Chapter VII

Conclusion

Finally, he must cease defining himself through the categories of the coloniser.

Albert Memmi

7.1. Introduction

One of the basic assumptions underlying this study has been that the Indian English novels of the 1980s carry forward the 'nationalist' agenda of the modern Indian nation-state, articulated through the aspirations of the elitist sections of society. The ideologies inherent in civil structures of society like the family, the caste, community, and class, which have been analysed in some detail in this work, go a long way into the political and cultural definition of the state. In re-inscribing the stories of nationhood and linking them with family stories, the essential identification of the family with the nation is reinforced. Political discourse tells stories which, 'are not negligible things. It is by telling these stories, by this construction of the past that this community, in exactly this shape and form, comes into existence... [determining] the being of a nation' (Kaviraj 1997:320). It has been seen that the novels of the 1980s focus upon stories of nationhood and monolithic national integrity. The near-uniformity of all these stories reveals that the
narrators/authors, to some extent, subscribe to the ‘single process called and recognised as Indian history rather than (regrettably) separately regional or dynastic chronicles’ (ibidem:320). This aspect of the novels, therefore, shows up the silent significant spaces the novels have not yet ventured into.

Neil Ten Kortenaar sums up this aspect of with reference to Midnight’s Children, but it is equally applicable to the other novels of the period as well:

This is Indian history in its canonised form, as found in encyclopaedias and textbooks ... Indian history... is political history, the story of the nation made by middle class nationalist politicians, and it has a well-defined form: established origins, narrative watersheds, and an agreed upon chronology of significant events. It is not history in the sense of a past recoverable by radical historians, seeking the traces and empty spaces left in their archives by classes other than the middle classes and groups other than intellectuals.

(Kortenaar 1995:42)

In spite of the active questioning of this homogenising view of the nation with the use of postmodernist strategies by Rushdie, Tharoor and Sealy, and in opening up this mainstream version to multiple interpretations, it is, nevertheless the framework which has been handed down by the colonial inheritance. Hence, in order to enter the silent spaces it is essential for the
Indian English novelist to break away from the 'categories of the coloniser' (Memmi 1990:218).

However, freeing oneself from the colonial baggage does not imply a retreat into amnesia of the colonial condition. The excavatory nature of the novels represents an attempt to keep the memory of the colonial humiliation alive, - to keep alive the memory of the structures of colonisation that continue to subsist in the nation even after political independence has been achieved. The nationalist framework is reinforced by the agonising pleas made by almost all the novelists – Rushdie, Seth, Tharoor, and Mehta – for the acceptance of the multiplicities and pluralities of the Indian ethos to ensure the survival and the integrity of the Indian nation. So, in view of the 'common' message and holistic vision presented even by obviously postmodernist texts which reject totalisation and homogenisation, like *The Great Indian Novel* and *Midnight's Children*, perhaps, the argument of Leela Gandhi that 'post-colonialism is in danger of becoming yet another totalising method and theory' (Gandhi 1999:160), does seem to have some relevance, opening up the need for alternate ways of reading these texts. It is, perhaps, for this reason that this study has drawn frequently on sociological concepts and theories. Further, postmodernist and poststructuralist explorations even into
the traditional texts might throw up very interesting openings and spaces in the narratives

