Chapter 6

Political and Historical Concerns

A nation is a soul, a spiritual principle. Two things constitute this soul or spiritual principle... One is the possession in common of a rich legacy of memories... The other is present day consent, the desire to live together, the will to perpetuate the value of the heritage that one has received in an undivided form. The nation, like the individual, is the culmination of a long past of endeavours, sacrifice and devotion. Of all cults, that of the ancestors is the most legitimate, for the ancestors have made us what we are. A heroic past, great men, glory... that is the social capital upon which one bases a national idea.

Ernest Renan

6.1. The Fiction-History Interface: A Brief Introduction

According to Linda Hutcheon (cited in Marshall 1992), postmodernist representations affirm only to subvert and subvert in order to affirm. The Indian English novels of the 1980s, with the exception of three non-postmodernist texts, Raj, Days of the Turban and A Fine Family, both affirm and interrogate, in their uses of history, the pan-Indian idea of the nation and its shared experiences of the colonial encounter and its aftermath. Almost all of them represent 'the story of the nation, made by middle-class nationalist politicians (which) has a well-defined narrative form, established origins, narrative watersheds, and an agreed upon chronology of significant events.' (Kortenaar 1995:42). The
result is a largely macro view of history, with its emphasis on events and personalities, rather than a scrutiny of the complexities and fluidities of the historical process. This version, with its focus on accepted watershed events in history, is then problematised and subverted by the intervention of myths, symbols, low-brow representations of history in the form of diaries, letters, news reports and oral narratives in works of 'historiographic metafiction' (Hutcheon cited in Marshall 1992) like Midnight's Children, Shadow Lines, The Great Indian Novel and The Trotternama, and a persistent use of the ironic mode in dealing with both fiction and history. In the process, the novels 'demythologise the political mythologies constructed and projected by the ruling groups' (Jaidev 1987:35). However, this subversion is carried out within the framework of a very emotional commitment to 'the narrative of the nation' (Kortenaar 1995:42). Novels like Days of the Turban, A Suitable Boy and A Fine Family, valorise the construct of the nation while Midnight's Children and The Great Indian Novel employ postmodernist strategies to serve almost Orwellian warnings about the disintegration of the nation to actively acknowledge, accept, subsume and explore the pluralities and multiple identities that make up India.

Family history is linked to the history of the nation in a 'micro-macro symbiosis' (Dhar 1999:16), making in the process, the family the
basic, seminal unit of the nation. Further, since the narratives are interlinked with the concept of nationhood, there is little scope for histories which speak for the marginalized communities like the lower classes and lower castes that constitute the pluralities that form India. So, history in the sense of a past recoverable by radical historians seeking the traces and the empty spaces left in the archives by classes other than intellectuals – the subaltern studies project (Guha and Spivak), works only to some extent in Agastya Sen’s encounter with the tribals in English, August, and traces of it may be found in history that is ‘swept under the carpet’ (like that of the Hummingbird) in Midnight’s Children. Thus, in the traditional novels, the voices of the pluralities of India may often be subsumed under the grand narrative of the nation-state. However, novels that work within a postmodernist framework, like Midnight’s Children, The Shadow Lines, The Trotternama and The Great Indian Novel make an attempt to question the canonised versions by projecting them through multiple voices and perspectives.

6.2.1. ‘The Narratives of the Nation’

Timothy Brennan in ‘The National Longing for Form’ has worked out the essential links that bind the novel as a form of literature with the nation and the growth of nationalism. He points out that ‘it was
essentially the novel as a composite but clearly bordered work of art that was crucial in defining the nation as an "imagined community" (Brennan 1989:48). This connection is very obvious in the very title of Homi Bhabha’s anthology Nation and Narration (1990). It is interesting to note that Bhabha lays great store by Tom Narain’s term ‘the modern Janus’ with reference to the nation. It points to the essentially ambivalent nature of the term, and includes within its scope ‘the attempt by nationalist discourse persistently to produce the idea of the nation as a continuous narrative of national progress, the narcissism of self-generation’ (Bhabha 1990:1). It also points to Anderson’s ‘imagined political community’, ‘thought out’ and ‘created’ – made possible by

Enormous increases in physical mobility, imperial Russification programmes sponsored by the colonial state as well as by corporate capital,... the spread of modern style education [which] created a large bilingual section which could mediate linguistically between the metropolitan nation and the colonised people.

(Chatterjee 1996:20-21).

Further, as Aijaz Ahmed points out

the issue of nationalism is... difficult to settle, because nationalism is no unitary thing, and so many different kinds of ideologies and political practices have invoked the nationalist claim that it is very hard to think of nationalism at the level of theoretical abstraction alone, without weaving into his abstraction the experience of particular
nationalisms and distinguishing between progressive and retrograde kinds of practice.

(Ahmed 1994:7)

In the Indian perspective, the idea of the nation is inevitably associated, on the one hand, with the idea of secularism and cosmopolitanism, which insists upon the composite nature of Indian society with its varieties/diversities in language, races, religions, and on the other, with its conception in terms of a Hindu 'Rashtra' which seeks to subsume the pluralities of India within an umbrella-fold of religion/politics-as-religion and a right wing ideology. The 'Hindu' base of Indian nationalism is as obvious in the very terminology applied to it by a person like Gandhi – 'Ram Rajya', or the use of the idea of 'Akhand Bharat' by resurgent right wing groups. This is the assertive, strident face of nationalism, in contrast with the more 'tolerant' Nehruvian vision of the nation as an institution which would guarantee 'equal rights of citizenship, irrespective of religious, linguistic or other cultural differences' (Chatterjee 1994:141). Sunil Khilnani summarises these attitudes to nationalism as follows:

National Hindus asserted that Indian unity could be found in a common culture derived from religion; Gandhi, too, settled on religion as a source of interconnection among Indians, but manufactured his own eclectic and pluralistic morality from different religious traditions; others, for
whom, Nehru became the most effective spokesman, turned away from religion and discovered a basis for unity both in a shared historical past of cultural mixing, and a future project of common development.

(Khilnani 1997:154)

The novel of the 1980s, a product of the 'large bilingual section' of the Indian elites that Chatterjee (1996) speaks of, inevitably veers close to the Nehruvian model, which supplies the emotional core to the issue. On the other hand, the concept of the nation as an artificial 'construct' rather than an intrinsic emotional entity, is also focussed upon. Thus, the shifting national identities of characters like Aadam Aziz/Saleem Sinai in Midnight's Children, the ambivalences of the shadow lines that divide nations in Ghosh's novel and which incite the grandmother to ask where exactly the borders between India and Bangla Desh/East Pakistan begin and end, further highlighted by the ambiguities of simple concepts like 'going home' and 'coming home' with reference to Dhaka project the processes involved in the 'making' or the construction of the nation-state.

On a more political, even literal level, the 'constitution' of the Indian nation in The Great Indian Novel, with its highly satirical and comical account of the role of Vidur (Sardar Patel), in getting Kashmir to join the Indian Union and the decision of the princely states in Raj to become a part of democratic India, are both a case in point. By and large, the India
that the novels of the 1980s project is a young postcolonial nation shaped, created and constructed by the colonial experience, with an urban, upper-class, upper-caste bias, trying to establish its credentials within the discourses of democracy and socialism, and threatened by the forces of disruption on the religious, political and cultural levels. The only novels that escape this dark vision are Gita Mehta’s Raj, Gurcharan Das’ A Fine Family and Partap Sharma’s Days of the Turban, which focus on the ‘triumphs’ of the Indian polity: the bright future envisaged by Jaya when she joins the mainstream of Indian politics in Raj, the economic and spiritual resurgence of Arjun in A Fine Family and the successful flushing out of the terrorists in Days of the Turban.

6.2.2. A Macro-view of Politics/History

The location of the novels in the 1980s within the framework of nationalism, when it is perceived as ‘a discourse of order’, and ‘the rational organisation of power’, appears to give them a unitary character in which ‘the discourse is not only conducted in a single, consistent, unambiguous voice, it also succeeds in glossing over all earlier contradictions, divergences and differences’, the ‘moment of arrival’ of Nehruvian socialist thought as Chatterjee refers to it (Chatterjee 1994:51). Among the ‘essentials’ of a nation that Ernest Renan outlines, viz. race,
language, material necessity, religious affinities, and material necessities, he emphasises that it is the past 'the possession in common of a rich legacy of memories' that shapes it into 'a soul', 'a spiritual principle', 'a spiritual family' (Bhabha 1990:18-19). This accounts for the near-complete obsession with the retrieval of a shared past in the novels of the 1980s, shaped by concerns of nation and nationality.

Inevitably, this nation-history combination leads to what T N Dhar (1999) has called a macro view of politics and history. This macro view implies an identification of history with larger political movements, and issues of colonisation, the freedom struggle, and the attempts of a nation to decolonise itself, take centre-stage; in the narratives it is revealed in what Meenakshi Mukherjee (2000) has referred to as the anxiety of Indianness. Writers like Rushdie in Midnight's Children employ this canonised version of the past as a strategic starting point and then press it into the service of the Brennanian 'myths of the nation'. What is interesting is that when these novels go back to the past, it is inevitably the colonial past they stress, emphasising the centrality of the colonial experience of the construction of the nation; in this macro-view of history, the Indian nation is a by-product of the colonial encounter. This urban-centric and elitist view is echoed even by Khilnani:

What made possible the self-invention of a national
community was the fact of alien conquest and
colonial subjection.

(Khilnani 1997:155)

None of the novels ventures into the territory of pre-colonial India or into local, regional or untold aspects of the process of history.

6.2.3. 'Demythologising the political mythologies'

The 'grand narratives' of the nation, with their focus on the colonial encounter, the political manoeuvrings between the British and Indians, and among Indians themselves, high-profile canonised events and personalities, present a streamlined, mainstream account which, on the one hand, finds acceptance in the Indian English novel of the 1980s, and on the other, is subverted and broken down with the help of a highly subjective interpretation of the events/personalities. Novels like A Fine Family, Raj, A Suitable Boy and The Days of the Turban use history in a traditional manner, reporting the accepted 'truth' of historical happenings. But Midnight's Children, The Trotternama and The Great Indian Novel, problematise this fixed notion of history by employing postmodernist narrative strategies, - 'micropolitics, language games, parodic skirmishes, irony, fragmentation' (Waugh 1992:5) to cause disruption of these narratives from within and to demythologise them.
Thus, the boundaries between fiction and history become fluid. As Brenda Marshall says, the very concept of history is opened up to multiple interpretations:

History in the postmodernist moment becomes histories and questions. It asks: Whose history gets told? In whose name? For what purpose? Postmodernism is about histories not told, retold, untold. History as it never was. Histories forgotten, hidden, invisible, considered unimportant, changed, eradicated. Its about the refusal to see history as linear, as leading straight up to today in some recognisable pattern – all set for us to make sense of.

(Marshall 1992:4)

In an essay written in 1983, “‘Errata’, or, Unreliable Narration I Midnight’s Children”, Rushdie links the subjectivity of the narratives with the conception of the unreliability of history itself:

History is always ambiguous. Facts are hard to establish, and capable of being given many meanings. Reality is built on our prejudices, misconceptions and ignorance as well as on our perceptiveness and knowledge.

