Introduction:
Ethnicity and the Dialectics of Minority Discourse

Chapter One
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The term 'Minority Discourse' gathered considerable currency in the postcolonial era as one of the novel, theoretical, and often political, articulations encompassing commonwealth literature, multiculturalism and counter canon that mainly identified and elaborated the emergent literary and cultural works from the non-mainstream, non-European writers and cultures. The widespread use of these terms particularly by the non-European academics, was directly influenced by diverse continental theoretical developments with such theoretical schools as Poststructuralism, the Frankfurt School, and Postcolonialism, and theoreticians and philosophers like Walter Benjamin, Michel Foucault, Georg Lukacs, Antonio Gramsci, Louis Althusser and Theodore Adorno, to name a few, who sought to reformulate and debate the concerns central to the Anglo-American academy. "These theoretical and thematic combinations have had the effect not only of focussing attention on particular areas of concern", says Aijaz Ahmed, "but also frequently of reformulating much older and recalcitrant issues both of minorities within these societies and of imperialism as regards the archive of Western knowledge and the question of cultural domination exercised by countries of advanced capital over imperialised societies." (2) In general, literary and cultural studies have recently, particularly during the past two or three decades, shown tremendous interest in deliberating on all minority expressions in literature and culture. This has led not only to the widespread surfacing of the voice of
the voiceless classes, but also in institutionalising or rather naming a set of identifiable traits and characteristics that are reported to be found in minority expressions, under the umbrella term, Minority Discourse. In other words, Minority discourse, in the vibrant theoretical nomenclature of theoretical developments like Colonial Discourse Theory and Cultural Studies, serves as a term that consolidates the expressions of marginality in the cultural artefacts of distinct minorities living in different parts of the world. Most of these minorities seem to have developed an intense sense of being thrown to the margins due to different historical or cultural reasons in the postcolonial period.

The theoretical framework or the mode of interpretation employed in the study of ethnic articulations in Indo-Anglian literature attempted in this dissertation is that of Minority Discourse. That is, the literary works under scrutiny here are basically treated as what is often called 'minor literatures'. In this chapter my focus is on tracing and understanding the evolution of the conceptual realm or what can be referred to as the dialectics of minority discourse with special emphasis on the concept of ethnicity as a minority position. The discussion of the theoretical parameters and cultural implications of minority discourse in general and ethnicity in particular would stand as a theoretical and conceptual background to my subsequent study, in this dissertation, of the selected Indo-Anglian novels written by the ethnic minority writers in India. The centre of attention of the present study is the distinct ethnic experiences encountered by four minority communities in India, which
are represented in novels by writers from the respective communities. Apart from looking into the multifarious general theoretical concerns in the field of ethnicity and minority discourse, there obviously is a necessity to evolve a specifically Indian way of looking at 'minor texts' considering the multicultural, multiethnic situation prevailing in India. Moreover, since my study is not on economically browbeaten classes like dalits whose very existence itself is a struggle, there apparently is a need to reformulate the theory of ethnic literature to suit their distinct problems, ways of expressing themselves and so forth. The proposed study of the dialectics of minority discourse in this chapter is divided into separate headings viz. Discourse and the Social, the Contours and Scope of Minority Discourse, Ethnicity and Literature, The Indian Literary Scenario: Cultural Nationalism and Voices of Minorities, and The Project.

**Discourse and the Social**

A discourse in the Foucauldian sense of the term (as it is used here) “is a strongly bounded area of social knowledge, a system of statements within which the world can be known.” (Ashcroft *et al*, *Key Concepts* 70) Viewed from a broad perspective, discourse refers to “a particular use of language in a given time and place: novels, television commercials or political speeches are not ‘discourses’ in this usage but instances of discourse, of ways language gets used on given topic in a particular culture and society.” (Warhol and Herndl 653) Foucault used the term to mean that it is through the discourse the world is brought into being, and the subjectivity of individuals is constructed through the discourse. Discourse consists of the “complex of signs and practices which
organize social existence and social reproduction.” (Ashcroft et al, Key Concepts 71) Literature in this sense is considered as a discourse, and “[t]o treat literature as a discourse is to see the text as mediating relationship between language users: not only the relationship of speech, but also of consciousness, roles and class. The text ceases to be an object and becomes an action or process.” (Fowler 77) Considering literature as a discourse again is to recognize that it carries out a socio-linguistic function, bearing or “possessing certain institutional values and performing certain functions” (Fowler 78), and also to start looking at literature as part of the social process. The study of the intricate way in which the discourse is connected to the social is expected to serve as a foreword to the study of minority discourse. With the extensive interest in the theory of literature that gathered momentum during the second part of the twentieth century the social has become a major point of departure in discourse. It was perhaps Russian critics like Mikhail Bakhtin and Volosinov who provided with the groundwork for the association of the social and discourse. For Volosinov, for instance, “language is utterance emerging from concrete social communication” and “when viewed in its social contexts language appears not as a closed system of self-identical forms...but as a generative and continuous process, as utterances which respond to and anticipate other utterances” (Rice and Waugh 194-95). He understood that the utterances that characterize social interchange also form the arena of struggle between different social groups (Rice and Waugh 194-95) and thus they contain ideological undercurrents. Volosinov’s theories were directed against the structuralist linguistics of Ferdinand de Saussure, as he critiqued the “abstract objectivism” of Saussure’s
theory of language (Rice and Waugh 195). Similarly Bakhtin was interested in the socio ideological accents of language. He approached language as plural and multiple rather than singular and monolithic, thus calling attention to what he calls its “heteroglossia,” and argued that language is intimately bound up with material and social condition (Rice and Waugh 195). Bakhtin applies the idea of language as socio-ideological to study novels that “represent a dialogic interanimation of socio-ideological languages.” (Rice and Waugh 195)

Following Bakhtin and Volosinov, later critical and theoretical schools, like Poststructuralism, New Historicism, Cultural Materialism and Cultural Studies attempted reflective studies into the relation between discourse and the social. The prominent writers who made valuable readings on this issue include Michel Foucault, Edward Said, Homi K. Bhabha, Raymond Williams, and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak.

It was, probably, Foucault who first made serious studies on the question of the discourse and the social. In his Archaeology of Knowledge (1972) Foucault associated the concept of power to the discussion of knowledge in general and discourses in particular. According to Foucault “in every society the production of discourse is at once controlled, selected, organised and redistributed by a certain number of procedures whose role is to ward off its powers and dangers, to gain mastery over its chance events, to evade its ponderous, formidable materiality,” (From Order of Discourse 221) and “in any society there are manifold relations of power which permeate, characterize and constitute the social body and these relations of power cannot themselves be established, consolidated nor implemented without the production,
accumulation, circulation and functioning of a discourse.” (Foucault “Power...” 544) These procedures include exclusion and prohibition. "Exclusion and prohibition primarily include restriction, objection and taboos that society imposes on its individuals. But there exits in our society a division and a rejection.” (Foucault, *From Order of Discourse* 221) Foucault gives the example of a madman’s speech that mostly utters hidden truth, which is rejected as either not heard or taken for the word of truth. According to Foucault in a broader sense the procedures of the system of exclusion often control and delimit a discourse. Here discourse puts power into play. The dominant tendencies of a society isolate a group by its internal procedures of exclusion that function as “principles of classification, ordering of distribution.” (Foucault, *From Order of Discourse* 221) Similarly major narratives of a society exclude marginal ones in a way to establish their superiority and power over others. Foucault explains that there is:

Scarcely a society without its major narratives, which are recounted, repeated and varied; formulae, text and ritualised sets of discourses, which are recited in well defined circumstances. Things said once are preserved because it is suspected that behind them there is a secret or treasure. In short there is in all societies with great consistency, a kind of gradation among discourses; those which are set in the ordinary course of days and exchanges and which vanish as soon as they have been pronounced; ...In short those discourses which over and above
the formulation are said indefinitely, remains said, and are said to be said again. (*From Order of Discourse* 225-6)

The marriage of the social and discourse was richly contributed by the findings of the postcolonial critics like Edward Said who traced the unholy alliance between enlightenment and colonialism. In his *Orientalism* (1978) for example Said attacked the tradition of western enlightenment that brought into use the high cultural tradition of humanism, and thus he has inaugurated a series of critical studies in the culturally sensitive areas such as elitism, racism, religion and so forth. This has led to the mobilisation of academics from non-western countries towards locating and studying what is generally called the narratives of oppression by interpreting and debating the representation of the non-western other. Said’s *Orientalism*, which serves as one of the source books in the field of cultural discourse in the post-colonial era is derived from his understanding of Antonio Gramsci’s and Michel Foucault’s ideas regarding the inherent properties of a culture. From Gramsci, Said learnt that “in any society certain cultural forms predominate over the others just as certain ideas are more influential than the others” and this was what Gramsci called “hegemony” (*Orientalism* 7) For Said, “no production of knowledge in human societies can ever ignore or disclaim its author’s involvement as a human subject in his own circumstances...” (11) Said’s work was greatly influenced by Foucault’s assumptions pertaining to the intricate ways in which knowledge and power are conjoined together. It was perhaps from Foucault that Said understood that literature and culture are not as politically innocent as they appear to be. He found the nexus of knowledge and power creating the
‘oriental’ and he exposed the latent experience of such tendencies as anti-Semitism in the western discourse. These findings are seminal to the understanding of the relation between the social and discourse.

