CHAPTER I

THE INDIAN NOVEL IN ENGLISH : ITS SOCIO-CULTURAL MILIEU
K.R. Srinivasa Iyengar begins his survey of the Indian novel in English with the assertion that "The 'novel' as a literary phenomenon is new to India." Although there was a rich narrative tradition in Sanskrit and in other Indian languages, the novel as a literary form had its origin in the "literary renaissance" that swept Bengal in the later half of the nineteenth century. Inspired by the social revolution against some of the deplorable practices in Hindu society, Bankim Chandra Chatterjee (1838-1894) dramatizes the plight of characters caught in the rigour and rigidity of Hindu joint families. Tagore, in his novel Binodini (Choker Bali), dramatizes the psychological tension of a young widow who confronts a hostile society when she tries to assert herself as a woman. Sarat Chandra Chatterjee, in a series of novels, tries to acclimatize the Indian mind to the uses of realism. In the southern parts of India there was an equally vigorous and fervent social criticism against the economic exploitation.

the rigidity of the caste system, and the miserable condition of young widows in society. Most of the criticism took the form of sarcastic essay. The spread of the English language and education in India brought the Indian mind into a happy contact with the Victorian novel. In any literary discussion, the word "influence" is a misleading term, and tracing literary influence may turn into a vague and slippery enterprise. To quote K.R. Srinivasa Iyengar, "Before 1947 (the year of the withdrawal of Britain's political connection), the English models were the major outside influence on the Indian novel. After independence, however, novelists in India have shown themselves susceptible to the influence of American and European (especially Russian) models, and also models from Oriental countries." Discussing the thematic complex of the Indian novel in English, Iyengar says, "After the advent of independence, the more serious novelist has shown how the joy of freedom has been more than neutralized by the tragedy of the 'partition'; how inspite of the freedom there is continuing (or even galloping) corruption, inefficiency, poverty and cumulative misery; how, after all, the mere replacement of the white sahib by the brown sahib cannot effect a radical cure

for the besetting ills of India. When independence came, the serious novelist in a sense found his occupation gone, for the traditional villain of the piece—foreign rule—was no more in the picture. Making a new start as it were, the novelist shifted his lantern this side and that, made his probes, and found little to satisfy him. The old narrow loyalties were seen to wax as eloquent as ever. Communal, linguistic, casteist passions were seen to come into the open with accelerated frequency.  

Strictly speaking, the sociology of the Indian novel in English is a problematic subject, in the sense that it cannot be established by taking into account the conflicts that crop up between various classes. Hindu society is not meaningful in terms of Marxian ideology. Terms like "bourgeois" and "proletariat" do not illuminate the struggles and tensions to which Hindu society has been subjected to since times immemorial. Moreover, the sociological landscape in India during British rule doesn't suggest any contrast between a city and a village. We don't come across in the regional literatures novels exclusively preoccupied with human problems in a metropolis, as we have in the novels of Balzac, Dostoevsky.

