foreword, he writes:

After language the next problem is that of style. The tempo of the Indian life
must be infused into our English expression even as the tempo of Americans
or Irish life has gone into the making of theirs. (Kanthapura p-5)

One of the difficult things in the plot construction is the observance of
the unity of time. In Kanthapura there is not much of the unity of time and the
novelist has handled it in the plot without bothering much about it. He is much
more obsessed with the new social ferments in the plot than with anything else
in the novel. The unity of place is easily manageable as a few streets, fields, the
coffee plantation are not of the great distance, hence they are controlled with
an ease which needs no great efforts. The plot covers the action and not a chain
of actions which builds the plot.

The plot of the novel is also without any twist or trick. It is grounded on
a plain level. There is hardly any suspense in it. We are never on the
tenterhooks to know what is going to happen next. The things inside the plot happen with a design but they do not tax the mind of the reader. The singleness of the locale makes the task of the novelist easier.

The beginning of the novel is not the beginning of the plot. It exposes the locale full of people who will matter directly and indirectly in the future course of the events. With the advent of the hero, the plot begins to quicken into a programme to the chagrin of the government men. The coffee plantation becomes the scene of the struggle if not the battle-field. Other Gandhian items too get picked up by the rural enthusiasts. It serves to thicken the plot with the yoking of the villagers to accomplish their objective.

The novel may be regarded as a tribute to the Indian tradition. The novelist skillfully introduces the mythological elements in chronological order, thus receiving the identity of “Gandhi Puranas”. It will have a central place in Gandhian literature.

XIV

A gifted writer, Cornelia Sorabji besides having three volumes of short-stories to her credit also published two other books, India Calling (1935) and India Recalled (1936). What makes them particularly interesting is that for all their sociological motivation and reformist bias, they have the best element of good fictional writing.

Both the works India Calling and India Recalled in their own way are autobiographical and valuable pieces of social criticism. They can be termed as sociological treatises with a fictional interest. India Calling, besides being
an autobiography and telling us about incidents and events in the life of writer is also a record of the growth and the development of her mind and sensibility which were exposed early, and later to two different settings, cultures and ways of life and of the diverse influences and inner cravings which give a shape and direction to the creative impulse in her.

The works depict a strong attachment for her own culture as well as strong impressions created on her during her stay at Oxford. Oxford days make her as nostalgic as they would anyone born to that country and its life, but equally strong is her attachment to the charms and beauties she has known and experienced in her own country. The following passage clearly indicates the above mentioned fact. In India Calling she delineates:

I can never forget Oxford seen for the first time in the October with the reds and russet and tawny greens of the Virginian creepers against the grey-worn stone. London, and the way it caught one’s heart, first seen...the feeling of standing at the core of the traffic, one morning at the Exchange, and knowing one’s self utterly insignificant and alone, yet alive and perfectly companied. My first robin: my first fall of snow: the ache when snow melted and got dirty: the Irish crossing-sweeper with her bonnet awry, who smiled at me – “One must keep up one’s spirits and one’s appearance” – the exhilaration of London fogs: dream cities: the Towers of Westminster in a white mist: the lion in the Trafalgar Square with whom I shared all my jokes and anxieties – the one nearest the Strands...things seen, loved, felt, admired: and last of all Friendships everywhere, and the faces of little children. (India Calling, Intr., p.IX to XI.)

Her attachment to her own home country was no less strong is evident from the passage describing her home, the summer cottage in Poona, in the Lanowli Woods with its deep verandahs set in gardens of flowers and shady trees. She delineates:

I remember chiefly the champak, white-limbed, adorned with exquisite ivory-petalled flower that held a golden secret in the bottom of the cup...And among the garden people my favourites were the red hibiscus, pink ragged-robin, stephanotis, jasmine, heliotrope, mignonette, quisqualis, a tangle of pink and red and white, the blaze of the tomato-coloured flowers in crisp
bunches, the Indian honeysuckle, the “Elephant Creeper”,...the sweet scented geranium and verbena that one crushed between the fingers...(India Calling, Part I, “Faites Vos Jeux” – “At Oxford”)