Said’s studies resulted in the development of what is generally called in the field of literary theory as Colonial Discourse Theory, the idea and contours of which were further enriched by works like Frantz Fanon’s *Wretched of the Earth* (1967) and *Black Skin, White masks* (1965), Ashcroft and others’ *Empire Writes Back* (1968), Said’s own *Culture and Imperialism* (1993), Homi K. Bhabha’s *Nation and Narration* (1990) and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s celebrated essay, “Can the Subaltern Speak?” (1985) These works opened up an entire range of theoretical and political activities that upheld the task of bridging the gap between discourse and social practice. Taking colonialism as a cultural change with widespread implications and corollaries, these critics and a host of others explored the convoluted way in which cultural products and knowledge as such is constructed in the world in the interest of the European elite, by explicitly sidelining voices from the margins. They focussed on how the colonial powers managed to evolve a knowledge base with the enlightenment that enabled them to colonise the non-European countries. These conceptual realms basically presupposed the racial superiority of the white Europeans over the others. They also probed the European cultural artefacts and discourses in general to find marked expressions of colonial desire, racial, intellectual and cultural superiority of, say, the occident over the orient. The philosophical foundation of colonial discourse theory was however supplied by Poststructuralist thinkers like Foucault and Derrida, who interrogated the
fundamental pillars of European thought like logocentrism, phonocentrism and phallocentrism. It was Foucault who first problematised the politicised character of discourses as all discourses essentially carry articulations of power. Following the Foucauldian dictum of power and discourse, or more precisely the idea that 'knowledge is power', critics like Said held that "ideas, cultures and histories cannot seriously be understood or studied without their force or ...their configuration of power being studied" (Said Orientalism 327). The development of the postcolonial study of literature as a whole was embedded in the renewed understanding of the purpose and role of representation itself. "[M]odern thought", according to Said, "have taught us to be sensitive to what is involved in representation, in studying the other, in racial thinking, in unthinking and uncritical acceptance of authority and authoritative ideas in the socio-political roles of intellectuals, in the great value of the sceptical critical consciousness." (Said Orientalism 327)

The association of the social and discourse has obvious Marxist connections. It was the Marxist critics who seriously pondered over the twin field of culture and aesthetics. Western Marxism, according to Aijaz Ahmad, has been preoccupied with cultural superstructures and literary production in particular. And the kind of political desire that characterise the cultural and literary studies, like the works of Said, was essentially influenced by Marxist literary theory. As Ahmad has rightly pointed out, "eclecticism of theoretical and political positions is the common ground on which radical literary theory is on the whole constructed." (5) But while taking Marxist position and authorial names such as that of Gramsci, there was a tendency among theorists
to explicitly debunk the theory and history as such (Ahmad 5). Marxism's literary theory and cultural theory underwent drastic reorganisations, as the neo-Marxist thinkers like Althusser and Gramsci tried to understand the innate connection between cultural production and the economic base or other kinds of production from the purview of the new cultural and social development. Moreover although Marxism connected the cultural productions of a period with the entire political processes and with other kinds of productions, it rarely addresses the same relations "in precisely these branches of literary theory were issues of colony and empire are most lengthily addressed." (Ahmad 5)

The new Historicist and Cultural Materialist critics who emerged in the 1980s also contributed to the merger of the social and discourse. While concentrating basically on what Montrose described as a "reciprocal concern with the historicity of the text and the textuality of history," (242) these critics provided with new interpretation of to the Marxist way of looking at the text as a product of the social conditions of its production. They took as a foundation the Foucauldian assumption that "patterns of power-relations at any given era in a society constitute the concepts, oppositions and hierarchies of its discourse" and thus they "determine what will be accounted knowledge and truth, as well as what will be considered humanly normal and so serve to define and exclude what, in that era is accounted to be criminal, insane or sexually deviant" (Cited in Abrams 248-9); further, the view of Althusser that "ideology manifests itself in different ways in the discourse of each of the semi-autonomous institutions of an era" and that "ideology operated to position its readers as the 'subjects' in the discourse in a way that in fact 'subjects' them
...to the interests of the ruling classes” (Cited in Abrams 248-9). They took a
"dialectical approach" in their critical works “which is conscious of its own
social function” and wished to “consider the problem of literary history from
the angle where literature is history, and history is an element of literary
structure and aesthetic experience.” (Weinman 281) New Historicists
understood the social as “discursively constructed and language use is
understood to be always and necessarily dialogical. Be socially and materially
determined and constrained.” (Montrose 240) They broke some fundamental
myths concerning the interpretation of literature, the relation between
literature and other discourses, the relation between cultural practices and the
social, political and economic processes, and the ways and means by which
subjectivity is socially constructed (Montrose 240). Rejecting the tendencies to
divorce literature from the social, New Historicists held that:

Writing and reading are always historically and socially
determinate events performed in the world and upon the world
by gendered individuals and collective human agents. We may
simultaneously acknowledge the theoretical indeterminacy of the
signifying process and the historical and the historical specificity
of discursive practices – acts of speaking writing and interpreting.
The project of a new social historical criticism is then to analyse
the interplay of culture specific discursive practices – mindful
that it too is such a practice and so participates in the interplay it
seeks to analyse. (Montrose 240)
As a composite form of ideas or elements commonly found in Marxism, New Historicism, Gender Studies, study of race and ethnicity, Film Theory, Popular Culture, Urban Studies and Postcolonial Studies, there emerged during the 1960s a school of thought popularly known as Cultural Theory or Cultural Studies which focussed on “Social and cultural forces that either create community or cause division and alienation.” (Guerin et al 240) Cultural studies, like other theoretical positions concentrating on the innate relation between the social and discourse, stand in strong opposition to the power structures dominating a society, and “they question inequalities within power structures, and seek to restructure relationships among dominant and subordinated cultures. Because meaning and individual subjectivity are culturally constructed, they can thus be reconstructed.” (Guerin et al 241) Following the Marxist tradition, Cultural Studies discussed issues relating to the means and ways by which cultural work is produced thus taking the ideological underpinnings of a literary work into consideration. It was with the intervention of cultural studies that literary studies took what Andrew Milner has called a “sociological turn” (11) that liberated literature from purely aesthetic concerns diverted from reality. “A critical cultural studies”, in his view, “would be one characterized, above all by a sustained hostility to whatever slaveries that may impede the continuing cause of human emancipation.” (Milner 15)

All these developments are to be perceived from the changed times when the literary studies are becoming global. As Giles Gunn has rightly observed, the last several decades have witnessed an extraordinary expansion
of the scope of literary studies, this expansion resulted in the "refiguration of the objects of literary studies." (16) The globalized world order ensured "the erasure of local differences and the integration of more and more of world's people as well as of entire sovereign states into a geopolitical system that inevitably erodes their ability to shape their own destinies." (Gunn 16) Here literary works, especially from the third world countries, faced the sweeping developments from reducing literary texts from their concern for their intertextual production, transmission and exchange, and from transferring all literary products into means of economic activity. When cultural works crossed their territories with globalisation of literary studies the question of the ideological location of the work also got problematised. While minorities have to negotiate the crucial issue of cultural erasure, as they are made part of a global totality, the study of such subjects as race ethnicity, sexism and imperialism acquired widespread attention in the era of globalisation. Here the texts are studied with reference to cultural identity represented in the text, which most often is opposed to some hegemonic principle operating in their respective spheres. Thus what is called "cultural narrativization" became a focal point in literary production as well as studies. For Stephen Greenblatt, cultural narrativization seemed "progressive rather than reactionary ends that they derive from desire by most groups to take responsibility for their pasts, shape their destinies and transmit their legacies to future generations." (Cited in Gunn 22)

