CHAPTER VI

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One of the many Indian themes which have fascinated
the novelists is the place of faith in the socio-cultural
life of India. Adherence to rituals and simple faith in
the superior wisdom of a holy man, shape the actions and
conduct of many people all over India. The holy man is
always held in high reverence here because renunciation is
an ideal not many can achieve.

The holy man plays a very important role in society
and he is a common sight in India. He is the object of
veneration and he commands the respectful homage of the
multitude. They are, to a large extent, religious teachers
of the masses. The profession of a holy man has been of
great dignity in the eyes of the Indian people as asceticism
is treated as the best mode of holy attainment. To most of
the people, these holy men are types and examples of a holy
life. They have become symbols of faith and admiration to
the Indian people. The holy man, fake or real, has become
the popular ideal of a great man and the guide of the poor
and the rich. He is too prominent in the Indian society
to escape attention.
Quite often, pseudomystic holy men arise to meet the demands of blind faith of the people. The imposture is not always pre-planned and what really matters is not the powers of the holy man, but the phenomenon of faith and attitude of mind implied in such situations. While the blind faith of the people represents an essential moral weakness as well as a very elemental strength, the people who make a business of spiritualism, certainly present an aspect of sin or evil. Sometimes the two issues impinge upon one another and the sheer force of simple trust transforms the evil in man's mind into a reservoir of goodness.

Hence asceticism runs through Indo-Anglian fiction as part of the design which many novelists deal with, though they may be indifferent to the spiritual aspects of life. As in life, there are real and fake ascetics in literature too.

Four distinct images of the holy man may be formed from a careful study of the most representative Indian Fiction in English, dealing with asceticism. The first image of the holy man consists of genuine holy men whose influence on the other fictional characters is positive and beneficial. The Swamy in Kamala Markandaya's two novels - A Silence of Desire and Possession is portrayed as a true religious figure.
He has all the noble qualities of Indian sainthood - leading a simple, austere life and guiding the people who approach him. He spreads peace and happiness wherever he goes. He fulfils the social function by satisfying the needs of those who crave for tranquility and want an object of faith. In *A Silence of Desire*, The Swamy succeeds in offering solace to the deeply-felt psychic need in Sarojini. One feels that his influence, in the ultimate evaluation is for the better and makes her more balanced and mature. He makes her come to terms with her ailment and she undergoes a successful operation. In *Possession*, the Swamy acts as the guide and mentor of Valmiki who receives inspiration as an artist from the Swamy. The first person to recognise the artistic talents of Valmiki is the Swamy who guides his destiny from the beginning. Through the Swamy in both the novels, Kamala Markandaya seems to exhort the people of India to strive for the attainment of purity, equipoise and inner calm represented by him.

Bhabani Bhattacharya's *He Who Rides a Tiger* offers us the second image of the holy man who puts on the garb of a holy man and discards it at the end by unwieldy situations. Kalo, a poor blacksmith, who suffers imprisonment for stealing a bunch of bananas, acts as a holy man in
order to take revenge on society. He enjoys deception until he realizes that he cannot dismount the tiger of his own creation without ruining himself. Kalo gets the final moment of illumination when he understands that his own daughter, Lakha, has to be sacrificed for his ambition as she is to be transformed into "Mother of Sevenfold Bliss." Lakha is prepared to accept Motichand's hedonous offer of taking her as his fifth wife and refuses to be the "Mother of Sevenfold Bliss." The magnitude of the sacrifice that Lakha is about to make, makes Kalo throw away the mask of a holy man by revealing to the big crowd that has gathered, the bitter truth about himself and he starts leading the life of a blacksmith in a village.