7.2. The Sociological Framework

The sociological framework has been very helpful in defining the basic structures of society, and viewing them as a set of hierarchical units which form the various heads under which this study has been undertaken and there is no doubt of the fact that the novels have been viewed, largely, as social documents. Thus, the primacy of the joint family ethos in the Indian situation has been instrumental in making it a symbol for the composite structure of Indian society; and the strategies used by the joint family to keep the balance in power equations are the very strategies employed by the nation-state in its attempts to define the roles of citizens, classes, men and women. Naturally, patriarchy becomes not only a familial concern, but also the basis of defining the concept of the nation, and the reaffirmation of patriarchy as a model both within the family and in larger social contexts becomes significant. Similarly, the vested interests which the class of Macaulayised Indians have in keeping the lower classes and castes ‘in their place’ is exposed by the upper class predilections of the novels. The twin concerns of this class for family prosperity and security have resulted in a neglect of the larger concerns of
society. Intellectuals, who are supposed to be the moral and ethical leaders of society have, post-independence, not really bothered to keep up with their social commitments, leaving a vacuum at the top, in the process precipitating a crisis of leadership. Communities, particularly religious communities have been caught in the majority/minority wrap, and the novels have tried to study the crisis and conflicts surrounding politically, ethically and constitutionally loaded terms like secularism and democracy, vis-à-vis the relationship between communities and the hegemonic role that caste continues to play in defining intra-community concerns. Thus, it is in the context of the parameters of the concepts defined by sociological studies that the novels have been placed, making them vocal about the political and social issues that dominate the debates of post-independence India.

What needs to be emphasised at this point, however, is that the exploration of these themes and issues has yet only skimmed the surface, and each of the categories, - family, caste, community, and class - can become the focus of detailed, separate studies. Thus, for example, the community and religious background of the novels can be subject to greater scrutiny, particularly by taking up the philosophic, social and political dimensions of each of the communities portrayed. Similarly, the majority/minority conflict can be studied vis-à-vis the Sikh, Muslim, Parsi
and Anglo-Indian communities, by examining the religious, language and inter-community equations and placing them in the social and political context of contemporary India. Further, full length explorations into the mindset of the intellectual classes of India in relation to the ‘masses’, the formation of the ideological patterns of both, and the role of education systems in the formation of these mindsets – all these aspects offer rich scope for further research into the novels of the decade. Also, in the light of the political polarisation that has taken place along especially caste and community lines in the 1990s, the warnings sounded by Midnight’s Children and the other novels seem to have been frighteningly relevant.

The focus on nativist concerns and ethnicity in the 1990s appears to be the direct result of the forces that these novelists had foreseen in their fiction. As Subrata Mitra points out, ‘the appeal of ethnicity and religion have overtaken the ... emphasis on economic development and class conflict as the dominant modes of political perception’ (Satyamurty 1997:220). The relation between ethnic representations, political polarisations and majoritarianism/minoritarianism, religion and politics in these novels needs to be subject to a more rigorous examination.
7.3.1. The Macro Perspective in the Novels

Therefore, the sociological concerns expressed in these novels form an ideological link between them. All of them, even novels like A Fine Family and The Days of the Turban which seem to tilt towards soft hindutva – a force which has gathered momentum in the 1990s – speak in terms of tolerance and the nurturing of a cosmopolitan, perhaps, even a loose pan-Indian identity, which calls for an acceptance of the plurality that forms it.

Speaking of Midnight’s Children Jaidev points out that ‘the politico-historical intent’ of his fiction, ‘keeps his characters two-dimensional’ and ‘not complex’” (Jaidev 1995:37). Certainly, this is true of most of the traditional novels of the period, like The Days of the Turban and A Fine Family wherein the characters are used to illustrate certain viewpoints and predilections – often resulting in stereotyped and predictable characters. The macro view of the nation that these novels have taken may be responsible for the so-called lack of depth and the movement away from individual characterisation and an exploration of the psychological motives for actions of individuals. Since the individual is viewed as largely antithetical to the social role in which s/he is placed in the hierarchical units, the social concerns far over-ride the traditional concerns of plot, characterisation etc. In A Suitable Boy, again, as in
most of the novels of the decade, the author begins with a preconceived set of conclusions and, through the intricacies of plot and characterisation, the conclusions are worked out. So, Arun is the typical WOG, Malathi the typical ‘liberationist’ of the 1950s, Savita the housewife, Lata, the confused girl with three neat options of marriage before her, Amit too much the stereotyped poet, Haresh the representative icon of a new India, and Begum Abida the typical virago. Unfortunately, none of the characters surprise, for none of them break the mould in which they have been originally set. Jaya, in Raj, the characters in the other novels do not grow, - or if they do, they grow in predictable, linear directions. For example, Agastya Sen, in English, August, at the end of the novel remains very much what he was when he comes to Madna. His realisation that he is not cut out for a career in the civil services is not in the nature of an epiphany, but merely a result of his boredom, which tells him that he should try out something different. All the characters remain affirmations and confirmations of what they have been to begin with, like Balbir in Days of the Turban, and Arjun, Priti and Bauji in A Fine Family. In this sense, the novels appear to be static in nature.