The Contours and Scope of Minority Discourse
With decolonisation, (which was “quite simply the replacing of a certain species of men by another species of men” and that resulted “in a whole social structure being changed from the bottom up” as Frantz Fanon wrote in his *The Wretched of the Earth* [1]), literary and other cultural discourses showed tremendous interest in putting across the subaltern consciousness. Thus postcolonial literature celebrated the minority’s propensity to speak in an attempt to make him/her heard, and thus establishing his/her unique place in the world. The entire intellectual landscape of the postcolonial era has been characterized by an overt political consciousness of the relation between such binary polarities as coloniser and colonised, self and other, centre and margin and so on, that sounded out the emergence of counter cultural discourses mainly from the colonised societies which essentially affirmed the identity of all the suppressed classes and silenced voices. The general characteristic of all these new developments was perhaps a penchant to evolve a politics rooted in otherness, the most influential principle of which is the political struggle of the colonised societies against being treated as what Fanon calls the ‘wretched of the earth’. Fanon held that colonialism and the resultant violent struggle for decolonisation, produced an array of cultural expressions and intellectual responses that gave “new values to the native culture within the framework of colonial domination”, and which arrived at a seemingly paradoxical proposition that “in a colonised country the most elementary, most savage and the most undifferentiated nationalism is the most fervent and efficient means of defending national culture.” (*The Wretched* 196) Thus the cultural expressions of decolonisation from colonised countries were rooted in a desire to define and
defend national cultures. He understood culture as "the first expression of its preferences of its taboos and of its patterns...A national culture is the sum total of all the appraisals; it is the result of internal and external extensions exerted over society as a whole and also at every level of that society." (Fanon 196)

Fanon found that it is the nation that ensures the conditions necessary to culture, and gathers together the various indispensable elements required for the creation of culture (197). For him reestablishment of the nation is the first prerequisite for a national culture in so far as "[a] non-existent culture can hardly be expected to have bearing on reality or to influence reality." (197)

Fanon found that colonial powers effected repercussions on their cultural plane by encouraging only those modes of expressions that made their existence in power possible. While at the beginning the native intellectuals produced their works to be read by the oppressor, the scenario in developed societies is that "now the native writer takes on the habit of addressing his [or her] own people." (The Wretched 193) This is the occasion of the subalterns' freedom to express themselves making themselves the subject matter of the book. Fanon calls the literature with typically nationalist character as 'combat literature', "in the sense that it calls on the whole people to fight for their existence as a nation. Literature of combat is called so because it moulds the national consciousness giving it form and contours and flinging open before it new and boundless horizons; "it assumes responsibility, and it is the will to liberty expressed in terms of time and space." (Fanon The Wretched 193) The emergence of the literature of one's own with decolonisation also helped to reformulate certain stereotyped pictures of the native from the psyche of the
general public. The storytellers from these societies replaced the vein and accepted formulae of story telling that may read, "[t]his all happened long ago" with that of "what we are going to speak of happened somewhere else but it might well have happened here today and it might happen tomorrow." (Fanon *The Wretched* 193), thus changing the method as well as the content of their stories. These developments have immense relevance considering the change of attitude in the people of the colonized countries it spoke of and represented. According to Fanon, "[t]he emergence of imagination and of the creative urge in the songs and epic stories of a colonized country is worth following. The storyteller replies to the expectant people by successive approximation, and makes his way apparently along but in fact helped on by his public towards the seeking out of new patterns that is to say national patterns." (*The Wretched* 194)

If this was the general case of the awakening of the national consciousness in the domain of literature and culture, there of course is something more interesting: the awakening of the smaller minorities within these societies. Not unlike the pre-colonial societies, the post-colonial societies are also not very much homogenous. There were and are innumerable number of fractions in these societies with their selected attributes and characteristics. These minorities include women, children, dalits and the ethnic minorities. In spite of their countries' major victory against the colonial centre, these minorities had to fight for social justice and equality in their own countries, as they were doubly suppressed owing to their backwardness or marginalized disposition. The literature of these groups thus form a second but more problematical and important layer in the minority discourse.
The discussion of the dialectics of minority discourse takes up another current area of enquiry viz., nation and narration. The minorities represent their concept of nation through their narratives, amid repercussions of a lack of 'space' in a country dominated by a majority. According to Homi K. Bhabha, "nation, like narratives, lose their origins in the myth of time. And only fully realize their horizons in the mind's eye." (Nation and Narration 1) He finds that, a particular ambivalence is haunting the idea of nation. The ambivalence is between the language of those who write it and the lives of those who live it.” (1) The idea of nation is also taken as a symbolic force according to which nation as a system of cultural signification, as the representation of social life rather than the discipline of social polity, emphasises the instability of knowledge. Thus the idea of nation or a national idea expressed in a literary work is also expressive of the ambivalence in defining the 'society' of a nation. The modern nation, according to Hannah Arendts, is the “curiously hybrid realm where private interests assume public significance, and the two realms flow unceasingly and uncertainly into each other like waves in the never-ending stream of the life process itself.” (Cited in Bhabha Nation and... 2) The ambivalent figure of the nation and its "conceptual indeterminacy" has an effect on its narratives. The narratives of a nation uphold a sense of "nationness", which gives the writer a "comfort" of social belonging, a sense of justice, law, sexuality and so on (Bhabha Nation... 3). Bhabha approaches nation as a narration, in an attempt to fathom the 'Janus-faced' ambivalence of language itself, which constructs the "Janus-faced" discourse of the nation (Bhabha Nation... 3). Evoking the margin of the nation space, Bhabha contests
to the claim of cultural supremacy. Thus he undermines the fact that marginalization results from rationalising the authoritarian tendencies within culture, in the name of National interest. In this respect, “the antagonistic perspective of nation and narration will establish the cultural boundaries of nation so that they must be acknowledged as containing thresholds of meaning that must be crossed, erased, and translated in the process of cultural production.” (Bhabha Nation...4)

The concept of "minor literature," which Deleuze and Guattari elaborated in their *Kafka: Towards a Minor Literature*, may possibly be helpful in the discussion of minority discourse in general and the aesthetics of ethnicity in particular. Deleuze and Guattari bring out three characteristics of minor literature: “in it language is affected with a high coefficient of deterritorialization” (16); “everything in [a minor literature] is political” (16); and "in it everything takes on a collective value.” (16) In the first characteristic the concept of minor literature deals with the “language question,” which although has been at the center of many discussions of postcolonial literature, is not to be elaborated here as it is not that relevant to the present study. However, Kafka’s situation with regard to the selection of language, as Ronald Bogue has pointed out, “is analogous to that of Indian writers who must choose between their regional, Indian tongues and a pan-Indian, bureaucratic English, or African writers who must decide whether to communicate widely through the colonizer's tongue or reach a more limited audience through a specific tribal language.” (105) The second and third characteristics of minor
literature are relevant to discussions of minorities in general, and here, of ethnic minorities in India, in that there is a stress on the "inseparability of the personal and the political as well as the unavoidably collective dimension of any individual effort by members of a marginalized group" in minor literature (Bogue 105). According to Bogue:

One of the original features of the concept of "minor literature" is its rapprochement of three distinct categories of literature: secondary literature, whether it be that of a minor nation or linguistic group in relation to a major tradition, or that of a humble, minor movement or tendency (e.g., American local colourists) within a larger tradition; marginal literature, or the literature of minorities; and experimental literature, which "minorizes" a major language.... By treating Kafka as a minor writer, Deleuze and Guattari call attention to his status as a member of an ethnic minority and citizen of a minor region/proto-nation within a foreign-based empire, while insisting that his formal and thematic innovations in literature have direct social and political implications. (105)