R.K. Narayan's Raju who eventually gets transformed into a true ascetic, offers the third image of the holy man. Sainthood is thrust upon him by Velen and the villagers of Mangala village in spite of the fact that he does not wish to be a saint. Raju's entire life has been an endless record of deception and sexual licence and at the end, he decides to confront his naked, real self. The moment of illumination, a moment which makes a person acquire the power to go beyond himself, comes to him. Thus, the mask of asceticism that Raju is compelled to put on, becomes his face at the end.
The fourth image of the holy man relates itself to a modern 'yogi' who achieves a remarkable union of the sensuous and the sublime in Rabanani Bhattacharya's *A Dream in Hawaii*. Meeloy Mockherjee, a reputed professor of Indian Philosophy, reincarnates himself as Swami Yogananda. The transformation is not a real conversion. In spite of his strong determination to strive for God-realization, his desire for Devjani continues to annoy him at the sub-conscious level. His personal magnetism casts an abiding spell on youths and on the people close to him. The garb of asceticism also helps him achieve a synthesis of the vedantic thought he teaches and its practical working out in his own life. Yet, the Swami suffers exposure of his imposture self—the Swami—at the hands of Walt Greadon and his minion, Sylvia Koo. He dares atonement by making an honest confession to Devjani. The sanctified self of Swami Yogananda emerges out of the fire of this ordeal. Thus, Swami Yogananda is portrayed not as a dry formulation of yoga concepts, but as a human being with his weaknesses. He achieves sainthood rather with self-fulfilment than with self-denial, quite contrary to the conventional saints.

The holy man figures as an important character in quite a few other Indian novels in English. R.P. Jhabvala, for instance, presents the holy man in many of her novels.
As in Kamala Markandaya's *Silence of Desire* and *Possession*, we have a true ascetic in her novels like *Esmond in India, Get Ready for Battle, A Backward Plunge* and *The Householder.*

In *Esmond in India*, the Swami lives in the house of Uma, the wife of a freedom fighter. Uma finds in him a great spiritual comfort. She is reminded of him in moments of despair and agony and goes to seek solace in his presence. *Esmond in India* is the first novel where Jhabvala introduces the holy man as part of Indian milieu, we find a detailed description of the Swami which is deliberately designed for the Western readers:

> She climbed the stairs to glance into the room where the Swami usually stayed; but she saw that today she could not speak to him, for he was in contemplation. He sat in the Padmasana pose, his legs tucked under him, his feet on his thighs, his hands palm upwards on his knees; his eyes, wide open and unblinking, stared straight through her.10

The Swami, in this novel, like the Swami offers in *Possession*, solace to people in despair though he remains detached from the materialistic world.

In *Get Ready for Battle*, Sarala Devi has most of the characteristics of an ascetic. She is an idealist devoted

to the poor. She turns from one hopeless project to another. Even in her defeat, she remains a noble and inspiring woman. Brij Mohan, opines:

She is a saint! ... For herself she wants nothing, only for others, always for others. If someone comes to her and says give me your jewels, give me your clothes, your food, the house you live in, she would give without one thought, she would strip herself of all.2

Sarala Devi symbolizes the perfection of Hindu religious and moral teachings in *The Gita*. She reaches a state which is far beyond the bounds of worldliness and shackles of self-interest.

*A Backward Place* shows the reaction of Westerners towards India's holy men. Judy, the English wife of an Indian unemployed actor, Bel, visits holy men along with Bhuaji, an old pious devotee. Judy is neither interested in the Swami nor does she show any regard for him:

Bhuaji rested a little on the sand. She chose to sit near a holy man - she loved such company - who lay reclined and at his ease ... He did not look particularly holy - he had a crude peasant face with small eyes and a large, spreading smallpoxed nose - but his orange robe and

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his air of freedom and leisure were enough to enchant Bhaaji.³

Judy represents those foreigners who laugh at the religious leaders of India.

The Swami in The Householder symbolises the spiritual life and ideals of India. He makes no demands on his disciples. People are welcome to visit him if they wish to. Though a minor character in the novel, his influence on other characters is positive and beneficial.