(Rushdie 1991:25)

And Saleem recreates it ‘by cutting up history to suit himself, just as he did when he cut up newspapers to compose his earlier texts, the anonymous note to Colonel Sabarmati’ (ibedum:24). Thus, factual errors, like the ones catalogued by Rushdie in this essay, become the remembered truth; they may be ‘false memory’, or rather the Foucauldian ‘counter-memory’ but for Rushdie, they are more valid than ‘mere literal
happenstance' (ibedum:24). This subjectivity is, further, highlighted by the plethora of narrative voices used, ranging from the unnamed, growing narrator in the *The Shadow Lines*, to the voices of Saleem Sinai in *Midnight’s Children*, V.V.ji in *The Great Indian Novel* and the decrepit Eugene in *The Trotternama*. These novels, thus, focus on ‘the telling of history in narrative form’ (Marshall 1992:147), so that history becomes more an act of enunciation than a mere chronological, objective record of past events. All of them present a personalised, localised point of view, leaving room for alternative versions and multiple points of view. Their ‘master narrative’ however, is debunked by including other voices -- the narration of narrations -- Ila and Tridib in *The Shadow Lines*, the babel of the midnight’s children, the accounts of Mik and the other Trotters in *The Trotternama*, and the pronouncements of Gangaji, Vidur and the others in *The Great Indian Novel*. This debunking imbues the narratives with a flexibility which takes into account the pluralities of a given situation. Further, there is the filtering of the narratives through an agent: Padma, the impatient, initial recipient of Saleem Sinai’s account in *Midnight’s Children*, Ganapathy, the impetuous amanuensis of V.V.ji in *The Great Indian Novel*, the narrator’s mosaics of memory in *The Shadow Lines*, and the loose manuscript which Eugene shows to a number of people and in which he claims to hand down the story of the Trotters. Inevitably,
their responses become part of the narratives, offering critiques, parodying and raising possible objections to the narrations and leaving scope for multiple interpretations of the narratives that confront the reader.

Apart from being highly subjective, the use of history in the novels is fragmented, elliptical and truncated as well; there is no smooth, continuous account of the flow of events, no straightline progression of the career(s) of the personalities involved. Rather, significant fictional characters from the families portrayed are located temporally at important moments of history and made witness/participant/victim to them. So, Tridib in The Shadow Lines, is brutally killed by a rioting mob at Dhaka; and Aadam Aziz, receives a bullet injury during the firing at Jallianwala Baug; the Trotters take an active part in the 1857 'sepoy mutiny'. Even in a more straightforward narrative like A Fine Family, events like the independence of India, the partition riots and the Emergency form high points of the lives of characters like Bauji and the protagonist Arjun. Thus the family history/ national history interface emerges as at least as important as the history/fiction interface. Mainstream history is, thus, often, streamlined to fit in with family histories and this aspect itself can reveal the postmodern unreliability of the narratives.

The sources of both these histories are also subjective – the simulated oral narratives of Saleem Sinai, the letters of Fonseca and
Tridib, the diaries maintained by Mik, the documentation by the historians in Trotternama, the stories told by Tridib to his credulous nephew, the dreams of the disrobing of Draupadi,... the list can go on.

Finally, the use of myths and symbols in the postmodern narratives is imbued with irony; while using the original myths as springboards to the action, their subversion leads to a reassessment of not only the historical reality, but also of the myths themselves, as is obvious in the case of *The Great Indian Novel*, which is a neat, if rather strained reworking of the *Mahabharata*. Apart from the overall patterning of the novel, this process is evident even in smaller details like the story of Arjuna’s abduction of Subhadra on the promptings of her brother Krishna, or the intricate reworking of the Eklavya myth, which is used to explore the caste politics of modern India, by extending the scope of the original story to make Eklavya a candidate in the Presidential election. In *The Trotternama*, too, this subversion is employed in the relating of Mik, the blue-black Anglo-Indian boy and his amorous exploits with the Alexandria sisters, with the legends of Krishna.

Thus, on the one hand, novels like *The Shadow Lines, Midnight’s Children, The Trotternama* and *The Great Indian Novel*, recreate and piece together fragments of history, as in the case of the elaborate ‘reconstruction’ of the death of Tridib by coalescing newspaper
reports, remembered conversations, silences, and eye witness accounts of it. The narrations, suffused with irony and subjectivity, present history as a verbal act, a re-writing and remembering, which, therefore, takes on the quality of fiction. On the other hand, the comparatively traditional novels like *A Fine Family, A Suitable Boy, Days of the Turban* and *Raj* take the objectivity of history for granted and place the plot and action within its framework. However, some liberties are taken even by Seth, when he places the 1991 Ayodhya conflict somewhere in 1951. But, the factual accounts these novels present may be contrasted with the ‘constructed’ versions of the postmodernist novels. This chapter will now focus on the depictions of the ‘macro’-events of Indian history in colonial and post-colonial times in the novels studied.

### 6.3.1 The Advent of Colonisation

The three novels which explore the process of colonisation through the fiction-history interface are *The Trotternama, The Great Indian Novel*, and *Raj*. *The Great Indian Novel* and *Raj* present the victims of colonisation, while *The Trotternama* speaks about, at least, partly, from the standpoint of the colonisers and their reluctant allies, the Anglo-Indians, who emerge as both perpetrators as well as the victims of the colonial regimes. *The Trotternama* is also significant, because it takes
into account the role of the French, too, apart from the British, in the colonial process; the half-and-half identity of the Anglo-Indians is reinforced by the fact that the Great Trotter himself is a man with a fractured identity, sometimes French, sometimes British, as per the demands of the time and situation. In *The Great Indian Novel* and *Raj*, it is mainly the British policies of annexation, under the guise of protectionism, that come under attack.

### 6.3.2 The hybrid, half-and-half victims of Imperialism in *The Trotternama*: The Great Trotter and Mik

What had he to do with either France or Britain?  
This was his home—all this. Here he would die…  
here he would be buried

(Sealy 1988:23)

A close reading of *The Trotternama* reveals that the novel is a documentation of the history of the Anglo-Indian community disguised as fiction. The accounts of Coralie Younger (1987), Frank Anthony (1969) and Gaikwad (1967), show how intimately the history of the race figures in it. But apart from objective documentation, the subjectivity in the novel makes it evident that Sealy’s focus is on the desperate need of the Anglo-Indians to *belong* and establish an Indian identity for themselves, right from the time of the progenitor of the race, the Great Trotter himself.
Aloysius Trotter, Frenchman turned Englishman, begins as a complete 'orientalist', seeing binary opposites between the Indian 'them' and the Western 'us':

This country is old and feeble, being hot and wet by turns. It is everything we are not, so that any object you are like to touch upon at home might be fairly argued to have its opposite here. Their cats are thin where ours are sleek, the rivers muddy where ours are clear, their bread flat where ours is risen. Winter is their pleasant season! Our washer-women beat the clothes with a paddle, their washerwomen beat the paddle with their clothes. A tobacco pipe which with us is short and straight is here long and sinuous and pliant, being called a hookah.

(Sealy 1988:118)

However, his amazing adaptability ensures his meteoric rise to the position of the Commander-in-Chief of the army of the Nawab of Trinab, from his extremely humble beginnings as an ensign in the British army. His career, starting with a fascination with Dupleix, represents the confrontation between the British and the French, and focuses on the fact that the French were outnumbered by the British at Madras. In the days of the struggle for supremacy, it is Justin's knowledge of artillery, which benefits the British and gets him fast promotions in the British army. His constant switching of national loyalties serves to represent the pragmatism of a man who rises to the highest positions in the land, by virtue of being able to be on the right side at the right time. But they also touch upon a
deeper chord – that national identities are shadow lines, which can be changed and altered with changing circumstances, instead of being fixed and rigid, rejecting a totalising and homogenising concept of both nation and national identity. The ambiguity surrounding his nationality, also, becomes a symbol for the ambiguous identity of the Anglo-Indian race itself.

Among the features that determine nationality according to Ernest Renan, territory seems to be of very great significance in the case of the Anglo-Indians in *The Trotternama*. The importance of the link between territory and nationality later on crystallises into craving for a homeland of their own. Different nationalities may occupy a territory, but a group of people, to qualify as a nation, must have a territory which they may define as their own, fight for and protect. Thus, as long as the Great Trotter is a wanderer, - not anchored to a particular place, his identity is fluid. When he settles down at Sans Souci at Nakhlau, it is as a Frenchman; but gradually the process of his Indianisation takes over, and changes in dress, food habits, friend circle, his wives, the library he builds, the servants he employs, - all come to represent a mini-India in themselves. Thus, his cuisine:

He gathered around him cooks: Muslim cooks from
Nakhlau, Hindu cooks from Benaras, Parsi cooks from Bombay, Christian cooks from Goa, Daman and Diu, Jewish cooks from Cochin, cooks from Assam to Gujarat, from Kashmir to Kerala.

(Sealy 1988:126)

So, when the Great Trotter dies, he is, no doubt, the Frenchman Trottoire and the British Trotter; but it is his identity as the Indianised Tartar Sahib which remains paramount. His career represents the 17th century spirit of adventure and sea voyages, the trade and subsequent colonisation of India by the two major European powers; also, the plight of the common soldier in both these armies, so that war becomes more a mercenary activity, rather than a manifestation of one's patriotic credentials; he also comes to represent the fact that in the early days of colonisation fortunes could be made through war, trade and patronage. Patronage, particularly, works both ways, - the Nawab of Trinab employs Trotter as his Commander-in-Chief, thus for a while, impressing the British with his power and military prowess, and leading him to create a mini-Empire like the one at Sans Souci.

Mik, his son, is the first Anglo-Indian of the Trotter family, and he becomes the victim of the discrimination of the policies of the British towards the race they have sired, but feel guilty for, since it reveals the darker side of the empire they represent. Disowned, literally and
symbolically by his father and father-race, Mik grows up at orphanages and schools, established by the British in the metros of Bombay, Calcutta and Madras, receiving the benefit of the education offered, but little else; his use as a spy in the British army, for which his dark colour is eminently suitable, his dismissal from service along with the other officers of the community, their joining the Maratha army in which they form a permanent battalion, the suspicion of their loyalties by whichever master they are forced to serve, highlight, not so much, the exploits of the individual Mik, but form a precise, accurate documentation of the plight of the Anglo-Indians before 1857. The novel, at this stage actually quotes orders issued by the government, and the progress of the plot is interwoven with the actual, historical documents of the period. However, this 'objective' reportage is constantly undermined and problematised by the actual experiences of Mik himself and the other Anglo-Indians who share his plight. Mik, like the Great Trotter remains, by and large, homeless and a wanderer, till the time of his inheritance of Sans Souci; and, like his father, his identity and nationality remain fluid and ambiguous. Further, just as Mik has to prove that he is his father's son, the onus of proving their parentage, hence loyalty, falls on the race of the Anglo-Indians at all stages of their history. To a certain extent, this history may be classified as subaltern history, in so far as it speaks for and about a
dispossessed community; it also largely ignores actual battles fought on the macro level between the British, the French and Indians. The aspect of subalternity gains significance from the fact that the literal meaning of the word ‘subaltern’ is, a lowly soldier in the army, -which, in effect, Mik remains throughout his long and varied career. Both Mik and his father, the Great Trotter along with other narrators like Joseph Kahn Trotter, Theobald and even the relentless commentaries of Victoria, become the ‘marginalised narrator-authors’ of the early history of the Anglo-Indian race, and their narratives serve to ‘fracture received notions of the past’ (Marshall 1992:171). Further, the history of the Anglo-Indians does not form a part of the nationalist discourse of the mainstream history of the Indian nation – and even the received notions of it are recreated and retrieved through various voices to question the idea of a single truth about the community.