Minority discourse as discussed by cultural critics like Bhabha take up issues relating to canon formation that starts from the basic questions, what constitutes a culture? Do the constituent elements of a culture include ethnic and racial minorities? It interrogates the incorporation into mainstream of some texts and excluding some others from it (Guerin 255). Perhaps, since the 1960s
enquiries pertaining to “who writes? For whom is the writing being done? In what circumstances?” (Said Reflections 118) have been widely discussed. To Said the answers to these questions provide us with the basic presumptions for a politics of interpretation. (Reflections 118) As the present study concentrates on the ethnic minorities these questions also lead to further questions like “In a culture of victims does being ethnics mean being oppressed? Can successful ethnics still be ethnics? Do ethnics have to be subalterns?” (Gilman 23)

One of the first noted instances of minority discourse in the field of literature was from the writers belonging to the various small groups of African and Afro-American cultures. These works mainly discussed the question of race and they mostly ponder over multiculturalism, and multiracialism, and the trend of interracial marriages that, although was aimed at diminishing the problem of racism, seemed to have posed threat to the purity of each race. Among the Afro-Americans writers like Toni Morrison, Maya Angelou, Alice Walker and Ralph Ellison are the ones who expressed the angst of the black minority and brought into the limelight the need to thwart the privileges existing in the American society on racial, cultural, and gender grounds. African American writing in general “displays a folkloric conception of humankind; an ambivalent consciousness arising from bicultural identity; irony, parody, and sometimes bitter comedy in negotiating this ambivalence…” (Guerin et al 257) It tries to instil a definition of reality from the point of view of the blacks, rather than allowing the accepted ideal of reality to dominate. Bernard Bell argues that:

20
Traditional white American values emanate from a providential vision of History of Euro-Americans as a chosen people, a vision that sanctions their individual and collective freedom in the pursuit of property, profit and happiness. Radical Protestantism, constitutional democracy, and industrial capitalism are the white American trinity of values. In contrast, black American values emanate from a cyclical Judeo-Christian vision of history and of Afro-Americans as a disinherited colonized people, a vision that sanctions their resilience of spirit and pursuit of social justice.

(Quoted in Guerin et al 257)

What rings in the entire Afro-American consciousness is their concern with and memories of “Africa, the transatlantic or middle passage, southern plantation tradition, emancipation reconstruction, post-reconstruction, northern migration, urbanisation and racism.” (Cited from Bell in Guerin et al 257)

The Harlem renaissance with writers like Langston Hughes, Zora Neale, Countee Cullen and Alice Walker celebrated the folkloric tradition of Afro-American culture and affected black culture. The other major minority writers who also contributed to the identification and expression of minority consciousness in America belonged to groups like Hispanic, Mexican American, Puerto Rican, Cuban American, Chicano, American Indian and Asian American. The so-described Latina/Latino writers (belonging to Hispanic, Mexican American, Puerto Rican, Cuban American and Chicano) gave expression to their distinctive ethnicity of the Spanish speaking people of the United States. A sense of living two cultures and two languages - Spanish
and English - but without being able to be completely at home in either of
them, is probably the strongest motif in the writings of these groups. The
literary works of American Indians mostly encounter such accepted
misconceptions about them, as they are a primitive tribe. They carry the
tradition of Oratory, tales and songs composed in tribal languages and
performed for tribal audiences that have existed amongst the American Indians
for centuries (Guerin et al 264). All these minority literary expressions
emanated from a feeling of revival that made them delve deep into the
question of identity faced by the respective groups. As in the case of African
American writers, their works presented the complex relationship between the
African culture and their adopted culture. As Ashcroft and others pointed out,
"The fact that the bulk of African peoples shipped under condition of slavery
makes the relationship between that institutions and the wider practice of
imperialism central to the understanding of the origins of African American
culture." (Ashcroft et al, Key Concepts 7)

Yet another major development in minority discourse was the
emergence of writings from and about aboriginal and indigenous people
mainly from the settler colonies like Australia, New Zealand and Canada. The
term 'aboriginal' refers to the original inhabitants the Indian subcontinent, the
earliest inhabitants in countries like Malaysia and Indonesia. Thee literatures of
these people, like any other third world, postcolonial literatures, were
characterized by a national or regional consciousness. Besides, they assert their
difference from the imperial centre, the writings of which is in the language of
the literate elite. However, the first works from the indigenous people, mainly
by the representatives of the imperial powers in the colonies, were in the
language of the coloniser and they mostly glorified the settlers (Ashcroft et al
Readings on 5). It is true about the literary works produced from the colonized
Australia and India. Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin debate that:

Such texts can never form the basis for indigenous culture nor can they be integrated in any way with the culture, which already exists in the countries invaded. Despite their detailed reportage of landscape, custom and language, they inevitably privilege the centre, emphasising the ‘home’ over the ‘native’, the ‘metropolitan’ over the ‘provincial’ or ‘colonial’ and so forth. At a deeper level their claim to objectivity simply serves to hide the imperial discourse within which they are created. (Ashcroft et al Readings on 5)

The literature produced in these countries during the nineteenth century showed yet another tendency, the procedures of which “signify, by the very fact of writing in the language of the dominant culture, that they have temporarily or permanently entered a specific and privileged class endowed with the language education and leisure necessary to produce such works.” (Ashcroft et al Readings on 5) The prose and poems written by the English educated Indian upper class, and the African missionary literature are examples. The emergent minority literatures from these cultures had to encounter these problems so as to develop an independent literature appropriating language with distinctive usages. It is understood that “the institution of literature in the colony is under the direct control of the imperial
ruling class who alone licence the acceptable form and permit the publication and distribution of the resulting work.” (Ashcroft et al Readings on 5) So texts of this kind come into being within the constraints of a discourse and the institutional practice of a patronage system, which limits and undercuts their assertion of a different perspective. Moreover, “indigenous groups have so often fallen into the political trap of essentialism set for them by imperial discourse.” (Ashcroft et al Post-colonial Studies 213) According to Ashcroft and others “imperial narratives such as that of anthropology in their project of naming and thus knowing indigenous groups have imported a notion of aboriginality, of cultural authenticity, which proves difficult to displace.” (Post-colonial Studies 214) This resulted in the “positioning of the indigenous people as the ultimately marginalized, a concept which reinscribes the binarism of centre/margin and prevents their engagement with subtle processes of imperialism by locking them into a locally strategic but ultimately self defeating essentialism.” (Ashcroft et al Post-colonial Studies 213)

The postcolonial literature has still more complicated issues when we consider indigenous literature, as liberated from the clutches of a colonizing centre. We must also understand that the indigenous cultures were also thrown into separate groups, where indigenous elite has upper hand in the discourses of the society and over innumerable small groups. The literature produced by the small minorities within the postcolonial countries like India thus contains tales of a two-fold marginalization. Here the case of the minorities or marginalized groups within a minority is still worse as several layers of marginalization had to be encountered by them. Each of the small groups in
the post-colonial countries has their different problems to narrate. As for the
dalit and the most backward sections of the Indian subcontinent, they still
undergo the enigmatic experience of being treated as untouchables by the
members of the dominant community. Casteism, caste violence, and various
other methods of antagonism practiced by the dominant classes, loss of their
folklore traditions, and exploitation of the local, national and global forces with
the emergence of globalisation and consumer culture and so on are issues of
immediate concern for them. The case of ethnic minorities in most of the
countries is similar. Basically most of the ethnic minorities have to resist
erasure of identity, and more importantly the attitude of the dominant
community towards them.

In general, the most important factor that works behind the minority
discourse is the minority's access to the centre of power. The centre may differ
from group to group, as each group is placed in the margins of a particular
centre in the dominant discourse. It may be created by patriarchy,
etnocentrism or imperialism. The claims of cultural nationalism raised in
India by the dominant majority, for example, work as a homogenising
principle, where innumerable number of minorities is thrown to the margins
owing to their insistence on continuing in the community of their origin, and
thus their desire to pursue a distinct community experience and geographical
space are either denied or disturbed. In this way marginality of all sorts
"unintentionally reifies centrality because it is the centre that creates the
condition of marginality." (Ashcroft et al, Key Concepts 135) The inaccessibility
of the minorities to the centre of power creates the handicap of being the
subjects of the dominant system's coercive power that operates in tandem with the social status that the community is exercising in the society. In the case of the minorities selected for analysis in the present dissertation, they are mostly not always targeted like the downtrodden classes, owing especially to their economic status in India. But at the same time, a palp of suspicion often falls on them, as the majority suspects the chances of the minority's involvement in disruptive activities to disturb the present social order. For example the Sikhs are looked at as potential terrorists, after the murder of Indira Gandhi by her Sikh bodyguards, and they were brutally attacked in Delhi by the extremists. Sometimes a certain element in a community is at loggerheads with the system of power, as seen in the case of the Sikhs. But for this the whole community is put on the receiving end, taking undue advantage of their minority position.