Dickens, Thackeray, Flaubert, Zola, and Dreiser. The obvious reason appears to be that both in the city and in the country the significant classification of the population is on the principle of caste and community. People who do menial jobs are segregated to a separate area outside the city or the village. When Gandhi entered the socio-political scene during the thirties, it was this section of Indian society that had attracted his attention. Inspired by Gandhi, creative artists in various Indian languages brought to a central focus the sociological and the psychological problems of untouchables, whom Gandhi rechristened Harijans. Making use of the conventions of realism as they evolved in Victorian and Edwardian England, the Indian novelist in English has drawn the attention of the international community to the Indian socio-cultural landscape. Before we proceed further in graphing the Indian novel in English and its socio-cultural milieu, it is desirable to discuss the conventions of literary realism in the Indian context. Indian imagination, nourished on the heroic mode we have in the epics and the erotic epyllions of the middle-ages, understands and dramatizes life in terms of the ideal norms of human behaviour and conduct. This imagination was exposed to Western literary realism in the middle of the nineteenth century and since then it has preoccupied itself with the burning social issues of the times, such as untoucha-
bility, casteism, opposition to British rule, and harassment of orphans and young widows. In a few exceptional cases, it successfully tackles the problem of miscegenation, as exemplified in Tagore's novel *Gora*. "Middle-distance" realism as formulated by J.P. Stern, it may be safely stated, is new to the Indian mind, and we notice its manifestation only in the thirties of the present century. Stern says that realism of the middle distance cannot be given an accurate description or a scientific definition. It is a combination of meaning, fact, and language, and is inseparably connected with the purpose of the whole work which employs it. In a very illuminating passage, he says, "After all, 'the purpose of the whole', or again 'the proper point of perspective' that determines the middle distance of realism, is the most familiar thing in all literature: it is the fictional creation of people, of individual characters and lives informed by what in any one age is agreed to constitute a certain integrity and coherence. ('An age' is no more than a community of agreements in time.) Moreover, the integrity and coherence that realism requires is present in the raw material as well as in the finished product; that is, in the persons and the world to which the realist directs his interest as well as in 'the characters' and 'the world' which he 'recreates' in the pages of his fiction. If
literary realism is inseparably related to realism outside literature, then its fictional creations must 'match and make' a world in which the realistic attitude (in its 'real-life' meaning) makes sense. And this attitude in turn only makes sense and works (that is, makes a meaningful difference to things) in a world in which there are people, individuals of some degree of integrity and coherence of character."4

II

Mulk Raj Anand is the first Indian novelist to make use of middle-distance realism—as formulated by Stern—in his minor classic, Untouchable. He dramatizes the activities of a day in the life of a scavenger—the "low-caste" boy, Bakha. The locale and the society of Untouchable conform to the canons of realism, in the sense that scavengers and sweepers are pariahs in a society dominated by obsolete and outworn caste morality. Since the town Bulashah has a military cantonment, the army personnel, who include a few Englishmen also, are part and parcel of the society in which Bakha moves and does his work. The Tommies (the Englishmen, as they are humorously called) and a few Christian missionaries have no

reservations about Bakha, though their attitude is one of petty condescension. It is definitely better than the attitude of the Hindus of the higher castes. When the novel was published in 1935, most Indians would have recognized the significance of Bakha. Mulk Raj Anand, exploiting the tensions in Indian society, makes the reader see for himself the poverty, suffering, sincerity, and humanity of the sweeper boy. Adhering to the point of view of Bakha, the novelist makes the reader realize for himself the viciousness and villainy of the caste Brahmins who try to dishonour Bakha's sister, Sohini; and her innocence is clearly contrasted with the corruption of the Brahmins in the temple. Mulk Raj Anand is not unaware of the social change that has taken place with Gandhi's entry into the Indian social scene. Gandhi fervently argued and demanded that the Bakhas of India should find a place in the Indian temple. In fact, in the novel, we see Gandhi addressing a public meeting. The very fact that Bakha hears Gandhi expressing his views on the privileges of Harijans in society amply demonstrates the significance of Anand's inaugural and innovatory novel.

Raja Rao's Kanthapura, published in 1938, may be construed as a variation on the theme of untouchability. While Mulk Raj Anand dramatizes the theme from the point of view of a Harijan sweeper boy placed in an urban society,
Raja Rao shows how a Brahmin boy has to encounter prejudice and callousness in order to make a rural community realize the social injustice to which they are utterly indifferent. The kind of realism we have in Kanthapura is a good illustration of the way in which an Indian novelist in English acclimatizes it to the Indian conditions. As Stern rightly observes, "Early sociologists came to insist that the individual self, in any living sense, even as a self, is already inextricably involved in a social whole. They were thus re-establishing a unity and a truth which the realistic artists had never ceased to take for granted." Anand and Raja Rao, the "realistic artists," noticed the divisions in Indian society and realized that the Gandhian revolution is the only solution to achieve social integration.