6.3.3. Protectionism/Annexation of Princely States

‘You see, the British Empire can believe its fairy tales of Justice, because its soul is five thousand miles away in London, too far to learn the price of its justice’.

(Mehta 1993:28)

The construction and consolidation of the British Empire, clearly a mercenary/political activity, needed to legitimatise its repressive policies
and the conquest of India by giving it the guise of reform and justice. As Metcalf points out the dilemma of the British, in the early days of colonisation was dual: ‘How could the British, as members of a society who adopted as their own the ideals of nationalism, in good conscience extend their authority over this distant and densely peopled land?’ (Metcalf 1998:1). Further, the cultural heritage of India was something that the Empire could not afford to ignore, and hence they often sought to justify their actions by taking recourse to what they chose to perceive one or another of the laws of the land. Laws, which were codified, and emerged ‘as a joint product of British scholars and Brahmin pundits’ (Metcalf 1998:12).

The annexation of princely states under some such scheme of ‘justice’ or ‘protection’ is explored both in The Great Indian Novel and in Raj. The straightforward narration of Raj contrasts effectively with the postmodernist disruptions presented in Tharoor’s novel. Raj identifies the economic situation, rising industrialisation, the poverty of the states as the main causes that lead to the signing of unequal treaties between the princes and British India, and the possibility of annexation hanging like the sword of Damocles over their heads. Thus, when Maharaja Jai Singh, in Raj, explains his reasons for the selling of the Balmer Navratan to the Russians, to his Maharani
'If the rains fail again, I shall have to construct a railway and allow foreign factories to be built in Balmer. I must arrange loans so the farmers don't have to sell their land to the Angrez companies at unreasonable prices',

(Mehta 1993:37),

her panic at its consequences shows how real the threat is

'You cannot do this! If the British discover you have broken the terms of your treaty with the Empire and dealt independently with a foreign power, especially Russia... [They] will exile you from Balmer! They will take your throne! They will refuse to recognise Tikka as your heir, and invest him of his rightful ruling powers! You know they can invoke the terrible Doctrine of Lapse'.

(Mehta 1993:37)

So, when Tikka dies in battle, in the service of the British army, and Maharaja Jai Singh is murdered, the British do not hesitate to pass on the reins of the kingdom to the son of the more loyalist, Raja Man Singh, who is also his murderer, and he is made king on the grounds that the earlier Raja has not left a male heir to the throne. That is why, later on, even the defunct marriage of Jaya and Prince Pratap has to be consummated: the kingdom needs an heir if it is to remain outside the fold of the British empire.

In The Great Indian Novel, the annexation of Hastinapur is viewed with more sarcasm and cynicism than in Raj. The self-conscious,
narratorial voice of V.V. ji and the knowledge that it is a tale being dictate to the amanuensis, Ganapathy, lends the account the wisdom and irony of hindsight, and imbues it with a more reflective, reflexive and even analytical quality. The author takes care to fill the reader in with the circumstances that lead to the sinister move on the part of the British Resident:

Motihari was like so many other districts of India – large, dry, full of ragged human beings eking out a living from land which has seen too many pitiful scratchings on its unyielding surface. There was starvation in Motihari, not because the land did not produce enough for its tillers to eat, but because it could not, under the colonists’ laws be entirely devoted to keeping them alive. Three-tenths of every man’s land had to be consecrated to indigo, since the British needed cash-crops more than they needed wheat. This might not have been so bad had there been some profit to be had from it, but there was none. For the indigo had to be sold to the British planters at a fixed price – fixed, that is, by the buyer.

(Tharoor 1989:50)

The exchange between Sir Richard and Heaslop, parodic of a ‘serious’ moment of threat and comic in tone not only the ‘anticipatory satisfaction’ and the glee with which the plot is hatched but also presents it as a Foucauldian ‘supplement’ of the mainstream version of the event. Since Ganga Datta has taken up the cause of the peasants of Motihari, the perfect excuse to annex Hastinapur has been found. A farcical legal quibble, that
Gangaji has ‘forgotten’ to inform the British of his abdication of the throne years ago, in favour of Dhritarashtra and Pandu, provides the cover that whatever is being done is according to the laws of the land, in keeping with the assumed sense of British righteousness and fairplay:

‘We’re entitled to consider him to be in full exercise of the powers of Regent until we have been formally notified otherwise... He has no business going about preaching sedition outside the borders of the state ... Conduct unbecoming of a native ruler.’

(Tharoor 1989:62)

Tharoor has brilliantly captured the fact that Indians do not share this view by making the annexation of Hastinapur the direct cause of the tragedy at Bibigarh Gardens, one of the darkest chapters of British rule in India being the Jallianwala Bagh massacre which it represents.

Finally, indigo cultivation, used to such dramatic effect in the annexation of Hastinapur, becomes in The Trotternama, an effective tragic-comic-parodic metaphor for the whole process of colonisation; Sealy has encapsulated the entire process in this short ‘culinary’ account of the introduction of indigo cultivation by Mik at Nakhla:

I wish to show how a fortune is made. Good adept, take twelve villages, more if small. Empty the smallest and raze the huts. This is no great matter with huts made of mud. The villagers will complain, but their memories are short and you have now an additional field. When you have land sufficient, explain to the cultivators (or send one to explain) that wheat will not
do, nor corn nor chick-peas. The new crop, the improved crop, the miracle crop, is a cash crop, paid for in money. (Here you or your agent will hold up a coin.) The villagers will complain, but there is now a body of labourers and division in the ranks ... Every fifth year you must uproot. Your labourers have by now forgotten that they have ever cropped anything but indigo (nil) and are quite happy to be called, after the plant nilchis, viz., blue-chis or blue ones.

(Sealy 1989:150-151)

The process contains within it all the ‘ingredients’ essential for colonising a people, - usurpation, incitement with cash rewards, transition from an agricultural to and industrial set-up, the policy of divide and rule; - all that brings about a complete negation of the identity of the peasants, who, even without their realising it, are transformed into nilchis – a potent symbol for an enslaved population. So, the two ‘differing’ versions of the event point to the injustice and the callousness of the colonising programme.

6.4. The Freedom Struggle

The term decolonisation is loaded with ambiguity since there is no definite demarcation for it. It may refer to the formal withdrawal of the colonial power from a country when it wins its independence; or it may be a process which begins immediately after colonisation with the resistance of the natives to foreign rule. Decolonisation may begin when the colonised understand for the first time that they are the oppressed, and the
'find the oppressor out and become involved in the organised struggle for their liberation', when 'they begin to believe in themselves' (Freire 1993:47). Then, the whole struggle for independence may be regarded as the process of decolonisation, and many unrecorded uprisings like the revolt of the nilchis in The Trotternama would be part of it.

The first recorded, and valorised resistance to British rule in India, dismissed ubiquitously by the British as the 'sepoy mutiny', and venerated by nationalists as the first war of Independence, is the uprising of 1857, and it has acquired semi-mythical status in the history of India. The ninety years following this event, right up to the independence of India 1947, constitute roughly the Freedom movement of the nation in mainstream history records. Most of the novels pick up a few of the major events during this period in which to situate the family chronicles. Further, since in most of these records the Freedom struggle is identified with the negotiations and the conflicts of the Indian National Congress (henceforth referred to as the INC) with the British, their plot development coincides with the hegemonic periods of the INC from about 1900 to 1947. Hence, most of the novels go back in time to somewhere in the 1890s; - and the first major event almost all of them highlight is the Jallianwala Bagh Tragedy of 1913. It is only The Trotternama which goes as far back as 1857, and seeks to reconstruct it with almost kaleidoscopic effect.
Otherwise, the novels follow the careers of the leaders of the Indian National Congress, particularly Gandhi, with spotlights on well-known events like the Quit India Movement, the Independence of India and Partition, in which their major characters are either participants or victims. Almost in confirmation of its rupture with mainstream history and its concerns of presenting alternative versions, *Midnight's Children* is the only novel which actually ignores the role of the INC, Gandhi and Nehru in the freedom struggle.

6.4.1. 1857

By referring to the 1857 uprising, derogatively as the 'sepoy mutiny', British administrators and historians devalued it by giving it the colour of just a local event, restricted to a few 'sepoys' who rebelled against the Enfield cartridge, which was alleged to be greased with the fat of cows and pigs. On the other hand, the range of heroes aligned by nationalist historians, - Bahadur Shah, the Rani of Jhansi, Nana Saheb, Tantia Tope, Maulana Ahmedulla, Kunwar Singh, Rani Jindan, Diwan Mulraj, Vasudev B. Phadke, the Chapecar brothers, Mangal Pandey... - point to its pan-Indian significance and its centrality in the Indian context. Bipan Chandra, writing about the process of hero-creation in modern
India, has underlined the subjectivity and prejudice involved in it.

According to him, the creation of heroes by a community or group is

entirely a political question, a question of political instrumentality or engineering. The validity, the usefulness, the socio-political justification of this or that hero (has) hardly anything to do with historical evidence, role or analysis.

(Chandra 1994:140-141))

Thus, the two heroes of 1857 in *The Trotternama* are Mik, who is killed in action and Thomas Trotter, cranny turned warrior, who is awarded the Victoria Cross for his meritorious services, by the British government. This makes it clear that for the Anglo-Indians, 1857 was an opportunity to prove their loyalty to the coloniser. They are the ‘other’ for both Indian and the British, and this revolt aligns them effectively on the side of the British. Therefore, a leader like Mangal Pandey, parodied and demythologised as Mahavir Pandav in the novel, is depicted as a fanatical, foul-mouthed, drunken lout:

‘Remember, your caste is in danger from those greased____s! The British intend to convert us to Christianity. What are you? Cowards? Are you asleep? Rise up now! Already there is resistance – or have you heard of the dry____s that are appearing everywhere?

(Sealy 1989:326)

Though hints about his subsequent valorisation are thrown in
He died calm, aloof and unrepentant, with the slightly knowing look of a martyr.

(Sealy 1989:327)

it is the Trotters who man the railways, the telegraph and post offices and who keep the wheels of administration running for the British who are presented as the heroes of the uprising. Thus, the simultaneous valorising and debunking of a person like Mangal Pandey (Mahavir Pandey in the novel), his representation as both hero and traitor, reaffirms that 'that's one way of looking at things, now here's another, and another, and another' (Marshall 1992:156).

Coupled with this aspect are the tales of horror perpetrated by Indians on the Anglo-Indians and the British

...all the men and a few women were killed. The remaining women and children, some two hundred of them, both British and Anglo-Indian, were kept prisoner for several weeks in a house called the Bibighar. In mid-July, as the British relieving force approached, it was decided that nothing was to be gained by keeping hostages. Ordered to kill the survivors, the sepoy guard refused, emptying their muskets into the ceiling of the Bibighar. Upon which five butchers were fetched from the bazaar, two Hindus, two Muslims, and one identified man, and led into the house with their knives. Next morning, the bodies were thrown into a nearby well.