What needs to be looked into is, whether this aspect has a detrimental bearing on those novels, which have been identified as historiographic metafiction, and which ‘problematises history and subvert
meaning, but ... deny neither' (Marshall 1992:178). The Great Indian Novel, thus, employs this predictability and stereotyping techniques consciously and deliberately and they are used to good satiric and mock-heroic effect, problematising not only the portrayal of history, the source text i.e. the Mahabharata and the novel form itself, emphasising the metafictional element in it. Similarly, in Midnight's Children and Trotternama the fragments and seemingly arbitrary pieces cohere, achieving a critique of everything they seem to assert. Characters may emerge as two-dimensional and flattened, subservient to the political and social agenda, and the emphasis on the brilliance of the techniques used. But, it is through this very stereotyping that the subversiveness aimed at it achieved.

However, The Shadow Lines is the only one of the novels discussed, which does not sacrifice characterisation at the altars of social concerns or postmodernist strategies. Tridib, The Grandmother, Ila, May Price, Robi and the narrator himself emerge as sharply etched characters who go way beyond merely their illustrative and representative roles. The tragedies which each of these characters go through, are worked out by Ghosh on deeply personal as well as social levels. Perhaps it is for this reason that The Shadow Lines reaches out on a much more intimate level, without compromising on the various issues it speaks for; and it also
eschews the smartness and glibness of the other postmodernist texts like Midnight's Children and The Trotternama.

7.3.2. The 'Chutnification' of language:

One of the very important questions regarding Indian English literature from its very inception has been about the appropriateness of the use of a foreign language to express Indian concerns in forms like that of the novel that are, also, Western in origin. This debate has often taken on very strident overtones. Without going into the many issues involved in these debates, it may be pointed out that the Indian English novel has moved from the formal, conscious use of the language as evidenced in the work of an early novelist like Mulk Raj Anand to a self-conscious, almost parodic and playful use of it in the postmodernist writers — resulting in rich and varied experimentation. Two works stand out as pioneering efforts in this direction: Raja Rao’s Kanthapura consciously uses a South Indian idiom and rhythm in the narration revealing the encoding of the culture and the value systems of India in the English language; and G V Desani’s All About H Hatterer, works out a hybrid variety of Indian English loosely based on the language of the Anglo-Indian community.

Midnight’s Children, The Trotternama, The Great Indian Novel and to some extent English, August carry forward this
experimentation and self-conscious use of language. Rushdie’s hybridisation of the English language owes a great deal to his precursor – G.V. Desani in *All About H Hatterer*, which can be considered as the first postmodernist novel of India. As mentioned earlier, the language evolved by Desani echoes the hybrid variety which was used extensively by the Anglo-Indian community; but the language of this microscopic community can hardly be taken as representative of the English used by Indians over the country. The Indianisation takes place largely on the level of *vocabulary* wherein a number of Indian words or transliterated words or hybrid words find their way into the text. Khair points out that in the process of the creation of an Indian variety of English, the authors do so by largely limiting dialogues to the idle classes and creating a highly stylised pidgin English, creatively crafted from odds and ends of linguistic elements that might actually be employed by certain classes some of the time.