The introductory pages of India Calling reveal the writer being haunted by memories and impressions of the happy days spent in the various parts of India. She nostalgically states:

I inhale the past in great whiffs. The eyes of my Mother, whatever her mood: my Father’s laugh: the clearings in the woods near our home and the many games we played as children: the branches of the forest trees on moonlit nights as we swung from one another: the stars hanging like lamps out of an indigo sky reaching immeasurably...the smell of the earth after the rains, the wonder of thunder and lightning: camping in India and waking in the dawn hour to sniff the sour-sweet mango blossoms and hear the lovely sounds of a camp astir...Dawn at Darjeeling with the snows coming alive with colour, early morning rides in the hills, the trees dripping dew-”And all growing things I offer, thus before the world has soiled them...” (India Calling, “Faites Vos Jeux”, Intr., pp. ix to xi.)

Interestingly the writer could entertain such passionate love for two homes, two countries at the same time and more surprisingly that she should have completely identified herself with the women of her country and dedicated herself to the cause of their well-being and upliftment without being carried away by the glamour of the West. It was always the land of her birth which called to her with utmost insistence.

India Calling and India Recalled bear ample testimony to the very dynamic way in which she was involving herself in the social problems of her mother country, particularly those relating to women. The incidents of the Burning Ghat in Part IV of India Calling, the gruesome story of Anarkali, the child daughter-in-law who was being prepared for the ordeal of “Suttee” even from childhood or again the plight of the ‘co-widows’ in joint families or the
misfortunes of Giribala Dasi, the young widow who is condemned to miserable isolation, is best summed up in the words of K.S. Ramamurti as:

...we feel that we are reading fiction which is poignantly human.
(Rise of the Indian Novel in English p.88)

These works show that Sorabji with her English background and upbringing had not only made the English language and culture part of her own intellectual and emotional make-up but had also sought to bring about a fusion and reconciliation between the language and the culture and the demands of a thinking and sensibility which were unmistakably Indian.

Thus the women writers of the beginning of Indian Writing in English candidly touched upon the issues relating to women of their times and attempted through their writing to bring a change in society by education and awareness.

Almost by the end of the mid-twentieth century Indian Writing in English also witnesses bold experimentation with the novel form. G.V. Desani’s All About H. Hatterr (1948) serves as an appropriate illustration of this innovative style.

XV

All About H. Hatterr (1948) is a classic novel by G.V. Desani chronicling the adventures of an Anglo-Malay man in search of wisdom and enlightenment. Wildly funny and wonderfully bizarre, it is one of the most perfectly and strangely absorbing works modern English has produced. H. Hatterr is the son of a European merchant officer and a lady from Penang who
has been raised and educated in a missionary school in Calcutta. His story is a search for enlightenment as in the course of visiting seven oriental cities, he consults with seven sages, each of whom specializes in a different aspect of “Living”. Each teacher delivers himself of a great “Generality”, each great Generality launches a new great “Adventure”.

The mad English of All About H. Hatterr is a thoroughly self-conscious and finely controlled performance. The book is a comic extravaganza, but as Anthony Burgess writes in the introduction:

…it is the language that makes the book...It is not pure English; it is like Shakespeare, Joyce, and Kipling, gloriously impure. (All About H. Hatterr - Introduction)

The content and literary importance of this work are nearly inseparable. Salman Rushdie, in his preface to Mirrorwork anthology of Indian Writing has placed Desani at roughly at the same rank of importance as R.K. Narayan. He remarks:

...all modern literature descends from either Richardson’s Clarissa or Sterne’s Tristram Shandy, and if Narayan is India’s Richardson than Desani is his Shandean other. Hatter’s dazzling, puzzling, leaping prose is the first genuine effort to beyond the Englishness of the English language...Hard to imagine I. Allan Sealy’s Trotter-Nama without Desani. My own writing too, learned a trick or two from him. (xviii)

Desani’s importance was to take the colonial bequest and turn it against itself. Salman Rushdie observes:

The instrument of subservience became a weapon of liberation. It was the first great stroke of the decolonizing pen. (Mirrorwork x)

One of the most outstanding characteristics of Indian Writing in English is that the background is Indian and the language though foreign, has adapted to the needs of the Indians. The issues, concerns and the themes too are Indian.
This has provided a distinct identity to Indian Writing in English. Though the triumvirates are instrumental in providing this distinct Indianess and identity to the writings, these concerns and issues raised in their works are different and their treatment of the issues too is different.