(Sealy 1989:337-338)
It may be that this is the voice of the narrator and not the author, but even then, the discourse of orientalism seems to be at work here, and the sepoys are viewed as cruel, rapacious, greedy, irrational and violent thieves, ignorant of the 'scientific' inventions installed at Sans Souci, mistaking the observatory for a children’s playground.

Further, a report of the siege of Nakhla, published in 1946 speaks of the valour of the victims in glowing terms, and it is quoted by Sealy very strategically:

‘In the entire history of warfare, from antique times to the present day, there is no purer example of heroism against overwhelming odds than that presented by the defenders of the Nakhla Residency. From the 1st of July to the 25th of September, 1857 A.D., three thousand souls, two-thirds of whom were civilians or WOMEN AND CHILDREN held out against a foe ten times their number.’

(Sealy 1989:336-337)

The attempt, clearly, is to create a shared past of victimisation for the Anglo-Indian community, which can bond it together in suffering and solidarity against a common enemy. Through all its disruptions, the one message that gets across is that the alienation of an entire community from the Indian nation, and its unfulfilled, unrealised quest for a home of its own, is the result of the ambivalent and shifting loyalties of the race which aligned itself with the coloniser during key moments of crisis.
6.4.2. The Jallianwala Bagh Massacre

The incident at Jallianwala Bagh on 13 April 1919 is a turning point in Indo-British relationships since it marks, according to Tharoor, 'that point of no return that exists only in the minds of men, that point which, in any unequal relationship, a master and subject learn equally to respect' (Tharoor 1989:82). In the true nationalistic tradition which the novels project and accept, it comes under heavy fire in Midnight's Children, The Great Indian Novel and Raj. Historically, the 'we' vs. the 'they' attitude is obvious in the near vindication of General Dyer by the British House of Lords and the fund drive which fetched him more than 2,50,000 sterling pounds (Metcalf 1998:228), and the revulsion Indians feel towards him. Metcalf also emphasises that, 'The firing in Jallianwala Bagh cannot ... be viewed as an unfortunate mistake, marked with regrets on the part of its participants, but rather as expressing enduring assumptions about the nature of the Raj, and of Indian society' (Metcalf 1998:228-229). The orientalist inclination of the coloniser, in general, and Dyer, in particular, is clear in his racist attitude that Indians are to be viewed as 'naughty' children, who needed to be punished for their misdemeanour. His morally strident role of a stern, watchful father, who needs to discipline wayward children and his patronising tone towards
Indians at the inquiry commission highlights the preconceived notion harboured by the British, and echoed by a person like Winston Churchill that, like children Indians were simply incapable of governing themselves.

This one event in the history of British India, which has been sufficiently highlighted in the novels of the 1980s, stands as a vindication of the contention of Albert Memmi that 'Colonisation distorts relationships, destroys or petrifies institutions, and corrupts men, both colonisers and colonised' (Memmi 1990:217) and that it can 'only disfigure the coloniser' (ibidem:213)

The representation of this event in the three novels reveals, tellingly, the hurt and the bitterness that it aroused in the Indian mind. Rushdie, Tharoor and Mehta work to recreate the horror and the inhumanity of the event, while, at the same time, underlining the callousness of the British Raj to it. The indiscriminate Rowlatt Acts, which provoked great unrest among the Indian populace, after the generous role played by Indians in the 1914 war effort, are merely mentioned by Gita Mehta, and even Rushdie focuses more on the massacre itself rather than the build up to it. In his own subversive re-writing, taking liberties with historical facts, Tharoor, on the other hand, relates what he calls the Bibighar Massacre directly to the annexation of Hastinapur, - again highlighting its political significance and seriousness,
and also expounds the near-playful way in which the annexation is planned by Sir Richard and Heaslop. Mehta also draws attention to the humiliation heaped upon Indians before the massacre: the orders making it ‘illegal for any Indian to talk upright through the Amritsar streets... warn(ing) all Indians to crawl on their hands and knees through (the) streets’ (Mehta 1993:166). The actual incident itself is delineated in stark, documentary terms:

A mass meeting was held in Amritsar to protest General Dyer’s ordinance. Armed troops surrounded the walled park where the meeting was taking place, and blocked the park’s only exit. No warning was given to the crowd to disperse. On General Dyer’s orders, the troops fired directly at unarmed men, women and children. Each bullet, of each round fired, killed or wounded a demonstrator. Subsequently, no assistance was rendered to the wounded.

(Mehta 1993:166)

The short, cryptic sentences, apparently devoid of any emotion, point to the seething intensity and anguish that underlie the cold-blooded brutality in this narration.

The seething intensity is evident in the accounts of the massacre in both Rushdie and Tharoor, too. Tharoor focuses on the coldness and the precision with which the whole operation is carried out, making it ‘no act of insane frenzy, but a conscious, deliberate imposition of colonial will’
Colonel Rudyard, in The Great Indian Novel, i.e. General Dyer, according to him,

acted in the way dictated by the simple logic of colonialism, under which the rules of humanity applied only to the rulers, for the rulers were people and the people were objects. Objects to be controlled, disciplined, kept in their place and taught lessons like so many animals.

By placing the narrative in the point of view of the colonisers, - probing into the possible motives of Colonel Rudyard, pointing out the machine-like 'objectivity' of the soldiery that fired the rounds, by making them deaf and blind to the cries of men, women and children at Bibighar Gardens and by presenting the massacre as 'a frozen tableau from a silent film, black and white and mute,' Tharoor succeeds in exposing the logical, deliberate, cruel brutality of the colonial agenda, - 'the civilising mission' as the British piously and self-righteously regarded their imperialist conquests, makes, he reveals 'savages of us all, and all of them' (Tharoor 1989:80)

Like Tharoor, Rushdie, too, evokes the language of cinema to document this event, which he presents in long shots, close ups and pannings, - perhaps to create the necessary distance between the horrifying event and its narration and also to show that his account is a re-construction and a re-telling of the event. Without going into the
exploration of the political motives and provocations for it, Rushdie speaks vaguely of the unrest in Amritsar and the hartal on April 7, 1919, as a day on which Indians were ‘to mourn, in peace, the continuing presence of the British’ (Rushdie 1982:32). The actual massacre itself is painted, as in the case of Mehta and Tharoor, in stark, documentary fashion. Rushdie’s account is more subjective, because the central character Dr. Aziz figures in a subject position and as a victim in it; but, in spite of this subjectivity, as against the seeming objectivity of Tharoor’s narration, both end with a graphic statement, with an emphasis on the callousness of the colonial mentality, its dehumanisation of the coloniser and the objectification of the colonised.

Brigadier Dyer’s fifty men put down their machine guns and go away. They have fired a total of one thousand six hundred and fifty rounds into the unarmed crowd. Of these, one thousand five hundred and sixteen have found their mark, killing or wounding some person. ‘Good shooting,’ Dyer tells his men, ‘we have done a jolly good thing.’

(ibedum:35)

The soldiers fired just 1600 bullets that day, Ganapathy. It was so mechanical, so precise, they used up only the rounds they were allotted, nothing was thrown away, no additional supplies sent for. Just 1600 bullets into the unarmed throng, and when they had finished, oh, perhaps ten minutes later, 379 people lay dead, Ganapathy, and 1137 lay injured, many grotesquely maimed. When Rudyard was given the figures later, he expressed
satisfaction with his men. ‘Only 84 bullets wasted,’ he said, ‘not bad’.

(Tharoor 1989:81)

The fallout of the Jallianwala Bagh massacre is the complete and symbolic indianisation of Adam Aziz, who till this time had been fluctuating between his various shadowy identities, and by implication the indianisation of the subjects of the empire. As Tharoor succinctly concludes,

The massacre and its reward made Indians of us all. It turned loyalists into nationalists and constitutionalists into revolutionaries, led a Nobel prize winning poet to return his knighthood – and achieved Gangaji’s absolute conversion to the cause of freedom.’

(Tharoor 1989:83)

6.4.3 The Role of the Indian National Congress and Gandhi

The history of the freedom struggle in the novels is identified with the role played by the Indian National Congress, formed in 1885 (henceforth referred to as the INC), especially under the leadership of Gandhi; - it remains within the parameters of mainstream, political history, in keeping with the broadbased concept of the idea of the nation. As P. K. Rajan points out in the context of The Great Indian Novel, the treatment of history is ‘superficial’ and the novels lack ‘an adequate historical vision’:
The ruling concept of history... seems to be basically flawed as it sees history as a gorgeous spectacle, a dextrous chess-play of heroic personages, a splendid pantomime in which men and women move about theatrically in their make-believe world.

(Rajan 1995:159)

This focus on Gandhi also results in the complete marginalisation of the other leaders of the INC, including Nehru, whose role is viewed as peripheral and supplementary to Gandhi's role. The other streams of struggle against the British, movements under the leadership of people like Ambedkar and Bose are relegated to the background, - and the more aggressive/violent phases of it, represented by the likes of Bhagat Singh, hardly figure in these narratives. Next to Gandhi, the only other leader whose contribution is highlighted is Jinnah,- but only as the 'other' of Gandhi, his binary opposite, who becomes an icon for Pakistan and extremist Muslim fundamentalism, just as Gandhi is seen as the messiah of India. Thus, apart from Raj whose deep delving into the political/historical in the princely states in the colonial era make it the only genuine 'historical' novel, in most of the others, history is anchored to and subordinated to the demands of the family chronicle and they depict only those events which have a direct bearing on the lives of significant family members.
Raj, thus, may be viewed as the historical novel per se, in which Gita Mehta explores the dilemma of royal India, caught between the demands of the British Raj, which demands their loyalty as the price for the protection which ensures their survival, and the growing Nationalist forces, spearheaded by the INC, which demand that Princely India align itself with them against the British. This is the dilemma that dogs Jaya throughout the novel, - the need to save first Balmer and then Sirpur from being annexed by the British.

Jaya’s political consciousness is formed by the influences exerted by her father and the Rajguru at Balmer, who initiate her into the intricacies of ‘rajniti’, who teach her to stand up for the rights of royal India, and later on that of Mrs. Roy, who introduces her to nationalistic politics. The contradictory accounts she hears of the arrest of Tilak are symptomatic of the dilemma she is caught in:

‘...Mrs. Roy’s eyes, bright with passion behind rimless glasses. “The British Raj has jailed another great patriot, Tilak, but his words have already become a slogan throughout India, spread by our own newspapers. “Freedom is my birthright and I shall have it.” A hundred thousand people chanted that slogan when they heard Tilak sentenced to six years in a British jail.

‘A few days later, Captain Osborne waived a copy of the London Times ... his face was flushed with rage, “Didn’t I say it was dangerous to allow these damned city
lawyers to publish their scurrilous rags and incite violence?...”

(Mehta 1993:65)

The novel presents the ‘landmark’ happenings of the freedom struggle, either by making Jaya a first-hand witness to them as in the case of the Dandi March in which her mother is an active participant, the visit of the Prince of Wales to India, for which Royal India has to make elaborate preparations, her presence at the nationalist meets where she rubs shoulders with the stalwarts of the freedom movement – Rabindranath Tagore, Motilal Nehru, Sarojini Naidu, Annie Besant, and later on Nehru, Patel, Jinnah and finally Gandhi himself. These cameos of national leaders bring the movement alive, adding a touch of authenticity to the narrative, but nowhere does Mehta try to evaluate the contribution of any of them. The account remains, more or less, on the factual level, and the responses evoked by the leaders are largely predictable. However, in some cases, her insights about the movement are quite striking:

Jaya understood Gandhi’s genius in challenging this Empire with the very elements that terrified the Angrez, poverty instead of power, humility instead of exclusivity.