Jhabvala presents not only true ascetics but also fakes. For example, we have in A New Dominion, a hypocrite who passes for a holy man. Lee, Bvis and Margaret come to India in quest of spiritualism. Their aim is to seek their own identity. They have great faith in the powers of the Swami. But the Swami proves to be fake. He seduces the girls, holds them firm and claims them as his possessions - corporeal as well as spiritual. Lee narrates her terrible experience with the Swami:

He said terrible things and did terrible things ... He was terrible, terrifying. He drove right into me and through me and calling me beastly names, shouting them out loud and at

the same time hurting me as much as he could.4

Thus, the Swami has no qualms either moral or religious, claiming the bodies of women. The holy man is presented as a fake by a few other novelists like Suku, K. Nagarajan, and G.V. Desani. One observes the picture of a Swami and a Yogini Ma who show what happens when hypocrites and charlatans put on the saffron robe, in Webs of Vengeance, a recently published novel by Suku. Swami Nirnay Maharaj appears to be a man of few words. He eats only simple ‘sattvic food’. He makes a deep impression on his devotees with his powerful eye, melodious voice and persuasive tongue. He draws people from different walks of life. Susila, whose dreams of a happy married life are shattered, makes a visit to the Swami. The Swami says to her while welcoming:

Sit down daughter ... We know what brings you here ... Don’t worry ... those who come to the Lord, imbibe His strength to face all worldly problems.5

Susila is overwhelmed when the Swami decides to take her as one of his disciples. She feels

Swami is God - sent ... I shall be content to be his humble servant.6


6Ibid., p. 125.
She becomes 'Yogini Ma'. The name of the ashram is changed to "Yogini Mata Ashram of universal Harmony." But Susila's happiness is short-lived. Her dreams are shattered as the Swami rapes her after giving anesthetic fragrance to her. Susila, deceived by the Swami, puts an end to her terrible existence by jumping into the Ganges. Thus, the fake holy man becomes responsible for the death of his own disciple, Susila.

K. Nagarajan's first novel, Athowar House consists of a few chapters portraying how a young man is duped by a fake ascetic at Banaras. This young man, who, for the first time, moves out of the security he has enjoyed in a joint family, is chased across the country by this dupe of an ascetic in an attempt, which may be aptly termed blackmailing. It is a very significant thing that this happens at Banaras, the most holy place to Hindus. People, from all parts of the country, come here for a holy bath in the Ganges in an attempt to wash away their sins. Nagaraja's young man gets his 'salvation' from a fake ascetic in the form of blackmailing.

G.V. Desani's All About H. Hatter deals with a man's encounter with a series of fake 'Sadhus'. The novel consists of seven episodes in which seven sets of impostures manage to make a fool of Mr. Hatter. All these holy men seem to be
members of a disreputable gang of swindlers. We come across varieties of human deception. Natter is on the look out for a 'guru' or a holy man, who, in ancient tradition of Hindu wisdom, will offer him guidance to religious truth. People are seen constantly changing their identity or reveal their true selves beneath the masks because they have special advantage in deceiving men and exploiting the simple faith of credulous people. Natter stands for the eternal dupe who is an easy prey to all kinds of charlatans. Desani's presentation of holy men as fakes and charlatans, on no account, may be taken for Desani's denouncement of the order. The novelist is only criticising the sham of hypocrisy that shrouds many holy men.

Thus, the holy man seems to be a fascinating character for the Indian novelists in English. Apart from providing interesting fictional material for the novelist, the image of the holy man, seems to contribute to the special appeal of the Indian Fiction in English to the foreign reader. That the successful treatment of the holy man in the Indian Fiction in English has attracted even the novelists of the younger generation, is evidenced by the recently published novels like Inner Door by Margis
Dalai and Webs of Vengeance by Suku. The younger novelists may no longer treat the holy man as a true ascetic like Kamala Markandaya, but mostly as a fraud and a hypocrite inasmuch as he has become "for the rich ... a diversion, a hobby, thanks-giving and for the middle-class... an escapade."\(^7\)

\(^7\textit{A New Dominion},\ p. 124.\)