It may be safely asserted that most Indian artists have creatively exploited the socio-political changes that came over India during the Independence struggle. The images of Gandhi we see in R.K.Narayan's Waiting for the Mahatma, K.A.Abbas's Ingilab, and Chaman Nahal's The Crown and the Loin Cloth suggest that literary realism explores new areas of worldly experience as and when they become accessible to the

\[5\text{ J.P. Stern, On Realism, p. 101.}\]
creative artist. Kushwant Singh's *Train to Pakistan*, Rajan's *The Dark Dancer*, Malgonkar's *A Bend in the Ganges*, and Chaman Nahal's *Azadi* are a creative comment on the problems and the chaotic conditions that defaced India after the Partition. Yet another prolific theme that the Indian novel in English has explored is the East-West encounter. Discussing this aspect of the Indian novel in English, Rajan observes, "India today is facing radical challenges not merely in its sociological landscape but perhaps even in that immemorial landscape of the heart. The clash is not simply between East and West (a conventional but deceptive stylization) but between the *mores* of a pre-urban civilization and one committed to drastic industrial growth. The question to be answered is whether the Indian tradition with its capacity for assimilation and its unique power of synthesis can come to terms with the new (and the new is the inevitable) without deep erosions in its fundamental character. In creating an image of this challenge there is perhaps a part to be played by the man of mixed sensibility, caught between crossfires, whose own mind is a microcosm of what he seeks to convey."^6^ Rajan, a "man of mixed sensibility,

caught between crossfires, whose own mind is a microcosm of what he seeks to convey," conveys a significant ambivalence in The Dark Dancer, in which his protagonist, Krishnan, finds the West attractive but unsteady and the East unattractive but compelling. Most Indian novelists make the East-West encounter profound and pervasive, with various degrees of achievement and success. In the chapters on the individual authors, we discuss this aspect of the Indian novel in English. Suffice it to say here that this theme in and by itself has not produced a memorable novel. When this theme is fused with other themes like communal disharmony and quest for identity, it acquires richness and complexity.

III

Robert Nisbet, in his Sociology as an Art Form, says, "At the center of any given style lies what can only be called a theme, or a cluster of themes. Theme carries with it a more active, positive, and dynamic character than does the word style. Implicit in any theme is at once a question being answered, more or less, and also an ordering of experience and observation in a special focus." Nisbet thinks that terms like "realism," "naturalism," "Romanticism," and "classicism"

may be construed as various styles of thinking and working. A critical consideration of Narayan's novels from the point of view of theme as a method of the "ordering of experience and observation in a special focus" would make them an important sub-genre in the Indian novel in English. His Malgudi stories emerge from a view of life in which discrimination and sagacity are disciplined and controlled by kindness and reverence for life. Most of his characters come from lower middle-class families and suffer from all the foibles the flesh is heir to. Without using the sophisticated and complex rhetoric of fiction, Narayan conveys the charm of social institutions like the family, marriage, property, worship, and yoga. His novels and stories implicitly pose the question whether human beings are using them or abusing them, and in either case, with what consequences. In the novels, there is no explicit answer to this question. We do not come across in Narayan any tragic event that has a devastating effect on life. In most of his stories, we notice a melodramatic turn or twist in the lives of the characters, which leaves them chastened and secure. The point may be illustrated by analysing Narayan's The Dark Room, published in 1938, and by comparing it with Anita Desai's Where Shall We Go This Summer?, published in 1975. In both the novels, marriage and marital harmony and disharmony are brought to a central focus from different pers-
pectives. Savitri and Sita, inspite of their sincere efforts to assert their own rights as wives and women, ultimately return home not to please their husbands but to play a role and fulfil an obligation in a network of social relations.

Narayan's couple, Savitri and Ramani, suffer a temporary separation, because of Raman's fascination for and relationship with Shanta Bai, an assistant in the insurance office where he is the boss. Having quarrelled with her husband over the issue, Savitri leaves the house. She reaches the banks of the Sarayu and tries to commit suicide by drowning in the river, but Mari, a bad character, who lives on the other side of the river, rescues her and leaves her on the sands. His wife, Ponni, takes her to her hut. She tells Savitri, "Sister, remember this. Keep the men under the rod, and they will be all right. Show them that you care for them and they will tie you and treat you like a dog." Ponni's technique of keeping "the men under the rod" may be a practicable proposition among the lower castes but very difficult to practise among the families of the higher castes. Savitri, after much struggle, returns home to perform her duty as a Hindu wife and to fulfil her obligation to her children as their mother. The narrator's comment