(Mehta 1993:221)

Or, when she meets Tagore

“No child. I do not believe in bonfires. Today we throw silk shirts into the flames; tomorrow we will burn books,
perhaps even human beings. Destruction, like imitation springs from fear, and a colonised people must lose that fear.'

(Mehta 1993:240-241)

The major concern of the novel, moreover, is not the conflict between England and India, but the various negotiating stances that the ruling princes have to adopt vis-à-vis the British Raj on the one hand and the nationalist forces on the other.

Another source of history in Raj is the interminable gossip of Lady Mody, who moves in the highest echelons of power, and claims intimate friendship with the likes of Ruttie Jinnah. The casual manner in which she mentions what are today regarded as the high points of the freedom movement add a touch of lightness and humour to the happenings. Thus, when the Prince of Wales visits Sirpur

Cloth banners, blazoned with florid calligraphy, stretched across the crowded bazaars. 'Give our love to Mummy. Good for Mummy. Your Mummy is our Mother.'

Lady Mody sank back into her seat. 'Darling, I had no idea your subjects felt so strongly about Queen Mary.'

'Those are antiques from the last royal chakker — when the Prince of Wales visited Sirpur in 1876. The Mummy in question was my brother's godmother, the Empress Victoria.'

(Mehta 1993:217)
The novel also tries to valiantly showcase the attempts of the princes to forge some kind of unity amongst themselves, and in the later sections is almost exclusively devoted to the conflict between the nationalists and the princely states. The sense of betrayal with not only the INC, but even with other organisations who press for a formation of a federation of states consisting of both Royal India and British India, is palpable, since the Princes feel that these demands actually end in the extinction of their very existence. Arun Roy becomes the new symbol of the leader who combines principles of Gandhian ideology with a pragmatism and opportunism in which results are more important than ideology, and his betrayal of Jaya, on the personal level, parallels, on a larger level, the betrayal of the interests of Sirpur, and by implication, Royal India.

Further, *Raj* is the only novel which works through the entire gamut of negotiations that form the landmarks of the struggle: from the Jallianwala Bagh Massacre, the unstinted support of Royal India to the war effort in 1914, Montague-Chelmsford Reforms of 1919, and the feelings of disgruntlement that followed them, the growing communal divide leading to a vertical split between Hindus and Muslims, culminating in the demand for Pakistan, the demands for Dominian status, the question of separate electorates for divergent groups, the boycott of the Simon Commission, the failure of the three Round Table Conferences, the
Butler Commission on which the hopes of Royal India were pinned and its subsequent betrayal of their interests, the Quit India Movement, the support for England in the second world war... all these events form the web and woof of the narrative. They do not form only the background to the action – they form the core action itself. And Jaya, like her mother before her who becomes a part of the Gandhian movement, has to realise that the salvation of the princely states lies in merging with mainstream India – symbolised by her becoming a part of democratic election politics. In a telling comment, on the role of a shared, distant past, in keeping a people united against present unrest in a colonial situation, Mehta ironically points out

In Sirpur, mythology drew its customary veil over history. During the Diwali celebrations, the priests held their daily readings from the *Mahabharata* at the Kamini Temple, and the names of the Sirpur kings were recited to the satisfaction of every citizen present.

(Mehta 1993:340)

The focus on the INC and Gandhi in *Raj*, therefore, lies in the fact that the INC is portrayed as the chief, if not the only vehicle of the freedom struggle, with concessions made for Jinnah and the Muslim League as the main opposition to it; while Gandhi is viewed as the very soul of the INC and freedom movement, as is evident in the unquestioned and uncritical
portrayal in the few scenes he actually appears in, particularly in the account of the Salt Satyagraha at Dandi.

The Great Indian Novel may be viewed as an extended paean to Gandhi, even though the other leaders of the Indian National Congress are given adequate representation. The blind idealism of Nehru/Dhritarashtra, the flawed divisive vision of Jinnah/Karna, and the practical iron will of Patel/Vidur, the almost mock-heroic failure of Bose/Pandu, are all explored, but without offering any new insights into their contributions to the freedom struggle, since they are regarded as mere appendages to the all-encompassing vision of Gandhi. Tharoor’s attempt to ‘rewrite’ the history of modern India in postmodernist terms, ironically, points to a single point agenda: the re-establishment of Gandhi as the moral core of India. As T.N. Dhar points out, ‘his main complaint is against the (history) which gave too much importance to the role of Nehru. He is particularly unhappy with versions made current after Nehru’s death by the Congress party, particularly by Mrs. Gandhi.’ (Dhar 1999:134)

Tharoor’s portrayal of Nehru as the blind Dhritarashtra represents his self-obsession and monumental ego and makes him responsible for the ills of post-independence India; his blindness to the realities around him, rooted in his idealism and alienated, acquired ideology is also seen as a product of his westernised, English education; - he is projected as a
product of colonisation, - one who has, even in his resistance, internalised all colonial structures. His political resistance to the coloniser is offset by his complete acceptance of the institutions which the British introduced in India. His liaison with Lady Drewpad (Edwina Mountbatten) results in the birth of a hybridised Republic, personified as the enduring Draupadi Mokrasi; it is also significant that during the most crucial moments of the freedom struggle, Nehru is absent from Gandhi’s side, - whether it is the Bibighar Gardens tragedy or the Motihari agitation or the Great Mango March. After independence, therefore, it is he who takes all skewed decisions: the setting up of heavy industries, concentration on higher education, internationalism, non-alignment, centralisation of power, lop-sided socialism... all products of an elitist, westernised, removed-from-reality vision of the Macaulayised Indian. The power struggle within the Congress itself (the Kaurava Party in the novel), between Nehru and Bose, Nehru and Patel, Nehru and Jinnah, in which the blessings of Gandhi always remain with Nehru, leads to the near-complete eclipse of his political opponents – culminating in the mock-heroic death of Pandu, the relegation of Vidur to the background work of administration and beaurocracy and the tragic partition of the nation.

Though parodic spoofs on Gandhi abound in The Great Indian Novel, they do not come in the way of his deification. So, if he is the
'hairless, bony, enema-taking, toilet-cleaning Ganga, with his terrible vow of celibacy and his habit of arranging other people’s marriages’ (Tharoor 1989:52), he is also the messiah who ‘bore his fatal impalement calmly, as another campaigner for justice and peace had accepted the catharsis of crucifixion’ (ibidem:233). His centrality in the making of modern India is based on his feat of drawing the masses into the freedom struggle, converting an elitist ideology into a mass movement, - adding a new dimension to the concept of nationalism itself. Tharoor also lauds his dual identity of saint and master strategist. His emotional response to Gandhi is obvious when he states

What I feel about Gangaji can’t be put in words,  
and in a sense, everything I have been telling you,  
and everything we are living today, is the Mahaguru’s funeral ovation.  

(ibidem:234)

His failure is the failure of the tragic hero, and it goes beyond his life and death. More than being his personal failure it is interpreted as the collective failure of India to understand him and to measure up to his concepts of truth and non-violence:

Gangaji was the kind of person it was more convenient to forget. The principles he stood for – and the way he asserted them were always easier to admire than to follow.
While he was alive, he was impossible to ignore; once he was gone, he was impossible to imitate.

(ibedum:47)

Thus, in contradiction to the postmodernist concept of dislocating the centre, Gandhi forms the focal point of the novel. Though he comes in for a fair amount of criticism for his various idiosyncrasies, and later on for abdicating his responsibilities by withdrawing from the sphere of public life at a very crucial moment, and allowing the reins of power to pass into the hands of ineffectual leaders, it is the truth of his vision that is finally asserted. Postmodernist strategies, thus, in the context of this novel are employed not to negate but to reaffirm forcefully the vision of India which Tharoor seeks to project.

However, the novel’s major concern, evident in the valorisation of Gandhi and the principles he stands for, is the angst of the novelist for the mismanagement of a land in which, ‘we soothe ourselves with the lullabies of our ancient history’, where religion is an excuse for conflict, rather than a code of conduct, where piety, instead of marking wisdom, masks a crippling lack of imagination… an India where mediocrity reigns, where the greatest cause is the making of money, where dishonesty is the most prevalent art and bribery the most vital skill, where power is an end in itself rather than a means, where the real political issues of the day involve not principles but parochialism.

(Tharoor 1989:411)
It is in the context of this decadent picture of India that the relevance and validity of the Gandhian vision is foregrounded and offered as a panacea.

The Great Indian Novel also takes a much more comprehensive look at the events of the time. It is one of the few novels which places happenings like the Quit India Movement within the context of the second world war, takes a look at the failure of the Cripps Mission and the withdrawal of the INC from the legislative assemblies in protest against the British government's undemocratic drawing of India into the war effort. Tharoor's account of the Quit India Movement is graphic and captures its enthusiastic burst upon the Indian political scene:

Oh, Ganapathy, how these two major words ['Quit India'] captured the imagination of the country! The new slogan was soon all over the walls; it was chalked, scrawled, painted on notice-boards, on railway sidings, in cinema posters. Little newspaper boys added it sotto voco to their sales cries: 'Times of India. Quit India. Times of India. Quit India.'

The magic refrain was taken up by chanting crowds of students, office-goers, political workers...

(Tharoor 1989:206)

and he winds it up with the anti-climactic

It lasted twenty-four hours... it was all over before it began.

(ibidum:206)

No doubt, the narration is brilliant. But, in spite of the brilliance,
The spotlight falls entirely on individual lives and keeps the people at large in the dark; history becomes a splendid frame without much substance in it, a body without a soul. 

(Rajan 1995:159)

The involvement of the ‘people at large’ is indicated, however, in *A Fine Family* and *Midnight’s Children*, in which events and the build-up to them are not as important as the impact on the lives of the families concerned. Thus, in *Midnight’s Children*, it is the yoking of historical events to the life of Saleem Sinai that is important, and in *A Fine Family*, the attitudes of the upper-class, educated, professional Indian, represented by Bauji, to the nationalist movement are explored. Bauji, though sympathetic to the struggle has concerns of security and class uppermost in his mind. He considers the Quit India Movement to be ill-timed and one calculated to make the British more oppressive, because it would make them more defensive in the already charged atmosphere of the war. His is, therefore a lukewarm response to the nationalist movement:

He wanted the English to leave, but he wanted their institutions to stay. He wanted a gradual transfer of power.

(Das 1990:41)

Added to this moderate stand is his immense faith in the rule of law of the British raj. In an incident reminiscent of Gandhi’s unceremonial
excavation from a first-class railway compartment in South Africa, Bauji, too, faces such social and colonial discrimination when he is thrown out of a similar compartment in 1932 at Lahore. This incident, rich with near-mythic overtones, makes Gandhi’s experience a typical, representative, almost universal one, and also critiques Gandhi’s revolutionary response to it. What awakens Gandhi to colonial oppression reinforces Bauji’s faith in the British judicial process, because he manages to secure the conviction of the errant officer in a British court of law. Bauji’s leanings to the side of the raj, however, are juxtaposed with the more strident nationalism of ‘Chachi’ and his nephew Karan, who throws himself, wholeheartedly into the nationalist movement, giving up, in the bargain, a prospective career in the civil services. The fact that Karan does not fulfil his early promise in the later sections of the novel in post-independence India and merely fritters away his energies in inane pursuits seems to suggest the collective failure of the nationalists in the task of rebuilding India. It also seems to point to the direction in which the sympathies of the respectable, conformist Bauji lie.