The modern Indian writer of the Indian Novel in English has shown a capacity to accommodate a wide range of concerns. Owing to the peculiar situation in which he finds himself the Indian writer in English, who wishes to deal with significant modern experience, finds himself preoccupied with one major theme and its ramifications, whatever his ostensible subject may be.

The usual theme of Anand’s novels is social or economic or the political expression of the individuals. Before him, numerous novels of social protest were written, but it was Anand who for the first time wrote about the waifs, the disinherited, the lowly and the have-nots. In his novels, Anand is wholeheartedly devoted to the life of the poorest of the poor and the lost. He is also concerned with the orphans, untouchables and urban labourers and it is he who is credited with being the first to depict them as protagonists in his works. His works highlight the suffering of the poor Indians and emphasize on the need for restoration of sympathy and compassion in the world lost in industrialism, capitalism and communalism.

Anand is a master in writing about the miseries of the have-nots, but that does not mean that he is blind towards the social, economic or the political issues concerning the middle-class. Thus in the next three novels The Village, Across the Black Waters and The Sword and the Sickle, he changes his focus
to Lalu Singh, the son of a village farmer who becomes a soldier. Lalu’s boyhood, youth and early manhood are the themes of the trilogy.

Anand’s novels are written with a specific purpose of discussing a special problem. Thus it can be safely stated that Anand emphasized the problem novel. At the same time as he uses his works to convey his political, social and economic views to the readers, the element of propaganda is obvious on the very surface of his novels.

Distinct from Anand, R.K. Narayan has no other motive in his works than giving his readers the delight and joy of creative art. Though he does not deal with certain human problems, his treatment of the novels is incidental, mild and casual. Unlike Anand he does not believe in presenting the full magnitude of the tragedy and the poignancy of the situation. Narayan is satisfied with depicting the contours of Malgudi, that provides the background of all his fourteen novels.

Narayan is matchless amongst the novelist of his age in characterization. He is also an excellent story-teller. The plots of his works revolve around human relationships. Although his plots are often slender and there is rarely anything spectacular or distinctive about them, yet Narayan has the power of keeping the readers in suspense and playing on their curiosity. He entertains his readers by evoking genuine and simple laughter.

The contribution of Raja Rao, the third of the triumvirate is very meagre compared to his counterparts as only Kanthapura is published before independence and majority of his works are in the post-independence period.
The political, social and religious aspect of the general run of the people has been selected by Raja Rao in his novel *Kanthapura* which deals with the political events of the thirties. The novelist artistically presents the political, religious and social awakening that was witnessed in the Indian subcontinent in the twenties and the thirties of the twentieth century. Mahatma Gandhi was the main inspiration behind this awakening. In the novel, Gandhiji’s impact is conveyed through Moorthy, the hero, who is able to transform the life of an entire community from the bondage of highly conservative orthodoxy to struggle and sacrifice for an ideal.

The individual contribution of Anand, Narayan and Raja Rao to the Indo-Anglian novel, as well as its development, is very great and outstanding. There were other talented writers during their time and even before them, but they were happy to produce a stray novel or two only and were engaged in their profession of law, teaching, politics, civil service, journalism etc. They lacked the stamina, stern consistency of purpose which is observed in the triumvirate. It is these three writers who steered the course of the Indian Writing in English. They established its assumptions, sketched its main themes, freed the first models of its characters and elaborated its peculiar logic. Each of these writers used an easy, natural idiom which was unaffected by the opacity of the British inheritance.