---

on Ramani's embarrassing position unmistakably suggests the signification of *The Dark Room*:

Ramani got up from the bed after a night of disturbed sleep. With all his bravado before his wife, he was very much shaken by her manner. Such a thing had never happened to him at any time for fifteen years. She had always been docile and obedient, and the fire inside her was a revelation to him now. Though he had invited her to walk out of the house last night, he had not expected her to do it. He had expected she would go into the dark room and sulk for a few days, a few days more than usual; then she was bound to come to her senses and accept things as they were. He felt irritated when people made any fuss. A man had a right to a little fun now and then, provided it didn't affect his conduct at home. No doubt it took him home rather late, but that could have been rectified by a little persistent persuasion on her part, all this sullenness and dictation was not the right way to set about it; he expected to be coaxed and requested; he told himself that people could get anything from him if only they knew the proper way of approaching him. It would be a very bold person indeed who tried to dictate to him.  

Since times immemorial, a dark room has a special significance in a wife-husband relationship. Depending on the

*The Dark Room*, pp. 91-92.
caste and the status of the family, a woman seeks the consolation of a dark room whenever her husband wounds her feelings or turns recalcitrant. When Ramani tells his wife, "What a dutiful wife! Would rather starve than precede her husband: You are really like some of the women in our ancient books," it may sound ironical, but there are, even in contemporary India, wives who do not take food till their husbands take it. Even today most wives take it as a compliment if they are told that they are like the women in the ancient books. William Walsh thinks that "The Dark Room is the account of marriage given throughout from the point of view of the wife, in which the image projected is that of the Indian woman as a victim, written, it should be remembered, some thirty-five to forty years before the current talk of women's liberation." If we read Anita Desai's Where Shall We Go This Summer?, written and published three decades after The Dark Room, at a time when women's liberation is not a programme but a reality, we can notice that Sita is in no way a more sophisticated and liberated woman than Narayan's Savitri. Though the narrative is rooted through the consciousness of Sita, and the chronology

10 *The Dark Room*, p. 13.

is collapsed in order to facilitate a composite vision of Sita and her familial life, as a daughter and as a wife, we find that her revolt is against the structural compulsions of a society in which the image of woman has not changed since the publication of *The Dark Room*.

"Part One/Monsoon '67" dramatizes Sita's visit to Manori, a village situated on an island near Bombay. Fed up with the business atmosphere of Bombay and nursing a grouse against her husband, who is "not an introvert, nor an extrovert--a middling kind of man, he was dedicated unconsciously to the middle way," Sita, accompanied by two of her children, goes to the island in order not to give birth to a fifth baby. Her father, a Gandhian, had built a huge structure in the village and stayed there till the end of his life, doing social service to the village folk. The villagers worshipped him as he had performed miracles. Sita goes to the village house on her pilgrimage, fondly hoping that she can miraculously keep the baby in her womb unborn. Unlike Ramani in Narayan's novel, Sita's husband, Raman, appears to be sensible and conducts himself in such a way that he doesn't want to lose his place in the Bombay society. "Part II/Winter '47" presents, in a

---

12Anita Desai, *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* (Delhi: Orient Paperbacks, 1982), p. 47. All subsequent page references are to this edition.
flashback, Sita's father and his saintly life in the village. But we learn that Sita's mother had left her (Sita's) father and children and was supposed to have stayed in Benaras for twenty years. Sita learns from her brother, Jivan, that her mother, unable to live with her husband, whom everybody called a second Gandhi, ran away to Benares. Curiously enough, Sita doesn't find any clue regarding the mystery that surrounds her mother and her flight in a biography of her father written by an old lady. After her father's death, his friend's son, Raman, becomes her guardian and her husband. Although Sita follows Raman, she doesn't appear to be highly grateful to Raman for his timely help. She feels: "It was as though he had been expressly sent by providence to close the theatrical era of her life, her strange career, and lead her out of the ruined theatre into the thin sunlight of the ordinary, the everyday, the empty and the meaningless."  