(Khair 2001:104)

Certain typical structures occur especially in the speech – Padma and Mary Perriera in *Midnight’s Children*, ‘Queen Victoria’ in *The Shadow Lines*, and almost all the characters in *The Trotternama*. The following examples are meant to be purely illustrative:

‘Madam, I saw your baby just one time and fell in love. Are you needing an ayah?’

(Rushdie 1982:137)
'Me? Where to go? I don't know. Here, you look into my eyes. See? Tell me now. Where to go?

I was saying to Eunice – nice looking girl, no? – I was saying to Who? Me? Marry her? Oah no. I've already got four waiting, men. One nice brown plump one over that side, one damn risky one just down the road, skin like a black swan. Then a German one, bit cold at first. Used to stay in the junta actually, but she’s just gone on a short trip Nepal side. And the youngest one, pink like a I don't know what...'

(Sealy 1990:574)

'Mugger-muchh, shrieked Ram Dayal. Save me, burra mem, bachao me from this crocodile....

Shatup Ram Dayal, Queen Victoria snapped. Stop buk-bukking like a chhokra- boy
Dekho burra-mem, he said again...

(Ghosh 1997:25)

These speech patterns reflect the English used by the characters.

An interesting aspect of the study of language would also be that many of the characters in the novels do not speak English and the reported conversation is a translation of the Indian language used by them; for example, the Azizes in Midnight's Children, the Kapoor and the Baitar families in A Suitable Boy and many of the characters in English, August. An important question that arises is – to what extent do the writers succeed in evolving an English, which conveys this idea of a translation of the spoken language of the characters?
Further, language can also be related to class. It is an accepted fact of linguistic study that the lower a person is on the social ladder, the more hybrid his/her language is. As one moves up the social scale, the language gets more refined and standardised. It is The Trotternama, which explores a range of englishes with perhaps even a historical perspective and it tries to replicate the speech patterns of Anglo-Indians in the last two hundred years. Thus, for example, the speech of the early Trotters is more formal and 'British' and by the time we come to the last Trotter, the narrator of the Chronicle, it is a replication of the slang used by the urbanised, semi-educated classes. The aspect of language, however, is being merely touched upon in this thesis to indicate how promising a systematic study of it can be.

However, not all novels are marked by experimentation in language: the conventional novels like Raj, A Fine Family, The Days of the Turban do not move beyond the token experimentation with Indianisms or use of Indian words which would be the minimum that would be integral to an Indian English novel. Even A Suitable Boy, The Shadow Lines, and English, August, remain fairly conventional in their use of the language and do not attempt to capture or better still create an idiom that is distinctly Indian. But the question that can be asked at this stage is: Do any of the writers succeed in creating a distinctly Indian
variety and idiom of English, or, as in the poetry of Nissim Ezekiel, does this hybridisation of language remain only a vehicle for the comic and ironic mode?

However, two tentative conclusions: The novels have not evolved a new variety of Indian English, and Indian English is used only as either a means of characterisation or, rather, caricature for comic or satiric purpose. Thus, Mr Makhijani in A Suitable Boy writes poetry, which is linguistically hilarious, being a hybrid of Victorian pomposity and so-called Indian sensibility:

Mahatma came to us like summer 'andhi',
Sweeping the dungs and dirt, was M.K. Gandhi.
Murder has mayhemed peace beyond understanding,
Respect and sorrow leave me soiled and standing...

We are all masters, each a Raja or Rani.
No slave, or high or low, says Makhijani.
Liberty equality fraternity justice as in Constitution.
In homage of Mother we will find all solutions.

(Seth 1993:153)

The narrative, - the author's voice - is never in the hybrid. One of the main reasons for this may be that the educated Indian in India uses a fairly standardised version of British or American English which is urban-centric and corruptions of this language are related to class. Even the mother-tongue influence is minimised when the author belongs to the metropolis and has a certain level of education and social standing. The
fact that many of the writers studied belong to the Indian diaspora, live or write abroad maybe even for a large audience abroad has something to do with the fact that Indian English in the novels remains a peripheral and decorative aspect. Otherwise, the playful ease and skill with which writers like Tharoor and Rushdie handle the English language, points to the complete appropriation of the language of the colonisers by the colonised in an attempt to write back to the imperial centre. Thus, the language aspect is one of the most significant aspects of the novels that can be studied, and it can be related to larger questions of alienation of the writer from his/her Indian roots, the evolution of an English that reverberates with Indian nuances and the mastery of the language of the colonial power centre by Macaulayised Indian writers.

