CHAPTER I

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Aristotle defined man as a social animal. It was maintained later that man is more animal than social. He is significantly shaped by contemporary social, political, religious and cultural conditions. The present study aims at analysing in depth the social ethos in the fictional world of Khushwant Singh, an Indian English novelist of considerable worth.

Ethos, according to The Shorter Oxford English Dictionary, refers to "the prevalent tone of sentiment of a people or community; the genius of an institution or system". It signifies, as Webster's Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary points out, "the distinguishing character, sentiment, moral nature, or guiding beliefs of a person, group or institution". According to the Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary of Current English also, it means "characteristics of a community or of a racial culture; code


of values by which a group or society lives. 3 Social ethos thus connotes social attitudes, inter-racial relations which combine literary, political, historical, sociological and cultural elements and so on in a community.

Literature in a way may be regarded as an expression of a writer's response to a given situation lived or perceived by him. Most writers of fiction have to face in this process an inevitable clash between the ideal and the real. Realizing their strengths and limitations and those of their craft, they find some conditions disagreeable. When they cannot bring about desired changes, their tone, tenor and content assume an aggressive posture, and in their fictional domain they seek to break this putrid world into bits and then reshape it according to their dreams and designs. Thus literature in general and fiction in particular, because of its intrinsic form, becomes an efficacious means of voicing dissent and protest of the author who disapproves of prevailing practices.

Fiction is an ordered restructuring of reality by means of which the bewildering multiplicity of life is reduced into an artistic unity. The movement of the creative process in fiction is from disorder to order and from particular to general. What the novelist — or, for that matter, any writer of imaginative literature — attempts

to do is to introduce "a little order into this chaos" of experimental existence. A novelist sets out to present his own vision of life. As Leon Surmelian points out, "reality itself is beyond our grasp when we try to express in words", and the novelist has to fight through a fog to make his meaning clear. Only a person with a special sensitivity for words can attempt an aesthetic recreation of life successfully.

Lionel Trilling says that writing of a novel is "a perpetual quest for reality" and "the most effective agent of the moral imagination" in the present-day world, for it deals with problems faced by modern man. The writings of Indian English novelists are no exception to it. Questions have been raised from time to time whether Indian English novel is a part of the Indian tradition or of the abstract world tradition or English tradition. Despite its medium, it is, like any regional language literature, part of Indian literature. An Indian novelist faces many problems including those in respect of the choice of a subject, the choice of medium, the choice of technique, the choice of audience and so on. Whatever be the subject — a patch of the past history, a segment of contemporary life, a problem in ethics or politics or a revolutionary eruption

5. Ibid., p. 3.
in body politic — a novelist is obliged to transcend in his writing the merely local and controversial, and attain the vitality and dignity of creative literature. Even when he grasps the timeless, he does it through a temporal medium, attaining universal knowledge through concrete moments of experience. In such an experience the novelist is sustained by the intellectual and spiritual climate of the society to which he belongs.

India has had a rich tradition of narrative fiction. There were so many longer and shorter stories in Sanskrit, Pali, Prakrit and Apabhramsa literatures. There were fables, parables, folktales, religious tales and so on. Among them, a special mention may be made of Subandhu's Vasavadatta, Bana's Kadambari Dandin's Daskumarcharita, and Dhanpal's Tilakmanjari, which proved to be models of Indian novels. A Jain Muni Sidharshigani had written a saga named Upmitibhavaprapanchkatha. These facts show that long before the emergence of the Western model of the form of the novel, we in India had a long tradition of novels, which have their own novelty, Indianness and fictional norms. These novels were spread out in the whole country and were enjoyed by the people for several centuries. But, as we know, there is no relation between these older fictional works and modern novels.

Indians have made the most significant literary contribution in the field of fiction. Indian fiction in English can be said to belong to three periods:

(i) Upto 1920: The age of religious and Political awakening.
(ii) 1921 to 1947: The Gandhian Era.
(iii) 1948 onwards: Independence and after.  