Further, the touches of humour thrown in serve to highlight the multiplicity of responses to the momentous, almost venerated aspects of the freedom struggle. Bauji’s son, Big Uncle, is arrested during the Quit India Movement, because he has ventured out in the curfew hours to get a
haircut; there is also a sense of glee at some of the destruction that takes place:

As the news arrived of Gandhi's arrest, the students of the Government College burned the Income Tax office, much to the delight of the taxpayers.

(ibedum:49-50)

This attitude, coupled with the reports of the death of anonymous, 'innocent' victims like the family dhobi and his son, serve to question the halo surrounding the heroics of the nationalists. The disruption is not obvious, but the very juxtaposition of the trivial with the serious, the narrator seeks to point to the lacunae in the accepted, mainstream versions. The discomfort of Bauji also needs to be viewed in the context of this overall questioning:

The sceptre of India breaking up haunted Bauji. Would the subcontinent, left to its own devices... degenerate into narrow parochialism?

(ibedum:41)

These fears, though they seem to echo the colonial scepticism regarding the ability of Indians to fend for themselves, go beyond a mere internalisation of the coloniser's attitudes: they link up with the general assessment of the dismal post-emergency situation in India, which all the novels under consideration seek to warn against – the forces of disruption, bigotry and parochialism.
In a deliberate re-working of history, *Midnight's Children* sweeps under the carpet the entire issue of the freedom movement, and leaps from 1919 to 1942, perhaps as a protest against the canonised mainstream linking of the freedom struggle with the campaign of the INC. In 1942, the Quit India Movement is kept very much in the background, while the narrator Saleem dwells at length on retrieving the seemingly insignificant stories like that of the Free Island Convocation and its leader Mian Abdullah making it a symbol for the many other stories that have been similarly forgotten. So, the exploits of the Ravana Gang in the targeting of the Muslim community, which drives Ahmed Aziz from Delhi to Mumbai offers a prelude to the growing tensions between the Hindu and Muslim communities. Nadir Khan’s ‘obliterated’ existence in the underground chambers of the Aziz household and his impotence, point to the complete inefficacy and marginalisation of the liberal Muslims like the Rani of Cooch Nahi, Aadam Aziz and Nadir Khan. These are the stories of small insignificant people whose narratives fill out the macro events of mainstream history. The pre-independence struggle in the novel, except for the Jallianwala Bagh massacre, is not seen in terms of the struggle against the British, but in the context of the increasing Hindu-Muslim divide and the Muslim-Muslim divide. Thus, Mian Abdullah’s Convocation stresses the conflict between the Muslim community itself,
the conflict between the proponents and opponents of the demand for partition and the Muslim League; and the brutal murder of Mian Abdullah anticipates the strengthening of the communal divide. And from this stage of the freedom struggle the novel moves fast-forward to a blow-by-blow account of the advent of independence on 15 August 1947, interspersed with and almost inseparable from the accounts of the births of Saleem Sinai and Shiva.

6.4.4. 15 August 1947

Postcoloniality is ‘a historical condition marked by the visible apparatus of freedom and the concealed persistence of unfreedom’.

(Memmi, quoted in Gandhi 1999:6-7)

15 August 1947 forms the highpoint and watershed of almost all the novels under scrutiny – an emotive moment, marking the hopes, the excitement, the euphoria of the moment, but tinged with the painful memory of the blood-letting of the communal riots and the partition. In A Fine Family and The Great Indian Novel the announcement of independence is recorded in Nehru’s midnight speech, and Tharoor manages to capture the exhilaration of the moment:

... you cannot imagine the excitement, the exhilaration, the exultation of that midnight moment when the nationalist tricolour rode up the flagpole and Dhritarashtra,
his voice breaking with emotion, announced to the nation in the most enduring of his visual metaphors: ‘At the hour of darkness, as the world slumbers, India awakes to the dawn of freedom.’

(Tharoor 1989:230)

This midnight speech binds Sewa Ram and his family in A Fine Family with the crowds in Midnight’s Children and the nationalists in The Great Indian Novel. A Fine Family dwells upon the poignancy of the experience:

Despite the suffering and the uncertainty about their future, the refugees were filled with emotion as they listened to Nehru’s words. The national anthem of the new nation was heard for the first time. Most of the listeners did not recognise it. Dr. Sharma was the first to stand up. Then one by one, the other listeners got up, until everyone in the dusty room was standing at attention… despite their travails, Tara and Sewa Ram realised their good fortune in having witnessed the birth of their nation after centuries of domination by foreigners.

(Das 1990:138-139)

However, the pain and the agony related with the dawn of independence lies deeply embedded in the celebrations, - mainly because of the protracted, painful negotiations that go before it, the communal riots that break out almost a year earlier, reaching a crescendo with the partition award and the drawing of the Radcliffe line, the agonising experiences of partition itself and the assassination of Gandhi in 1948. In Raj the agony is compounded by the fact that the princely states are either coerced or
blackmailed into joining the Indian Union. The inevitability and the sordidness of this happening is made clear by Osborne to Jaya:

‘Why does India want to blackmail us?…’
‘Fear. Almost a million people have been killed, another seven million made homeless. The rulers could start hundreds of new civil wars. They have their own armies. They could cut India’s railway network, its telegraph and communication system. That is why the rulers are being asked to sign an instrument of Accession and merge with India’.

(Mehta 1993:450)

And how exactly the blackmail is worked out is portrayed with sardonic satire, bordering on the bitter, by Tharoor in his account of the accession of Kashmir/Myanmar, by locating it within the bedroom antics of the beleaguered Maharaja.

So, in more ways than one, the ‘persistence of unfreedom’ that Memmi speaks of links itself inextricably with the ‘apparatus of freedom’.

Nowhere is this made clearer than in Midnight’s Children, in the private transfer of Methwold Estate to the families who purchase it; making it in the process, a microcosm for India. The Methwold ‘empire’ goes into the hands of a heterogeneous, composite group, of Macaulay’s progeny, and it is inevitable that the whole of the colonial baggage is transferred along with it, since the new owners can remove or dispose off nothing from it, according to the terms of purchase. Incidentally, both Midnight’s
Children and The Great Indian Novel view the birth of the new nation in terms of hybrid births: Saleem, the midnight’s child is the progeny of the departing Englishman Methwold and the street singer Vinita; as a close parallel to it, the Indian Republic, Draupadi Mokrasi, is, in Tharoor’s novel, the natural offspring of Dhritarashtra and Lady Georgina Drewpad. There is, thus no escape from the white man’s and white woman’s burden. Midnight’s Children also presents 15 August 1947 as the ‘birthing’ of the twin nations of India and Pakistan, by providing a moment-to-moment account, foregrounding the labour pains of Amina Sinai with Vanita’s labour in the background, and the births of Saleem and Shiva coinciding with the midnight moment of independence.

6.4.5. Partition and Communal Riots

Even more than the independence of India, the novels converge upon the partition as the cataclysmic event in the history of India; it is treated at great length in A Fine Family, The Great Indian Novel, Trotternama, Midnight’s Children, and Raj, in which post-1942 events are given prime importance. But even in novels like A Suitable Boy, The Shadow Lines, and Days of the Turban, which are more concerned with post-independence India, the partition persists as memory and sometimes as metaphor. The Shadow Lines, particularly, treats partition
ideologically and symbolically in the concept of the upside-down house, wherein the other side is always viewed as the very contradiction of 'this' side:

When the house was divided,... Maya... didn't remember the other side at all... Everything's upside down over there I'd tell her; at their meals they start with the sweets and end with the dal, their books go backwards and end at the beginning, they sleep under their beds and eat on the sheets...’

(Ghosh 1997:125)

echoing the orientalist construct of the other, complete with what Memmi has designated as the mark of the plural 'they', which is unfamiliar, ominous and therefore to be feared. As Meenakshi Mukherji points out, the story of the upside down house 'allegorises the process whereby the identity of a nation is consolidated through imagined hostility with the neighbours' (Mukherji 1995:263). Even though Ghosh does not speak directly about the partition of 1947, the mentality, which spurs hostility based on difference, is very much present in this account. Partition is also persistent in this novel in the ambiguity associated with the terms 'coming' and 'going', and its memories are perpetuated in the continuing hostility between Hindus and Muslims in post-independence India. Similarly, the experiences which Lok Raj carries with him in Days of the Turban, and the bruised hand of Kedamath in A Suitable Boy, bear
ample testimony to the continuing tragedy of the partition. It is something which cannot be left behind easily. In *Midnight’s Children*, like in *The Shadow Lines*, partition is evoked symbolically. The simultaneous births of Shiva and Saleem are designed to reflect the birth of the two nations, and their ambivalent identities also point to the ambivalent dividing lines between the two nations.

The horrors of the communal mayhem that followed the drawing of the Radcliffe line are graphically documented in *A Fine Family*, *Midnight’s Children*, *The Trotternama*, *Raj*, and *The Great Indian Novel*. The stories about murders, rape, looting, betrayal and other atrocities follow the pattern evident in most partition literature; but it is clear that these novels merely skim the surface of the holocaust, and that they do not centralise the experience of partition. After a brief account of the blood-letting, it is relegated to the background. The bitterness is very much there, as in the diary of Dr. Des Raj, and the victims blame the ‘other’ community for their troubles: thus, *A Fine Family* presents a detailed account of the kafilas from Lahore to India, conveying their sense of outrage at the loss of life and property of the Hindus. *Midnight’s Children* highlights the destruction of Muslim property at Delhi, before the mass waves of migration begin. What is missing is the holistic vision of a Saadat Hasan Manto, with its deep human concerns. In all the novels
the violence is seen as a madness, an aberration that afflicts both the communities for a temporary period. It is only in A Suitable Boy and The Shadow Lines that the larger ramifications of the conflict are brought home. Kedarnath’s bruised hand and the upside-down house, because of their understatement and symbolic nature become greater potent marks of the lasting tragedy of the partition, especially in view of the fact that in both these novels, the communal riots that follow hark back to the Hindu-Muslim divide.

The stories of the horrors, however, are ameliorated by the mandatory accounts of bonding between communities caught in the mayhem. So, in A Fine Family the military commander Hamid and the romantic, mystery woman, Anees, who are both instrumental in saving Bauji and his family, emerge as prototypes of sanity in the wilderness; in Midnight’s Children, it is the Muslim Amina Begam who saves the life of Lifafa das, the ‘dugdugeeman’, from a violent Muslim mob. In Raj, the young king, Arjun, is killed while trying, in vain, to save the life of his trusty Prime Minister, Sir Akbar in a communal riot. This kind of romanticisation is, perhaps, inevitable as one of the prime responses to an unbearably traumatic situation, as is evident even in the attempts of later researchers like Urvashi Butalia to unearth and recover stories that explore the more humane aspects of such tragedies of hatred:
Throughout my exploration, I have looked, by and large, at stories of loss, violence, division. There was, however, more to partition than that: there were also interminable stories of how people had helped each other, stories of sharing, stories where the borders laid down by the British to keep the two countries apart, were crossed time and again, and stories where the trauma and the upheaval of Partition actually resulted in opening up opportunities to make something of their lives.