Ethnicity and Literature

The term 'ethnicity' gathered remarkable currency by the end of twentieth century. It is today a major topic of interest to scholars in many disciplines not excluding literature. It has been increasingly used since the 1960s to refer to "human variation in terms of culture, tradition, language, social patterns and ancestry." (Ashcroft et al, Key Concepts 80) Ethnicity is different from more generalized terms like race as the latter carries the assumptions of humanity divided into fixed determined biological types or categories. Ethnic group of a person is a powerful identifier in so far as he or she chooses to remain in it, and it is an undeniable identity that cannot be rejected or taken away by others. "Whereas race emerged as a way of
establishing hierarchical division between Europe and its 'others' identifying people according to fixed genetic criteria, ethnicity is deployed as an expression of positive self perception that offers certain advantages to its members.” (Ashcroft et al, Key Concepts 80) Ethnic groups are distinguished on the basis of cultural criteria, and so the defining characteristics of an ethnicity usually depends upon the various purposes for which the group has been identified.

As social anthropologist, Thomas Hylland Eriksen observed, “Ethnicity emerges and is made relevant through social situations and encounters, and through people's ways of coping with the demands and challenges of life.” (1) Anthropologists of late twentieth century showed enormous interest in ethnicity. An important reason for this academic interest is the political relevance of ethnicity, especially as it has been inseparably linked to the world politics since the Second World War (Eriksen 2). The violent racial conflicts in countries like Sri Lanka, Northern Ireland, Canada, and North America are plausibly described as ethnic conflicts. Ethnicity is often discussed along with nationalism race and tribe. The term 'ethnicity' was first used to refer to the heathen or the pagan. This meaning of ethnicity continued until the mid-nineteenth century, when it began to refer to racial characteristics. “In the United States ‘Ethnics’ came to be used around the Second World War as a polite term for referring to Jews, Italians, Irish and other people considered inferior to the dominant group of largely British descent.” (Eriksen 4) Since the 1960s anthropologists brought a number of approaches to bear upon ethnicity all of which "agree that ethnicity has something to do with the classification of
people and group relationships.” (Eriksen 4) Although the word still has a ring of minority issues and race relations anthropologists refer to “aspects of relationships between groups which consider themselves, and are regarded by others as being culturally distinctive.” (Eriksen 4)

All ethnic groups do not possess defining traits and characteristics; rather they vary at different levels. “Ethnicity and its component are relative to time and place, and like any social phenomenon, they are dynamic and prone to change.” (Ashcroft et al, Key Concepts 81) Taking these factors into consideration, critics tended to narrow down their definitions of an ethnic group. Ashcroft Griffith and Tiffin, for instance, defined ethnic group as “a group that is socially distinguished or set apart by others and/or by itself primarily on the basis of cultural or national characteristics.” (Ashcroft et al, Key Concepts 81) Ethnicity acquired wider currency in the aftermath of colonialism, when colonial, national or ethnic groups were identified as minorities within a larger national grouping. These groups are mostly migrants or settlers who left their counties as a result of the large scale reshuffling or cleansing that occurred during colonialism and decolonisation.

Ethnic groups are not normally identified with “the national mythology”; thus Anglo-Saxon group in Europe is not considered as an ethnic group because “its ethnicity has constructed the mythology of national identity.” (Ashcroft et al, Key Concepts 82) In the cultural context of immigration, the definition of ethnicity is to be further narrowed down. Isajaw defines ethnicity as “a group or category of persons who have a common ancestral origin and the same cultural traits, who have a sense of peoplehood
and of group belonging, who are of immigrant background and have either majority or minority status within a larger society.” (Cited in Ashcroft et al, Key Concepts 82)

The concept of ethnicity varies from writer to writer, country to country. While some writers focus on ethnicity as of national or geographical origin, some others defined it considering it on the basis of religion, race and physical characteristics. All these orientations are factual making an allowance for the bewildering variety of ethnicity. For example, the ethnic minorities like Parsis, Jews and Sikhs in India are groups in which religion has the greatest influence in the way its members see its character.

Scrutinizing the social context, Eriksen categorises the typical empirical ethnic studies under four heads - urban ethnic minorities, indigenous peoples, proto-nations and ethnic groups in plural societies. In his view, the first category includes immigrants in European cities and Hispanics in the United States. The major problem of this ethnicity is the discrimination of the host society, racism and issues related to identity. These ethnic groups rarely demand political independence or statehood, and they are as a rule integrated into a capitalist system of production. The indigenous people are the aboriginal people of a territory who are politically powerless and they are not fully integrated into the dominant nation state. The third category, proto-nations or ethno nationalist movements like Sikhs, Palestinians, Kurds and Sri Lankan Tamils are groups who claim that they are entitled to a nation state of their own, and they should not be ruled by others. “These groups short of having a nation state may be said to have more substantial characteristics in common
with nations.” (Eriksen 13-4) The fourth group, ethnic groups in the plural societies are people usually designated or created by colonialism with culturally heterogeneous population. Kenya, Indonesia, and Jamaica are examples (see Eriksen 13-4).

The terms race and ethnicity, although they have some similarities and used interchangeably, do not mean the same thing. With some exceptions, a race is sustained of several ethnic groups. African-Americans are a good example. Afro-Americans is a racial group, and it is consisted of a number of ethnicities. John McLeod distinguishes the two terms with reference to the ways in which they are used in contemporary world:

[I]t is important to realise that all constructions of racial difference are based upon human invention and not biological fact. There exist no objective criteria by which human beings can be neatly grouped into separate races, each fundamentally different from the other. Racial differences are best thought of political constructions, which serve the interests of certain groups of people. Theories of racial difference are often highly selective in choosing certain biological facts in making distinctions. Skin colour has often been the primary sign of racial difference and a frequent target of racialising discourses, often taken as evidence some form of natural difference between, say, white and black Americans...But whereas race tends to prioritise physiological features as evidence of similarity between individuals the parameters of ethnicity tend to be more wide...Ethnicity tends to
involve a variety of social practices rituals and traditions in identifying different collective groups. Although race and ethnicity are not synonymous both can be used as the grounds for discrimination. Members of particular ethnic group or races might find themselves disqualified from certain positions of power...An individual’s ethnicity can provide an invaluable sense of belonging to a particular group in the present and also to a tradition or inheritance of cultural or historical tendencies. The potential use of ethnicity and racial difference are variable over time and space. (McLeod 110-11)

The evolving geopolitical situation in the postcolonial period witnessed the struggles of ethnic groups to end the long drawn practices of racist mistreatment, caste oppression and all kinds of marginalization in their attempt to achieve equality with the local ethnic majorities. Here focus of attention is turned to the question of difference in literature and culture, between the various ethnic groups in the world, and literature started projecting such issues as racial identity, inter ethnic relations, diaspora, homeland, nationhood and the like. In countries like Unites States and South Africa, because of the situation of severe racial oppression, literature came to be seen as a “privileged site for understanding the social structure, cultural codes and psychological tropes of cross cultural and inter ethnic understanding and misunderstanding.” (Ryan 147) The discussions of ethnicity and production of ethnic literature have been greatly influenced by Afro Americans since World
War II, and an omission of the same in any discussion of ethnic culture would create a serious gap in our reflections.