The beginning of the Indian novel in English can be traced back to the publication of Bakim Chandra Chatterjee's Rajmohan's Wife in 1864. The first period of Indian English fiction is characterised by cultivated mediocrity. Indians writing then in English were under the spell of early Victorian novelists. Bhupal Singh writes:

Indian writers and story-tellers on the whole do not compare favourably with Anglo-Indian writers that they wrote in a foreign tongue is a serious handicap in itself. Then few of them possess any knowledge of the art of fiction. They do not seem to realize that prose fiction, in spite of its freedom, is subject to definite laws. In plot construction they are weak, and in characterization weaker still. Their leaning towards didacticism and allegory is a further obstacle to their success as novelists. As writers of short stories they have occasionally achieved success.  

Indian English novel started like a toddling child — its steps were faltering, but it was trying to imitate the

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elders and it had an abundant energy to learn and improve. All the novels of this period belong to tastes and times of a bygone age, which have little appeal for the readers today. Moreover, these novelists have now become difficult to be studied or appreciated because "to appreciate the art of another period one must, to a certain extent, enter into its spirit, accept its conventions, and adopt, 'a willing suspension of disbelief' in its values." Consequently, Roshanara by Kali Krishna Lahiri or Bijoy Chand by H. Dutta, for example, are novels of antiquarian interest for us.

The second period of the development of Indian English novel began with the end of the World War I. Its impact began gradually to be mirrored in literature from 1921 onwards. The War with its grim carnage had stirred the conscience of the entire world. But Indian writers were doubly affected by it. The Indian freedom movement led by Mahatma Gandhi gradually spread over the length and breadth of India. Many a writer wrote the songs of freedom and martyrdom. Stories and novels on these themes were also written during this period. The realistic novel with a purpose appeared in its own right bringing with it new inspiration, new technique, and new vision. The novels of this period show a remarkable advance over those written before 1920. There had been a major shift in the selection of themes. The burning problems of the people now occupied Indian English novelists, who tried to have a close grip on

life, with its joys, sorrows, hatred and love. This brought realism to the forefront. Long digressions and tedious descriptions started disappearing from the novel, and conscious and better artistry became clearly visible in some of them. As George Barrett remarks,

The style of the [latter] authors shows better polish and grace. The renaissance in Indo-Anglian literature has achieved its flowering. The toddling Indo-Anglian novel, in spite of the handicaps, has by now learnt to stand firmly on its own legs. A conscious and decisive pattern has evolved itself.\(^\text{11}\)

Moreover, Indian novels of the second period bear impress of Gandhiji's views and personality and reverberate with the glorification of truth, non-violence, non-cooperation, village uplift, Charkha, Khadi, prohibition, Hindu-Muslim unity, the abolition of untouchability, and so on.

Various novelists, like people all over India, came under the spell of the freedom movement. R.K. Narayan from the South, Mulk Raj Anand and C.N. Zutshi from the North, and Frieda Das from the East of India — all these authors were inspired by the same cause. If they could not take part directly in the struggle for Independence, they contributed to it on an intellectual plane by keeping alive the patriotism in pages of their work. As M.K. Naik suggests, the Gandhian movement makes a significant contribution to the growth and maturity of Indian English

fiction. There is an "intimate connection between the growth of the freedom movement and the rise of the Indian novel in English" Naik remarks elsewhere:

\[\text{Upto 1930's there was no Indian novelist who could claim sustained and considerable achievement in fiction originally written in English. Then came a sudden flowering, and it is significant that it came in the 1930's a period during which the glory that was Gandhi's attained perhaps its brightest splendour ——. It is possible to see a connection between this development and the rise of Indian novels, in English, for fiction of all literary forms, as most vitally concerned with social conditions and values.}\]

Some writers took cognizance of the East-West encounter, and one can also detect western elements in their sensibility. A classic non-fictional example of this fusion is to be found in Nirad C. Chaudhuri's The Autobiography of An Unknown Indian (1951) and A Passage to England (1959). As Jawahar Lal Nehru observes in The Discovery of India (1961), India "looked to the West and at the same time her own past."