(Butalia 1998:366-367)

Such accounts are woven into the narratives, not only as human interest narrative strategies, but also to highlight the fact that the Partition need not be viewed in terms of the Hindu/Muslim, Hindustan/Pakistan binaries, fostered by the two-nation theory and reality, but as larger rejections of the modes of ‘otherness’.

The events leading to the partition are sought to be condensed in the novels, and the unspoken question in all of them is, ‘Why did the Partition have to happen?’ Since they remain within the domains of High Politics, the leaders of the freedom movement come in for severe indictment. In A Fine Family, Bauji lays the blame squarely on the shoulders of the ‘dreamer-idealists’, - Mountbatten, Gandhi, Nehru and Jinnah; The Great Indian Novel, on the other hand, tries to exonerate Gandhi of all blame by focussing upon his marginality within the INC, when the Congress Working Committee had accepted the Partition award. Mountbatten comes in for severe attack in Raj, and he is shown betraying
the princes into the hands of the nationalists. But, unquestionably, the
villain of the piece is Cyril Radcliffe, his total ignorance of the geo-
political realities of the region, and the haste and the arbitrariness with
which the line dividing India was drawn:

You have just succeeded in putting your international
border through the middle of the market, giving the
rice-fields to Kamistan and the warehouses to India, the
largest pig-farm in the zilla to the Islamic state and the
Madarsah of the Holy Prophet to the country the Muslims
are leaving.

(Tharoor 1989:224-225)

and, the absurdity of the situation is driven home by the cryptic comment,
‘the schoolmaster will require a passport to go to the loo between classes’,
culminating in the incisive, ‘In those days,... lines meant lives’
(ibedum:225).

However, the depiction of Partition in these novels is remarkably
distant, sanitised and predictable, more in the form of reportage than felt
experiences. Though in The Trotternama, the futile death of Girl-Boy, is
graphic and tragic enough, and in A Fine Family, the journey of Bauji’s
family from Lahore to Amritsar is closely followed, it is more in the
nature of a predictable, generalised account. Also, even though stories
about murder and loot abound, there is a great deal of silence surrounding
the question of rape, mass suicides, forced conversions and betrayals on
the personal level. Thus, women as victims are singularly absent in the partition narratives, perhaps, because they present the more disruptive aspects of the holocaust, and their stories would shatter the well-nurtured myths of family and community solidarity during this time. Thus, only one death of a woman takes place in all the novels, that of the unnamed sister of Tara in A Fine Family, and even this death is mentioned merely in passing. Most of these novels have been published nearly thirty years after the partition, and yet, they do not throw up any real re-assessments or new insights. In a recent book on Partition, the editors speak of a shift in perspective that has taken place in the literature of the partition in the late 1980s and 1990s:

Trends in recent Partition research represent a shift away from the parleys and betrayals in the domain of High Politics towards an emphasis on the subaltems as both victims and perpetrators of violence, the sociology and motivation for widespread rioting, the resulting psychological trauma, and... recovering lost stories of lost and abducted women during the Partition.

(Saint 2001:xxiii)

However, none of these shifts in perspective are to be found in the novels studied. Their representations of the Partition remain stereotyped, received and second-hand. Further, the aftermath of the Partition, ‘how people coped with the trauma, how they rebuilt their lives, what resources, both physical and mental, they drew upon, how their experiences of
dislocation and trauma shaped their lives...' (Butalia 1998:9). - and all its traces are completely obliterated. These 'absences' in the novel are indicative of the collective, forced amnesia and censorship that has been imposed by mainstream, nationalist politics on what is, arguably, the single most traumatic event in the history of modern India; and it is in these significant absences and silences that questions related to the partition remain open to scrutiny.

6.5. Post-independence India

The withdrawal of the imperial power from a colonised state marks, in political terms, the end of colonisation, and a new beginning in which a new nation-state consolidates its identity. Thus, as Leela Gandhi says:

After colonisation it is imperative to imagine a new configuration of social consciousness which exceeds the reified identities and rigid boundaries invoked by national consciousness. Postcolonialism ... ought to facilitate the emergence of what, we might, after Said, call an enlightened 'post-nationalism'.

(Gandhi 1999:124)

The emergence of post-nationalism, however, is marked by economic globalisation and homogenisation, migration of people and technologies, and exhaustion of the bitterness with the colonial encounter leading to
diasporas, and acceptance of hybridity and internationalism. But, before this stage is reached, a necessary re-assessment of the colonial condition must take place; further, the transitionary phase from colonialism to post-nationalism may become what she calls ‘falsely utopian or prematurely celebratory’ (Gandhi 1999:124). This ‘prematurely celebratory’ tone can, indeed, be heard in almost all accounts of the moment of freedom in the novels, typified by the famous midnight speech of Jawaharlal Nehru.

However, since the novels are written with the hindsight of about thirty or more years, this undue optimism of the moment does not sustain for long. In fact, most of the narrations are imbued with a sense of unmitigated foreboding that the Indian state is hurtling towards disaster and disintegration, the only exception being Das’ vision in A Fine Family. The formation of the post-national community is viewed in laudatory terms in Days of the Turban, (Raaskan, in Germany, is a success story), while in The Trotternama and The Shadow Lines it becomes a portrayal of the fears and insecurities that immigrants are victims of. The migrations of the members of the Anglo-Indian community in The Trotternama are a result of their alienation from the mainstream of post-independence India. In The Shadow Lines the strong overtones of racial discrimination are evident in the experiences of Ila. These experiences show that the formation of a post-national ethos is itself
fraught with problems and it continues to mark the vestiges of colonial power even after political decolonisation.

On the national front, the novels portray post-independence India as the site of conflicts and conflagrations. One of the causes that can be identified for these conflicts is the fact that since independence 'the state and its unity' have been exalted 'as the highest political value and has in the process placed the state at the centre of the communal question' (Brass 1997:264). While The Great Indian Novel and Raj dwell upon the violence and the betrayals that are resorted to in the consolidation of the Indian Union, all the novels being studied also take stock of the frustrations of the early years after independence, the painfully regular recurrence of riots, the wars with Pakistan and China, the near-failure of the parliamentary system of governance, culminating in the utterly humiliating experience of the Emergency. Days of the Turban also manages to tackle at length, one of the numerous separatist movements – the demand for Khalistan – that have threatened the unity of the Indian nation. These disturbances bear out the observation of Paul Gilroy that 'Nationhood is not an empty receptacle which can be simply and spontaneously filled with alternative concepts according to the dictates of political pragmatism' (Mongia 1996:259); and that the imposition of
unitary concepts of the nation choke the voices of dissent within a totalitising set-up.

6.5.1. Riots

Communal riots — which reached a maniacal pitch during the period between the declaration of partition in 1946 and the death of Gandhi in 1948, have been regarded as the bitter legacy of the British policy of divide-and-rule, and the insurmountable distrust between the Indian National Congress and the Muslim League. Riots — communal, sectarian, language-based, and regional — have flared up in post-independence India with alarming frequency. They have, often, been the violent expressions of the disenchantments, frustrations, feelings of marginality and alienation of large sections of the population; perhaps, even posing a challenge to the nationalist construct of a single, unified nation. Some of the novels of the 1980s take a detailed look at the violence and its causes in their narratives. Thus, *Midnight’s Children* has as one of its high-points the language riots in Bombay State in the late 1950s, which lead to its bifurcation into Maharashtra and Gujarat. The deconstruction of these, like other historical events, seems to be peripheral, even superficial, and linked to a personal equation in the life of Saleem Sinai. From the isolated heights of the exclusive Methwold Estate,
the language march is viewed more with curiosity than concern, and it is only when Saleem Sinai tumbles accidentally into the procession that the stark reality of the issue is hinted at. The mockery of the ‘other’ is obvious in the parodied Gujarati rhyme which Saleem is forced to recite; - the idea being that only when the ‘other’ is identified as the enemy, - to be laughed at, trivialised, derided, hurt, isolated and, maybe, even killed. - that one’s own identity can be asserted and established. By presenting the language riots from the perspective of a child, and by consciously trivialising that which considered significant in mainstream history, Rushdie points to the distances that are built into these varying perceptions. This apparent trivialisation challenges the sense of fixity that would have marked a more conventional narration. Rushdie’s mocking enunciatory act makes it a supplement to a mainstream narration. As Brenda Marshall points out, mainstream accounts of history are falsified by Rushdie by Saleem Sinai’s insistence that ‘he is directly responsible for all that happens to India’ (Marshall 1992:173).

Similarly, in a brilliant recreation of the Ayodhya conflict of the late 1980s and early 1990s, Seth gives it a validity and relevance across time by locating, nay, dislocating it in the 1950s. The reconstruction of the Calcutta riots and the Dhaka riots, pieced together by Ghosh in The Shadow Lines, offer meaningful insights into the longstanding Hindu-
Muslim divide, legitimised in colonial times and perpetuated both by state policies and popular imagination in post-independent India. If Rushdie merely scratches the surface of historical happenings in an attempt to open them up to multiple interpretations, Seth in *A Suitable Boy*, delves deeper into more definite socio-economic, political causes that lie at the back of these conflagrations. By shifting the Ayodhya-like conflict in time, he seeks to make an important point – that what happened in 1991 was neither sudden nor sporadic: that the mindset that brought events to a head during this period, already existed and had taken strong roots in the earliest years after independence. Set in the backdrop of the economic insecurities faced by the leather trade and partly fuelled by the frustrations caused by it, the communal frenzy is integrated into a larger framework. Thus, the provocative speech of the Imam, voicing as it does all the tensions that lead to the volatile situation, at the proposed construction of the Shiva temple in the vicinity of the Alamgiri mosque, though blatantly anti-Hindu, could reveal the agenda of any community that seeks vengeance upon another:

Their religion was in danger. The barbarians were at the gates. They prayed, these infidels, to their pictures and stones and perpetuated themselves in ignorance and sin. Let them do what they wanted in their dens of filth. But God could see what was happening now. They had brought their beastliness near the very precincts of the mosque itself. The land that the kafirs sought to build on – why
sought? Were at this very moment building on – was disputed land – disputed in God’s eye’s and man’s eyes – but not in the eyes of animals who spent their time blowing conches and worshipping parts of the body, whose very names it was shameful to mention. Did the people who had gathered here in God’s presence know how it planned to consecrate the Shiva-linga? Naked ash-smeared savages would dance before it – naked!

(Seth 1993:233)

The provocations, thus, are imbued with deep irony – marked by Seth’s indirect narration – a narration in which the reported speech lays bare its exaggerations and rhetoric. Seth manages to negotiate a more objective stance by the use of this irony and rhetoric; but he also falls prey to sentimentalisation by the less imaginative and more stereotyped device of making a Muslim head constable instrumental in saving the temple from destruction. This kind of stereotyping is later on replicated in the way in which Maan saves his friend Firoz in another one of the riots. The secular agenda is also carried forward subtly, by positioning the more positive Mahesh Kapoor on its side and by making the more cantankerous Aggarwal, his arch opponent, a votary of the communal elements.