While the world is slouching to the phase of multiculturalism and the intermingling of the varieties of humanity to the idea of a uniform totality, race and ethnicity become cultural and social categories of great importance (Ryan 148). Ethnicity and race, being the inerasable mark of a person’s identity, function as the most "effective and compelling determinants of cultural difference and literary specificity." (Ryan 148) Reading Toni Morison's *Beloved* (1987), for instance, one must ask what it meant to be a black and African descendant in a largely white dominated America; what are the responsibilities borne by those who are white? How long the history of mistreatment of one social group weighs upon the present? "And it is to confront the ghost of one’s own culture, the ghost of overseer and the ghost of slave as well to remember what shouldn’t be forgotten." (Ryan 148) According to Michael Ryan:

Literary criticism that takes race and ethnicity as their principle concerns has helped foreground the importance of racial identification and question hitherto unquestioned ethnic norms of racially unmarked literary study. The mergence of ethnic criticism displaced the notion that universality spoke a white dialect, and it focussed attention on the bleaching out of otherness, dominant ethnic experiences by the privilege... given witness in Eurocentric and the north American Literary study. Two major consequences of this change are the recognition of
ignored ethnic experiences and literature as the reconsideration of the white discourse from an inter-racial perspective. (148)

Ethnic writers seem to represent group that have been rarely presented, or misrepresented through stereotyping in the literature of high culture. According to Sandra Gilman “Ethnicity is a lens through which literature, even Shakespeare’s can be read.”(25) The fascination with ethnicity in literary studies, however, was inaugurated in the United States along with the debates that took place during the 1960s regarding the “advantages and disadvantages of particularism and universalism in reading writing and teaching.” (Gilman 20) These debates dealt mainly with the concept of ‘melting pot’, (which was derived from the title of a play by the Jewish British writer, Israel Zangwill), and the role of literature in “providing a medium for the expression and analysis of specific types of particularism.” (Gilman 20) The idea of melting pot in literature led to discussions of the individuals whose presence in the society is transitory and who are referred to as by the Jewish German Sociologist, George Simmel as ‘sojourners’; they also focussed on the category of the ‘pariah’ introduced by the German thinker, Max Weber while “examining the creativity of groups in externally imposed or self-imposed isolation from the collectivity.” (Gilman 20) These models provided the literary theorists as well as the critics with new and complex ways of thinking about ethnicities and literatures.

Literature of ethnicity is an interesting site to locate the aesthetics and dialectics of minority discourse as its most noticeable quality is the representation of difference of the ethnic minority from the majority and other
classes. The representation of difference arises from the ethnic minority’s identification of a history and tradition of its own, which yet survives amidst the tendencies of erasure at local, national and global levels initiated by the proprietors of totalitarianism, who are represented in all countries and cultures by the dominant, ruling classes. Apart from this the writing experience of ethnic minorities emanate from their desire for survival, being thrown into the borders of existence. However, ethnic minority’s representation of difference must not altogether be read “as the reflection of ethnic or cultural traits set in the fixed tablet of tradition” as Homi K. Bhabha observed (Location 2). In his view:

The social articulation of difference from the minority perspective is a complex ongoing negotiation that seeks to authorize cultural hybridities that emerge in moments of historical transformation. The right to signify from the periphery of authorized power and privilege does not depend on the persistence of tradition to be reinscribed through the condition of contingency and contradictoriness that attend upon the lives of those who are in the minority; realign the customary boundaries between the private and the public, the high and low and challenge normative expectations of development and progress. (Location 2)

Thus the aesthetics of ethnicity is a counter cultural discursive practice that challenges or redefines the dominant tendencies in the discourses like the concept of homogenous national culture, “the contigual transmission of historical tradition” (Bhabha Location 2) and so on. The dominant discourses
from time to time evolved strategies for the implantation of the "ethnically cleansed national identity" which as Bhabha noted can only be achieved through the literal and figurative death "of the complex interweaving of history and the culturally contingent boundaries of modern nationhood."  

(Location 5) In other words, this kind of nationalism leads to the interpretation of diverse phenomenon through one glossary, thus erasing specificities setting norms and limits, lopping of tangenitals as Rosemary Marangoly George has pointed out (14). Thus the national unity is seen manufactured in countries with a colonial history using divisive criteria which are based on racial, ethnic or religious exclusivity, rewarding some with the authority to tap power and considering others as second class citizens who are restricted from positions of authority (McLeod 110). In this way race and ethnicity have been used historically to set the norms and limits for the nation's imagined community (McLeod 110).

Ethnic minority writing is a location to express the anxiety of displacement which most of the ethnic minorities come across. Perhaps, lack of a determined locality of existence by which a group can explain its identity is a predominant theme in ethnic minority writing. According to Bhabha, "[t]he anxiety of displacement that troubles national rootedness transform ethnicity or cultural difference into an ethical relation that serves as a subtle corrective to variant attempts to achieve representativeness and moral equivalence in the matter of minorities." (On the Irremovable... 34)

Carrie Tirado Bramen argues that "[o]ne of the most difficult challenges confronting writers, and particularly minority writers, is how to represent
ethnic and racialized characters without resorting to stereotypes.” (124) In his view, “[t]he writer...needs to walk a fine line between the familiar and the over familiar, between the recognizable and the excessively visible.” (124) For him “identity tropes are necessary to give an ethnic group a degree of cultural and textual visibility and internal coherence, yet, on the other hand, an excess of identity tropes can cross the line into tiresome predictability”. In order to escape this, he finds that, the writers of ethnicity resolves to “to avoid the issue of stereotypes altogether by turning to "real" life, by having original characters come from actual people, a strategy that reinforces the mimetic function of literary representation.” (124)

The twentieth century has also witnessed the creation of a number of what Lynda Hutcheon calls “crypto-ethnicities”, or groups with mixed identities (Italian-Canadians) due to colonialism, decolonisation, globalisation and multiculturalism (Hutcheon 28). These groups have also found a distinct voice in literature as well. When countries like Australia, Canada and New Zealand opened their doors for migrants, and when the world has moved to the phase of globalisation that erased local identities or rather facilitated free movement of individuals in the pretext of free trade, and multiculturalism, the world has created a number of encrypted and silenced groups like Italian-Canadians and Japanese-Canadians. Novels like, Michael Ondaatje’s In the Skin of a Lion, which tells the story of an Italian-Canadian man named David Caravaggio; Peter Carey’s True History of the Kelly Gang (2002) which narrated the uprising of the legendary Kelly Gang from among the descendants of the decadent Irish Prisoners in Australia under the leadership of Ned Kelly; and
Kerri Sakamoto's *Electrical Field* (1998) which gives expression to the extreme loneliness and cultural alienation of the Japanese-Canadian community in Canada, vividly portray the quest for liberation and empowerment and a sense of dissidence against social odds and discrimination in particular from the ruling and dominant communities felt by the crypto-ethnic minorities in several parts of the world. Although there are marked differences in the thematic preoccupation in ethnic minority writers and crypto-ethnic minority writers, they all share some of the major tenets of minority discourse like the representation of difference and the articulation of cultural displacement.

There were some critics who were aware the distinction between ethnic cultures and minority discourse, and the political consequences of the dynamics ethnic and minority discourse. David Lloyd brings out the idea that:

[W]here an ethnic culture can be conceived as turned...towards its internal differences, complexities and debates as well as to its own tradition or histories, projects and imaginings, it is transformed into a minority culture only along the lines of its confrontation with a dominant state formation which threatens to destroy it by direct violence or by assimilation. Minority discourse is articulated along this line and at once registers the loss, actual and potential, and offers the means to a critique of dominant culture precisely in terms of its internal logic. (222)

He views that, since the ethnic culture is inassimilable, "minority discourse forms the problematic space of assimilation and the residues it throws up." (222) The majoritarian systems make use of the idea of liberal pluralism to
legitimate the assimilation of minorities. Liberal pluralism uses the method of 
abstracting ethnic cultural phenomena visible in food, music, literature and so 
on "from the material grounds of their existence and appropriating them on the 
model of...aesthetic culture." (Lloyd 222) Lloyd argues that "[t]he work of 
pluralism in the era of late capitalism is strikingly that of fascist ideology" and 
for him "the interdisciplinary nature of Ethnic Studies is not the 
reflection of a recent trend but is based on the crucial recognition that cultures 
are inseparable from their from their material conditions." (223)

The Indian Literary Scenario: Cultural Nationalism and Voices of Minorities

A study of the dialectics of minority discourse and aesthetics of ethnicity 
in the Indian context requires an understanding of the various tendencies and 
divisions in the literature produced in India, which obviously has roots in the 
cultural hegemony and domination prevalent in the pre-colonial and post-
colonial periods. It is clear that the post-colonial Indian cultural scenario is 
eclipsed by the problem of cultural hegemony, which arises from the claims of 
cultural nationalism raised by the dominant community. It was, of course, 
aggravated by colonialism. The pre-colonial Indian society was never so 
homogeneous, that meaner pictures of cultural domination and brutalisation of 
the suppressed classes were its regular features. Taking these factors into 
consideration it can be argued that representation here has various political 
ramifications taking into consideration the literature produced by the various 
sections and sub sections of the Indian society. The minorities in India 
naturally have a necessity to speak out, often in outrage and protest, against 
their predicament of being thrown to the margins owing to their
backwardness. What we come across in the general matrix of the mainstream Indian literature, according to Aijaz Ahmed, is an unfinished bourgeois project which determined:

The notion of canonicity in tandem with the bourgeois, upper caste dominance of the nation state; a notion of classicism part Brahminical part borrowed from Europe; the ongoing subsumptions of literary utterances and cultures by print capitalism, accommodation with regional languages but preoccupations with constructing a supra-linguistic Indian literature based on an idealized Indian self defined largely in terms of what Romila Thapar has eloquently called 'Syndicated Hinduism' textual attitude to lived histories; notions of literary history so conventional as to be not even properly bourgeois. (15-6)

The place of minority writings, in the pretext of these accepted norms of canon, is important in the sense that the minority expressions were and are on the one hand serious attempts to thwart the notion of accepted canonicity and the social hierarchy and dominance on the other.