7.4. Prognosis

With the Indian English novel having acquired international recognition in the last two decades, particularly, it is natural to expect it to strengthen its presence both in India and abroad. The Indian English novel may move from this point onwards in three possible directions:

Outward-looking, focussing more on the diaspora, and dealing with the concerns of Indians settled abroad, their cultural displacement, and nostalgia for the motherland, and mother culture – as in the vein of a
number of films made at the turn of the century, like *Bend it like Beckham, American Desi* and *Hyderabad Blues*. Novels like Meera Syal’s *Anita and Me* (1996) or short fiction like Jhumpa Lahiri’s *The Interpreter of Maladies* (2002) represent this trend;

Inward-looking - the novel may also turn inwards, and tackle issues on a local, regional level, as typified by Arundhati Roy’s *The God of Small Things* (1997). The regional and the local gain in importance; instead of the picture of a composite India, this novel moves in the direction of recreating the ambience of a region like Kerala; in fact, regional identity forms the core of *The God of Small Things*. When Rushdie’s focus in *The Moor’s Last Sigh* (1995) shifts to the happenings in Mumbai and the role of the Shiv Sena in defining the cultural ethos of the city, it is a more intimate picture of the city than the closed world of Methwold Estate in *Midnight’s Children*. Kiran Nagarkar’s *Ravan and Eddie* moves into the chawls of the city of Mumbai. Allan Sealy’s focus shifts to a narrower perspective in a work like *Hero* (1990), which ventures into the intricacies of the dominant glamour/entertainment industry in India, i.e., Bollywood.

International - Writers like Seth and Rushdie have also shown that the Indian origins of the author need not always be harped upon: their latest novels – *An Equal Music* (2001) and *The Ground Beneath her Feet*
(2001) are not overtly or consciously about India, signifying the expansion of themes and vision of the novelists. In fact, the first novel of Vikram Seth, The Golden Gate (1986) was set in California, and it dealt with American and global issues rather than with India. With A Suitable Boy, the Indian ethos in his work became significant, but his poetry, too, explores international themes and covers foreign territory. Thus, the idea that an Indian English writer must needs write about India seems to have been challenged in the work of Rushdie and Seth. As Mala Pandurang states,

Seth asserts his new freedom to write on subjects other than India and to create characters that cut across barriers and intermingle... the way he writes is no longer dictated by an urge to be 'Indian' or to forcibly 'put India' into his novel.

(Pandurang 2001:30)

History continues to be an obsession, and the excavatory trend continues in works like Kiran Nagarkar's Cuckold (1997) and Vikram Chandra's Red Earth and Pouring Rain (1995), which covers much the same ground as Sealy’s The Trotternama; and the fiction/family/history interface remains paramount in Upamanyu Chatterjee’s, The Last Burden (1993). It is interesting to note that there is no monolithic Indian English novel today, but it has devolved various modes and styles; while the post-modern novel continues to flourish, the more conventional work of Shashi
Deshpande also finds acceptance. It is this rich variety that forms its strength and offers the different strands along which it can find new directions.