"Part Three/Monsoon '67" brings the wife and husband together. Raman goes to the village and Sita thinks that he has come to take her home. Although she has many reservations about her husband and her children, Sita feels "comfort, security, and dull, safe routine walk in, in quiet, grey strides."

13 Where Shall We Go This Summer? p. 100.
membered it was the second time he had come to fetch her from the island that he was always having to save her from the island. But she is mildly shocked when her husband tells her that he has come to take their daughter Menaka, so that she may join the medical college. In spite of her anguish that she is betrayed by her own daughter and in spite of her unarticulated protest against her husband's view of life, she accompanies her husband and the children to the city. Although Sita appears more spirited and shows a greater awareness of the kind of life that is possible for a woman in the changing society of contemporary India than Narayan's Savitri, she also has to toe the line of her husband just for saving the family.

Narayan's limpid prose and Anita Desai's lyrical prose converge on an identical theme, of which the dark room and the island are the controlling metaphors. Among the Indian novelists in English, there are not many who have tried to experiment with the form as such. In Arun Joshi and Anita Desai, we have a few aspects of the modernist novel. Their novels may be called introverted novels, in the sense that they show an "awareness of the ephemerality and discontinuity of modern reality, of the evanescence of character, the

\[14\] Where Shall We Go This Summer?, pp. 130-131.
disorderly sequence of time,15 which are the special features of the introverted novel in the Anglo-American literature of the twenties and thirties.

IV

In selecting novelists to support his thesis and substantiate his argument, the author is guided by a few obvious norms. The fictional terrain has to be such that it is a fusion of the claims of relevance and the claims of art. The five novelists whose work is under a critical review in the following pages have structurated their imaginative insights in such a way that they serve both as a mirror and as a lamp. The images of society that are reflected in these writers are complex and unified. But it must be reiterated that we don't read these writers in order to forge a sociology of the Indian novel in English. We go to them to appreciate the way in which they successfully function as lamps, that is, for the light they throw on the Indian socio-cultural problematic. Moreover, as Joan Rockwell rightly says, "fiction is not only a representation of social reality, but also a necessary functional part of social control, and also paradoxically

an important element in social change. It plays a large part in the socialisation of infants, in the expression of official norms such as law and religion, in the conduct of politics, and in general gives symbols and modes of life to the population, particularly in those less easily defined but basic areas such as norms, values, and personal and interpersonal behaviour."¹⁶ Even a casual reader of Kamala Markandaya's novels may see that the narrative focus in her novels is on the stress and strain to which the masses in rural India expose themselves. Nectar in a Sieve, A Handful of Rice, The Coffers Dams, and Pleasure City foreground the sort of socio-cultural milieu we have in Mulk Raj Anand's Untouchable, Coolie, Two Leaves and a Bud, The Village, Across the Black Waters, and The Sword and the Sickle. By considering these novels from the point of view of the sociology of the novel embodied in Joan Rockwell's observation cited earlier— it may be positively stated—we get a faithful image of the socio-cultural norms that prevail in contemporary India. But a sensible reader of a novel would generally expect that the image of society the novel dramatizes is the result

of a creative synthesis of the cause and the effect that are there in any fictional situation. Though she is a prolific writer, Kamala Markandaya's fiction sometimes doesn't succeed in fusing analysis and action, and so when one reads it, one gets the feeling that "If the outer theme of Nectar in a Sieve was rural economics, the theme of A Handful of Rice is urban economics." Although the foregoing classification doesn't do justice to a competent novelist, the fact that her fiction lends itself to this kind of classification ("rural economics" and "urban economics") suggests that it falls short of achieving the kind of success that is possible. Ruth Prawer Jhabvala has written a series of novels, dramatizing the socio-cultural landscape of New Delhi. She doesn't form a part of this thesis because the sensibility that shapes her fiction is largely European. Hence Anita Desai becomes an obvious choice. A rapid review of her maiden novel, Cry, the Peacock, would reinforce the point. Maya marries Gautama for the simple reason that she sees a sort of resemblance between Gautama and her father. After her marriage she feels restless and miserable because everybody in Gautama's house seems to neglect her. The following passage very well illustrates Maya's obsessive