The third period of development of Indian English novel begins from about 1948. In India's history 1947 was the year of great joy and equally of great sorrow. On 15th


August 1947 India became free from the British rule. But along with the freedom came the unending lines of refugees from Pakistan with stories of untold and inhuman sufferings; and communal frenzy maddened the people on both the sides of our frontiers. These events deeply stirred the consciousness of the nation and many a writer tried to interpret those momentous events according to his own understanding.

The growth of historical novel coincided with the intensification of the struggle for Indian freedom, and the contemporary socio-political concerns. The novels written during this period can be easily divided into six kinds:

(a) The Rural Novels - e.g. novels of Bhabani Bhattacharya and Kamala Markandaya.

(b) The Social Novels - e.g. novels of Khwaja Ahmad Abbas, G.V. Desani, Zeenut Futehally, R. Prawar Jhabvala, Nayantara Sehgal, Anand Lall, Attia Hosain, Sachindra Muzumdar, Khushwant Singh, Kamala Markandaya, Bhabani Bhattacharya and others.

(c) The Historical Novels - e.g. Khushwant Singh's *Train to Pakistan*.

(d) The Romances - e.g. Ram Saran Sharma's stories, Purushottam Tricumdas's novels.

(e) The Political Novels - e.g. *In Transit* by Venu Chitale.

(f) Humorous Novels - e.g. novels by Sudhin Ghose and G.V. Desani.
No doubt, the most important historical event of our age, as evident from the writings of Indian English novelists, was the partition of the sub-continent. The Englishmen left the country with bag and baggage in 1947 after dividing the country into two parts, namely, India and Pakistan. The religious and political differences between Hindus and Muslims, which climaxed with this event, led to widespread disturbances, causing destruction of human life on a scale unprecedented in the recent history of the sub-continent. There was let loose a communal fury which caused a great havoc and misery. In the massacres which immediately preceded the partition and continued for several months afterwards, at least one million Hindus and Muslims lost their lives. There was a large-scale migration of people from one part to the other. In the process, thousands were massacred, women were raped, children flung on spears and property looted on a vast scale.

The Indian English novelists, like their counterparts in Indian languages, responded to these happenings with a sense of horror. A number of novels were written on the theme of partition, the destruction it brought about and the plight of the refugees, which provided a telling commentary on the breakdown of human values. A strain of despair and disillusionment is predominant in these novels.

Khushwant Singh, Chaman Nahal, Salman Rushdie and others have made a specific use of history of the period.
Our freedom movement is the greatest historical fact of modern India. All the happenings associated with the freedom movement and partition find place with minute details in the fictional works of these novelists. They help us understand the problems from different standpoints. They also enable us to understand the predicament of contemporary Indians.

Moreover, Indian English fiction reflects social comprehensiveness, the ethnic diversity, of the sub-continent to a surprising extent. Khushwant Singh, in his novels *Train to Pakistan* (1956) and *I Shall Not Hear the Nightingale* (1959) and elsewhere, acts as a social chronicler. Set in Punjab with a pastoral background, his works depict the human conditions of the time. The representation of the contemporary socio-cultural and political conditions is realistic and the novelist aims at an objective interpretation of scenes and situations, men and things in India. His writings give an authentic picture of the modes of life of people, their thoughts and feelings, their innermost urges and longings, and their fulfilments and frustrations, which left a profound effect on the psyche of the people and formed part of their cultural ethos. These cultural patterns developed through a process of individuation and enabled the people to evolve their identity. Khushwant Singh gives a befitting expression to Indians' urges, which issue from their cultural consciousness. While giving expression to these cultural
patterns, he depicts facets of human experience, which are individual, social, racial and national in scope, though not always universal. The present work aims at making an in-depth analysis of the socio-cultural ethos projected so powerfully in Khushwant Singh's fiction.