However, one fundamental question that these developments pose is, whose voice the Indian literature carries after all. One finds that most of the literary historians as well as the literary critics in India are found desperately trying to locate what is generally referred to as the 'Indianness' of Indian literature. Ever since the intervention of literary criticism, the 'Indianness' of Indian literature has been much debated quite enthusiastically involving a series of arguments and counter arguments. While the mainstream critical praxis
always sought to unbroken thematic continuity, canons and tradition, the others disagree with the so-called ‘Indianness’ citing instances of the dividing geographical boundaries within India, casteism, the position of the minorities, women and religious groups, to argue that these factors make it impossible to codify the expressed form of content in Indian literature to be unified in any sense. Although the need to think about a unified Indian culture and literature has political implications as to take for example Nehru’s propaganda for a unified and strong India, the geopolitical and cultural reality in India, especially in the post-independence period, showed tendencies of division on class caste and gender, religious and ethnic lines, which again made the advocacy and dream of a unified Indian literature and idealist dream which can hardly be visualised. The identification of the elements of unified thematic preoccupations in Indian literature proposed by the mainstream literary historians like V.H. Gokak, S.K. Das, C.D. Narasimhayya appears to be mere rhetoric that contained references on Indian myths, culture folklore, legends and arts, and “no image can actually contain or embody this spurious myth of a single Indian literature” as Shormistha Panja puts it (4).

The tendency to find a uniform code of expression has much wider implications when we consider this tendency as an effort to impose a uniform nationalism and national culture as the ‘typically Indian’ and all-inclusive. Nationalism in the Indian context is to be understood as mere ideology with which the elite groups used to legitimise their narrow ambitions and to mobilise public support (Chandra 18). This biased concept of nationalism was invoked during the time of India’s struggle for independence where “[t]he national
movement was merely an instrument used by the elite groups to mobilise the masses and satisfy their own interests" as Bipan Chandra argued (18). In his view, "[t]he elite groups and their needs and interests provide the origin as well as the driving force of the ideology and movement of nationalism. These groups were sometimes formed around religious or caste identities and sometimes through political connections built around patronage. But in each case these groups had a narrow selfish interest in opposing the British rule in India." (18)

Viewed from this angle it can be argued that the tendency to find a uniform code of expression in Indian literature has been an inclination to authorise and highlight the mainstream Hindu Indian literature, and Hindu world view as the ‘Indianness’ of Indian literature. The most implicit notion confirmed in all Hindu nationalisms, According to Aijaz Ahmad, is that "the entire tradition of high textuality in India up to the Turko-Persian or (called simply ‘Islamic’) invasion expresses a Hinduism … which elevates certain kind of Brahminical ideas to canonicity while assimilating all other cultural tendencies under its own dominance…" (261) Here all other large and small dissents of religious and not so religious kind like Buddhism and Jainism “are obscured into secondariness but also assimilated into processes of syndication.” (Ahmad 261) This is achieved by attaching a kind of sanctity and sacredness to texts which are not important in the specifically religious canon thereby privileging the ‘sacred’ texts which serve in the reconstruction of secular tradition and history of India over the ‘profane’ ones (Ahmad 261). One example of using the sacred in the literary is the fondness for employing the Mahabharata as a whole and in parts as a grandnarrative in literature. By the continuous reflex of the importance its basic
story, the *Mahabharata* has been projected as the epic of the nation, which can represent the make up and character of the nation as whole. Employing the sacred has two major varieties in Indo-Anglian literature. The simplest form is that the story line is employed to interpret other incidents and phenomenon as in Shashi Tharoor’s *Great Indian Novel* (1988). This also includes the use of the character for comparison and for citing a model instance to explain a problem in the literary narratives, where an elementary knowledge of the story line of the epic invariably becomes a prerequisite in the reader. The second variety includes the literary and other cultural products giving expression to an exclusive cultural or political sphere, where the story is constructed in such a way as to make the impression that only the dominant community exists in that sphere. This cultural exclusiveness is created in various ways, among which use of spirituality related practices seems to be the most important. Mixing of political activity with the religious rituals as showed in Raja Rao’s *Kanthapura*, and what can be called as spirituality syndrome, or the tendency to seek solace in the recesses of spirituality when entrapped in a quandary, in R.K. Narayan’s works, are examples. Malgudi as well as Kanthapura in the general critical practice typify India in microcosm, but the cultural exclusiveness of these locales appears to wilfully hide the multicultural face of India. But the works of R.K. Narayan willingly or unwillingly expose serious schisms in the cultural sphere of Hinduism while showing the tendency to withdraw to spirituality in some of his characters, in a way that by going back to the recesses of spirituality the heroes like Raju (in *The Guide*) and Chandran (in *Bachelor of Arts*) run away from social responsibilities. This view is perhaps in tune to the orientalist stereotypes of Indians, which held
that the Indians are basically lethargic in nature and unable to participate or carry out the roles assigned to them, and thus escape into the inner alcoves of spirituality. Revisionist historians of present day India like K.N. Panikkar and Romila Thapar have also argued that a section of the majority community did not participate in the freedom struggle and such movements owing either to their indirect collaboration with the colonial powers as both these are the elites in their cultures, or to their interests in more exclusive and communal matters than the national liberation.