'No one, no one else,' I sobbed into my pillow as Gautama went into the bathroom, 'loves me as my father does.' The curtain fell to behind him, in tragic folds. He did not hear me—the tap was running. The vacuum into which I spoke made me more frantic, and yet he was not really meant to hear. In Gautama's family one did not speak of love, far less of affection. One spoke—they spoke—of discussions in Parliament, of cases of bribery and corruption revealed in government, of newspaper editors accused of libel, and the trials that followed, of trade pacts made with countries across the seas, of political treaties with those across the mountains, of distant revolutions, of rice scarcity and grain harvests ... They had innumerable subjects to speak on, and they spoke incessantly. Sometimes, in order to relax, they played games of cards, so swiftly, so nervously, so intently, that they found they had to release the mounting pressure by conversing, and would begin to talk again, of political scandal and intellectual dissent.  

Given the preoccupations of Gautama's family, it is not hard to surmise that Maya is a misfit in that family. Moreover, as she had her father completely to herself, Maya would like to have Gautama completely to herself. The situa-

18 Anita Desai, Cry, the Peacock (Delhi, Orient Paperbacks, 1983), pp. 46-47.
tion is complicated further by the astrological prediction that her husband will predecease her. With all these oppressive thoughts assigning her mind, Maya, in a moment of utter disagreement with her husband, argues with him and causes his fall from a building which is not protected by a parapet.

This bland summary of the novel doesn't convey the rich texture of Anita Desai's fictional text. But it suggests a significant point. The heroine's name, Maya, is very suggestive and symbolic. In the Hindu Vedantic tradition, Maya doesn't mean what is unreal, it only means a lower kind of reality as contrasted with a higher kind of reality. Together they constitute what we see and perceive in the phenomenal world. Maya is in a state of Maya because she thinks that nobody loves her except her father. In Indian joint families it is not always easy and possible for a young husband to remind his wife constantly that he loves her. If one keeps this in mind and reads the novel, it is possible to assess not only the creative insight in the novel but also its social insight. The sort of privacy Maya wants to have with her husband also demonstrates the changing views about a family. Joint families deny privacy and may impose regimentation, which choke and stifle the Mayas of Indian society. Anita Desai employs psycho-narration to unravel
Maya’s hopes, fears, obsessions, and the tragic melancholy we notice in her. The sixth chapter of this thesis discusses Anita Desai’s fiction not only in terms of her art but in terms of her major thematic concerns and the images that solidify them. The solidity of specification we come across in Anita Desai’s novels reveals the subtle interrelationship between the self, the family, and society. Although she uses modernist narrative methods, her narratives are rooted in the problematic of woman and society in a very inclusive sense.

V

F.R. Leavis, in "Sociology and Literature," says "It is an elementary point, but one that seems unlikely to get too much attention as the Sociology of Literature forges ahead: No 'sociology of literature' and no attempt to relate literary studies with sociological will yield much profit unless informed and controlled by a real and intelligent interest—a first-hand critical interest—in literature."¹⁹ In the chapters that follow, the analysis of the individual novels proceeds by giving maximum attention to the narrative modes embodied in a fictional text. The sociological aspects of the novels as suggested by the title "Self, Family, and

Society" emerge as a by-product of the narrative analysis. The Leavisian observation on sociology and literature is kept in view throughout the study, so that the explication of the theme—"self, family, and society"—may not go beyond the confines of what is literary. Adapting the conventions of Anglo-American realism to the Indian context, the novelists of this study have dramatized some of the contemporary socio-cultural issues which have their origin in the nature of Indian society, and sometimes in India's past. A keen student of Indian society may notice two significant strains in contemporary Indian thought. One may be called transcendental, the other, humanistic. The transcendental aspect of Indian thought is enshrined in the ancient and the medieval Sanskrit literature, including the Vedas, the epics, the Puranas, and the commentaries on them. The humanistic tradition has its origin in the socio-cultural revolution—a concomitant of the freedom struggle—that swept India during the later half of the nineteenth century. In the novelists of this study, we find the dual perspectives of Indian thought fused and dramatized, with varying degrees of achievement. The images of India we see in the novels are

closely connected, because of the rich and significant way in which they illuminate the problems of the self, the family, and society.