In The Shadow Lines, the riots take on more sinister overtones, and are looked at from the point of view of children, who do not follow the rationale of why they are taking place, but become part of the atmosphere of suspicion and hatred. They view the absence of one of
their Muslim class-mates as almost conclusive proof of the rumours that the waters of the city have been poisoned. Fear is the over-riding emotion they feel and remember – the impressionistic account of the bus ride homewards remains embedded in the psyche of the growing narrator and, later on, he can relate to it when he reconstructs the account of Tridib’s massacre at the Dhaka riots. It is only after the narrator-protagonist has re-constructed the riots by piecing together the mosaics of narrative culled from newspaper reports and oral accounts of eye-witnesses like May Price, that one realises that what lies behind these two harrowing, seemingly separate incidents is an incident that has taken place in far-away Kashmir, namely, the theft of the hair of the Prophet from the shrine at Hazratbal. This vital link that is established across geographical space underlines the reverberations that take place within the same nation-space even when events appear to be unrelated; and distance does not emerge as the safe-guard from violence, when religious, social and cultural issues are at stake.

6.5.2. Wars

If riots mark internal threats to the construct of the nation, wars aid in defining it and in giving it solidity and a sense of unity and identity. In the case of wars, the ‘other’ is the outsider, the enemy who is more easily
identifiable and against whom the people of a nation can define themselves. For post-independence India the enemy has been supplied by the very act of independence itself: that part of the nation that was torn away from it and which forged a new identity for itself—Pakistan.

_Midnight’s Children_ and _The Great Indian Novel_ are the two novels which explore these armed conflicts. However, in the portrayal of the war, it is the internal politics of India that is given precedence rather than the exploration of the international conflict itself. Four out of the five wars have taken place for territorial reasons, harking back to Renan’s pre-requisites for nationhood—the bone of contention being Kashmir, in 1948, 1965 and 1999. The 1962 Indo-China war, too, had territory as its backdrop, the territory in the Himalayan region—Tibet. In 1971, war erupted between India and Pakistan because of the intra-nation conflict within Pakistan itself, and resulted in the creation of the new nation, Bangla Desh. In both _Midnight’s Children_ and _The Great Indian Novel_, these conflicts are not important per se, but are seen as reflections of the concerns of the leaders of the moment. Rushdie focuses mainly on the 1971 war, because of his near-obsession with the role of Indira Gandhi in the affairs of the subcontinent. Saleem’s participation in, both, the conflicts in 1965 and 1971, on two different sides, once as part of the top notch Pakistani militia, in which he anticipates and plans war strategies in
a mimic game with pepper-pots, and later on as a foot soldier and sniffer in the Mukti Vahini, very effectively, underline the shifting boundaries that divide nations. His amnesia becomes a symbol for the fact that collective amnesia about the reality of the 'other' side is necessary to sustain and give succour to the idea of the three nations of the subcontinent. The idea that the 1965 war actually took place in order to wipe out the entire Sinai family in Pakistan, convert Jameela Begum into a disembodied voice and strip Saleem Sinai of his memory and identity reiterates the implied question of whether such consistent claims of the omnipotence and causalities of Saleem are to be taken seriously (Marshall 1992:173) – thus debunking the entire notion of received history.

Politically, the Bangla Desh war is viewed both by Tharoor and Rushdie more as an ego trip for Indira Gandhi than as a political necessity in the region. By calling it the Gelebi war, Tharoor underplays its significance, deliberately trivialising it and almost dismissing it as a farce perpetrated upon the peoples of the three nations. In both the novels the Indo-China war is downplayed, its only importance being to show the political immaturity of Jawaharlal Nehru in the arena of international relations
6.5.3. The Emergency

Next to the partition, it is the Emergency, promulgated by Indira Gandhi in 1975, that is considered by commentators as the most traumatic of the happenings in post-independence India. In fact, Viney Kirpal identifies it as one of the major factors, which resulted in the reassessment of colonial and postcolonial concerns in the Indian-English novel in the 1980s since, politically speaking it marks a watershed in the psyche of the Indian who saw it as the return of the repressive ‘colonial’ rule and resented it fiercely. It made the novelist turn to history for a theme in as deliberate and studied a manner as he had done during the 1920s and the 1930s. Instead of the British ruler, Mrs. Gandhi with her authoritarianism (metamorphosed in the Emergency) became the protagonist of these new novels

(Bharucha and Nabar 1998:68)

This view has been disputed by Vrinda Nabar, who sees it as a typical reaction of the middle-class mentality, which has ignored the prevalence of violence and unrest in the marginalized sections of society, ignoring ‘other terrors before the Emergency, terrors which have been at least as ruthless, unpredictable and repressive, (ibidem:201), among which she cites the police repression of the Naxals in the Telangana region and the ‘white terror in Bengal in 1971, most of which she states was acceptable to
the middle classes in the cause of ‘national security, law and order’.

However, she concedes that

the Emergency alerted the middle classes to the infinite possibilities of state repression, especially in those aspects which directly concerned their day-to-day lives.

The excesses of the Emergency mobilised the Indian Middle classes as never before, perhaps not even during the freedom struggle, and affected the creative sensibilities of the writers belonging to that class.

(Bharucha and Nabor 1998:202)

It is no surprise, therefore that in both Midnight’s Children and The Great Indian Novel, the Emergency holds centre-stage and both Rushdie and Tharoor consider it to be the most unredeemable and unredeemable event in the history of post-independence India. As is to be expected from the general tenor of the novel, Partap Sharma simply glosses over it in Days of the Turban, and even tries to justify it in a casual, perfunctory sort of manner.

The villain of the piece is Indira Gandhi, who, Rushdie disparagingly refers to as ‘the widow’ – widowhood conventionally being an inauspicious, impure state in the mind of the Indian. In order to recreate the ‘horrors’ of the Emergency, Rushdie takes his protagonist to those locations in which the impact was felt to the maximum, the ghettos and the jhuggi zhoppadis which became the target of the clean-up drive of
Sanjay Gandhi. Living in one of the slums marked for destruction, Saleem has a firsthand experience of the mass sterilisation drives and the synthetic beautification and disciplining of India at the expense individual freedom and the classes of society which are unequipped to register any kind of protest. Even more than with the accounts of war, the harrowing experience of a fettered, threatened existence is vividly brought home through its impact on some of the most vulnerable sections of society. It is in his depiction of the Emergency that Rushdie comes closest to speaking for the invisible and unheard masses of India. In The Great Indian Novel the build-up to the ‘Seige’ as Tharoor calls the Emergency is explored, at least providing a rationale for it; even though in this novel, Mrs. Gandhi is belaboured for the Emergency, the other national leaders are not spared either; Dronacharya, especially, representing Jayprakash Narayan, is seen as equally to blame and the prevailing atmosphere of near anarchy which provoked such an extreme step is carefully built up in it. While most of the facts portrayed are well-known acknowledged facts, and the very politically correct stance of opposing the emergency is adopted, the larger question that is raised by both Tharoor and Rushdie is the constant threat posed by totalitarian tendencies within the concept of the state itself.
In *A Fine Family*, along with the general question of civil liberties, the effect of the Emergency on the middle classes is explored in the plight of Arjun, the protagonist, who becomes a victim of political and professional vendetta, and is arrested on trumped-up charges because he refuses to fall in line with unethical practices expected of him by people in positions of power. Arjun remains in jail for the major part of the Emergency, outlining the fact that individual resistance is necessary at such critical times and that heroic deeds can salvage both the honour of the individual as well as of the people at large. *A Fine Family* does not venture into an exploration of the other ‘excesses’ of the Emergency which are presented in a narrated, documentary manner. So, between the three novels, the political implications of the Emergency are explored in *The Great Indian Novel*, the social horrors perpetuated especially on the deprived cross-sections of society form the focus of *Midnight’s Children*, while the loss of individual liberty in the middle classes and their vulnerability to political machinations is laid bare in *A Fine Family*.

6.5.4. The Separatist Movements

Post-independence India has had its share of separatist movements which have threatened to rupture its fabric as has been previously cited by Nabar. Some of the uprisings have been due to the quasi-federal nature of
the Indian nation wherein the linguistically demarcated states are engaged in searching for greater space within the larger context of the nation; or for the creation of smaller states which seeks to represent the interests of the language/ethnic groups which have felt under-represented. Far more ominous have been the voices of disruption which pose a threat to the very concept of a unified nation, the movements for a separate homeland which could possibly result in a Bangla Desh kind of situation. The demands have been mainly from Kashmir, the Northeastern states and the Punjab. Most of these uprisings do not figure in the novels, highlighting the fact that they do not ordinarily come within the purview of the middle class, urban-centric Indian. Only one novel, *Days of the Turban*, ventures into the territory of the highly volatile demands for autonomy, when it seeks to address itself to the Punjab problem and which is relentlessly critical of the divisive politics of pro-Khalistan Sikhs. However, Sharma emerges more as a spokesperson for the policies of the Congress government of the time and an apologist for the policies of Indira Gandhi than a political analyst or a creative explorer into the problem. Even though the point of view of the so-called ‘Khalistanis’ is given a voice and extensive space in the discussions between Balbir and Amar Singh, it is presumed to be erroneous from the very start and excerpts from the speeches of Bhindrawala only reinforce Sharma’s one-sided views; - Amar is
portrayed as the sincere but misguided intellectual, who stands in need of correction and training. The fact that these discussions take place in the closed environs of the besieged Golden Temple becomes symbolic of the closed thinking of its proponents. Again, like most mainstream versions of this movement and the accounts of ‘Operation Bluestar’, which, according to Sharma ‘solved’ the problem in Punjab, the gear shifts from the economic and geographical demands of the Movement and the undercurrents that gave rise to the situation, and focuses on the religious and ethnic considerations, which, unfortunately, are highlighted both by the terrorists as well as the Indian state. So, instead of emerging as an exploration into one of the most symptomatic of ‘the numerous fragmented resistances to that normalising project’ (Chatterjee1994:13), Days of the Turban remains a well-documented but paternalistic, patriarchal, propagandist and feudal construct, in which pre-conceived notions are clothed as mature political statements.

6.6. The Empty Spaces

Thus, in the narratives of the 1980s, the movement towards a post-nationalism can only be felt in the international locations and perspectives of the writers, who are nevertheless more concerned about the struggles within the Indian subcontinent, rather than with issues like migration and
the international diaspora. Moreover, these concerns are in opposition to
the need to address some of the empty spaces left by these narratives in
terms of gender, regional, class, and caste, - the political and social
outsiders, perhaps, even outcastes, who have failed to capture the mind-
space of the Indian English writer. The movement towards post-
nationalism can, perhaps be only at the expense of the marginalized
groups who, themselves are demanding their space within the nation.
These spaces are sought to be filled with the help of translations of
regional writings which strive to speak for the tribals in the works of a
writer like Mahashweta Devi, or the dalits in the writings of a Laxman
Mane or Arjun Dangle, or the proliferating city slums as in the case of a
novel like Jayant Dalvi’s Chakra (1974). If the concept of the minorities
is extended to include all these, rather than focussing only on the time-
worn formula of Hindu-majority vs Sikh/Muslim minorities, the babel of
voices clamouring to be heard in the Indian narrative traditions offer a
virtual cornucopia of subjects waiting to be handled. In history and in the
social sciences, the ‘subaltern’ has been legitimised; in the context of the
Indian novelist writing in English, s/he has still to find a voice.