One interesting direction it can take is the one indicated by **Cuckold** – the historical/biographical, maybe even the non-fiction novel which has not made its mark in Indian English. With the plethora of public figures and the gallery of national and local freedom fighters/heroes in the Indian canon, with rich documentary evidence available and recorded in the case of national figures like Raja Ram Mohan Roy and Savitribai Phule, to name just two, and with the tremendous zest for history that the novelists of the 1980s have shown, the biographical novel could emerge as a distinct genre. Secondly, the traumatic happenings in pre- and post-independent India have no doubt been portrayed in some form or the other. But, the portrayal has remained largely sketchy and peripheral and as background, with the possible exception of the Partition. The Emergency and the Ayodhya conflict are two of the most cataclysmic events on the national scene as have been other conflicts like the Naxalite Movement, the separatist movements in the North East and the Punjab. – offering rich thematic material for literature as the works of Mahashweta Devi, Laxman Mane and Laxman Gaekwad have shown. With the rise in translation activity in India, when most of regional writing
is available in adequate translations it opens up another direction in which the Indian English novel can develop.

The nativist’s contention that the Indian English writer is alienated from his/her ethos, and is not and cannot become representative of the real India is bound to invite a backlash of strident rhetoric in the vein of Rushdie’s outburst in defence of the enormous corpus of Indian English fiction. Thus, what Vikram Chandra calls the ‘furious barrage of tidy moralising’, which bestows on the regional writer of India:

a pristine purity of content and purpose, an austere and lofty nobleness of intent, and following from the abnegation, an ability to connect to a ‘real India’ that could possibly not exist in Indo-Anglian writing.

(Chandra 1999:xv)

can only result in a truncated either/or approach that fails to recognise the ground realities of the Indian English writing of almost a century now. What the Indian English novelists of the 1980s have conclusively attained is the questioning and problematising of the very concept of the ‘real’ India, since one of its key contentions has been the affirmation of the many Indias that go into the making of what we identify as India. The celebration of plurality which these novels stand for, therefore, cannot be negated by arguments of a unitarian, monolithic ‘essence’ that is supposed to constitute the nation.
Finally, one of the central tenets accepted and posited by postcolonial theory has been that literature is a social and cultural construct and that no writing can be studied outside its social and political context. It has supplied, in the words of Leela Gandhi, 'the academic world with an ethical paradigm for a systematic critique of institutionalised suffering’ (Gandhi 1999:176). The Gramscian contention that 'the personal is the political' forms the base of most critical and social theories today, - feminist, Marxist, postcolonial, post-modern, even psychoanalytic analysis. An interdisciplinary approach to the reading of literature, therefore, becomes all the more important, and it is with the insights provided by social sciences that the theoretical base of these studies has been enriched.

The societal and social mores of the novel form are even more obvious, and the Indian English novel right from its inception has not only reflected them but also offered a critique of the moment and the milieu of which it has been a product. One of the most significant features of the Indian English novel of the 1980s, which connects it with its predecessors, and makes it part of a tradition has been its genuine concern with the state of the nation and a preoccupation with the strategies and the methods that can be evolved to preserve and strengthen it, giving the lie to the idea that the Indian English writer is alienated from his/her cultural context. The
anxiety which the elite classes have shown with regard to the problems facing India today, counters, to some extent, the charge that the Indian English Writer is alienated from his/her roots. By virtue of its peculiar regional/global positioning the Indian English novel, if it can focus on some of the pressing current turn-of-the century debates outlined by Shashi Tharoor: The bread-versus-freedom debate, the centralisation-versus-federalism debate, the pluralism-versus-fundamentalism debate, and the globalisation-versus-self-realisation debate (Tharoor 1998:3-4). If the elite classes take the responsibility of continuing the debates on their respective turfs, they will be making a substantial contribution to the problems that continue to afflict the nation. The political and social polarisation that has taken place in the post-Mandal, post-Mandir and post-Globalisation scenario in India is cause enough for anxiety; and the warning that ‘An India that denies itself to some Indians could end up being denied to all Indians’ (Tharoor 1998:5) appears to be not only relevant but urgent as well. Certainly, the Indian English novel now needs to move beyond the middle-class/upper class ethos that has nurtured it and seek new springs of inspiration from the rich variety of the classes, masses, communities and cultures that compose it.