The search for a uniform Indianness as highlighted in the whole Indian literature is again easier said than done because one comes across various schools and languages including English in Indian literature. It may be difficult to find a common essence in a Khasi poet from Meghalaya and a Brahmin from Karnataka, although both of them are Indians. Moreover endeavours to locate a common essence in Indian literature as it obviously is part of the dream of a uniform concept of nation created from and by the dominant assumptions of the majoritarian culture, will be to exclude the silenced voices of the dalits and other minorities that are expressive of their secluded existence at the distant margins of the majority controlled centre. The centre is found not broad minded enough to accommodate dalits who expressed their rage against the long-drawn ill treatment of that they are facing from the upper classes who control the administrative mechanism in the country, and “women who are supposed to adhere to the model of Indian decorum, reticence and self-sacrifice not just in their lives but in also in their writings in order, as Narasimhayya puts it to keep the wheels of civilization greased.” (Panja 11) For the dalit writers and writers
dealing with dalit issues, the major problem encountering them is the brute manifestations of casteism and suppression of the hegemonic groups who according to these writers are the descendants of the Aryans who came into the territories in and around the Indo-Gangetic plains roughly in the period 1500 B.C.; ever since they gained power and authority in various regions of India, subjugated the non-Aryan population, who are the indigenous people of this country (Basu XIII). The narrative of the Aryan conquest and command as, a 'superior' civilization, of an 'inferior' civilization existing in India, "frequently enabled the upper class Indians to assert a common Aryan essence with their English colonizers." (Basu XIII) The hegemonic groups at various occasions in the Indian history have shown their contempt for the 'lower' classes by constantly preventing the chances of the suppressed classes from coming on par with them in economic as well as social plains. In this context, both Ramjanmabhoomi movement and the anti-Mandal Commission agitation, key events of the 1990s, may be read as "efforts on the part of the hegemonic clusters in society (i.e. upper caste Hindus) to resist perceived attempts at social assertion on the part of the subaltern orders (i.e. Hindu lower castes and non-Hindu minority communities) or social engineering on their behalf." (Basu XI) These agitations "aimed at consolidating the Hindu national culture of India against divisive assaults from anti-Hindu anti- national forces." (Basu XII) The right wing Hindu viewpoint held that Hindu cultural nationalism must base on the concept of 'Akhand Bharat' or united India (Basu XII). Thus the hegemonic classes used communal mobilization as an antidote to caste turmoil, and it resulted from the fear of lower caste challenge to the upper caste domination. According to Uma Chakravarty,
the caste system as it is prevalent in India "comprises a series of hierarchy groups or jatis characterized by hierarchy or gradation according to ritual status." (Basu 200) Here the basis of inequality is the use of certain evaluative standards placing some castes high and some others low. These standards of evaluation are rooted in the religio-legal texts of the Hindus, "as the system developed the high and the low were opposed to each other because of their respective associations with the notions of pure and impure. The notion of the pure high and the impure low was expressed ideologically in ritual terms." (Chakravorty 200) Literatures produced from the point of the dalits have to simultaneously deal with the social as well as textual manifestations the ideology of caste that continues to govern the Hindu society in India. This ideology of caste is operated in the social sphere in order to sanction the unequal privileges that the upper castes enjoy. This is in spite of the constitutional guarantee of socio-political equality in India. The so-called Dalit literature that started in Maharashtra during the 1960s and 70s, and which now spread all over India has opened up the horizon of representing issues like casteism and untouchability. As many upper caste writers of nineteenth and early twentieth century like Tagore, Mulk Raj Anand and Prem Chand wrote about caste related issues, contemporary upper caste writers like Mahasweta Devi, Vijay Tendulkar, and U.R. Anandamurthy richly contributed to Dalit literature, and these writers exposed the perniciousness of untouchability and other kinds of caste discrimination. Dalit literature is to be considered as the most focussed minority expression in Indian literature as it obviously is consisting of one of the major contours of minority discourse viz. "the narrative of suffering", as Tapan Basu calls it, of the lowest strata of Indian society (205). The writing experience of
the dalits has an obvious political and social purpose, as it helps them to effect the revolutionary social changes by the exposition, and through that seeking the alleviation, of casteist violence and untouchability practiced by the upper castes over the dalits.

Taking Dalit literature and ethnic minority writings as instances of minority discourse in India, both these can be seen sharing the commonality of being produced by those who are treated as different in a predominantly majority dominated India, it can also be found that the ideology of caste and the ideology of race work in unison in carrying out repression of the marginalized groups. According to Gail Omvedt, “caste is analogous to class in so far as like class caste is a system of expropriation of surplus labour from actual producers by owners of the means of production” but “unlike class, caste is a construct not of the methods of production in the material realm alone but of the operations of reproduction in the ideational arena.” (Cited in Basu XVI) Moreover, for Omvedt “caste works using the logic of an inherited institution of division of labour within the community, sanctified by religion as well as by tradition, which frequently works in tandem with the class schisms of modern capitalist society.” (Cited in Basu XVI)

Both ethnic minority writings and Dalit literature textually as well as socially and politically are set against homogenising principles and standards of Indianness introduced by the literature of cultural nationalism, and the mainstream English literature in India. Thus one major problem in Indian literature is the question of nationalism. Considering the domain of literature as historically constructed it can be argued that there has been tendency to mark a
singular civilization or national culture in Indian literary studies as well. The intervention or rather the imposition of this national culture as already discussed previously is to give legitimacy to certain practices and beliefs of the dominant group and to embody these practices and beliefs as emblems of a unified national culture. Here literature from the margins does not exist in the spectrum of national literature, as they do not conform to the so-called unified national sensibility and culture. This resulted in creating a kind of pressure in the minority writers to assimilate the 'national culture' as it becomes an essential prerequisite for survival amidst the ideological compulsions of the dominant culture. However, the minority writers, writing from the outskirts of national culture resist these ideological pressures by creating an imaginative nation of their own and by making their writing experience a location of resistance, creating a narrative of dissidence. They identify that the subaltern has to resist the homogenisation of the indigenous, into a singular totality that will be similar to the capitalist cultural sphere of the west.

Coming to an exclusive focus on Indian Writing in English, it can be found that the Indo-Anglian literature is also not without hierarchies in thematic focus and representation as a whole. As the present study concentrates on fictional works, there will not be much discussion on the sphere of poetry, drama and other writings here. Among the major tendencies in fiction a few are quite apparent. There are a number of writers who are treated forming part of the mainstream in Indo-Anglian fiction. These writers deal with themes general to India as a nation, i.e. issues of national importance and wide implications in the perspective of the complex make up of India in the post-colonial period. Writers
like Salman Rushdie, Vikram Chandra, Shashi Tharoor, Amitav Ghosh, Upamanyu Chatterjee Amit Chaudhury and many others come under this category. These writers, most of whom have found their home abroad, recreate India through memory and endeavours to represent the country as a whole giving special attention to the vicissitudes of its colonial past, the struggle for decolonization and the current and past political upheavals marked in the history of India. These writers most often willingly forget the multifarious cultural diversities and complex cultural problems that make India, by conforming themselves to the mainstream views of the elite class in India. Thus their novels are written to feel an English environment as they convincingly use English language, and are set in urban milieu with characters mostly belonging to the upper middle class. They mostly do not represent the individual communities or issues concerning to subaltern classes. Some of their works can even replace history books as they contain elaborate probes into historical incidents like freedom struggle, partition, and the emergency of the 1970s and so on. However, most of these works conform to the argument for a uniform Indianness that is raised by mainstream historians and literary critics as already mentioned.

The non-mainstream of Indian literature is constituted mainly by the minority writers, the dalit, ethnic minorities and some women writers whose works are marked by their culture's difference from the dominant community and other communities, and an inclination to give expression to the varied geo-cultural landscape from which they express. While the case of dalits is an obvious instance of minority discourse, some of the ethnic minority writers like Arundhati Roy, Khushwant Singh and Rohinton Mistry have received such wide acclaim
and international readership equal to other writers, as to make us consider them part of the mainstream. But in the close analysis it can be found that these writers also have a strong case of minority expression in so far as their writing experience stems from their being different in a majority dominated culture, and as they address issues pertaining to the existential dilemmas and alienation of their respective communities. Here, there are writers like R.K. Narayan who although write in an Indian milieu, expresses from the vantage point of an apparently dominating mainstream, cannot be included in this category. One delineating mark in the non-mainstream writers is perhaps the way in which they present their concept of nation that is clearly in opposition to the notion of nation found in the discourses of the mainstream. And secondly these writers write their community, giving voice to their perceived voicelessness, and bring out the angst that the members of the community share. The fear of cultural erasure, and homogenisation to the dominant community, as it is exemplified in the novels of Rohinton Mistry, is a dominant theme in many minority writers. There are issues like the inner problems within the community that also form the centre of their work. Arundhati Roy in her God of Small Things for example talks at length about the predicament of the most suppressed sections of her community, the dalit, women and children. Thus she puts into fiction the ethnicities within her ethnicity finding the right to be heard of the most suppressed of her Syrian Christian community as a powerful spectrum to place her fictional imagination. The extent to which these writers voice the subalternity is debatable in the sense that these subaltern writers write from different ideological plains and that they have different motives to express. Still the sense of being different can be seen
strongly found in almost all these writers irrespective of the community that they try to represent.

The Project

The project calls attention to the ethnic variety and diversity of Indian English fiction, to establish, by revealing this variety, that India fiction in English is not still dominated by the concerns of the mainstream culture and that in recent times it has assumed interesting ethnic dimensions. It proposes to prove that, through this ethnic manifoldness the Indian fictional imagination has now begun to percolate into deeper recesses of the geocultural panorama of India as a country. The project covers four ethnic minorities, Parsis, Sikhs, Anglo-Indians and Syrian Christians. The use of the term "ethnic" is quite deliberate here. These groups are called ethnic in the sense that they possess distinct culture, tradition, social patterns and ancestry. Each of them has a composite of shared values, beliefs, tastes, and behaviours and so on that are commonly identified as characteristic of ethnicities in general. All these groups have certain agreed criteria that work as a binding force. The fictional works of writers from ethnic groups in India are found to have strong bearing on their ethnic identity, and the evocation their cultural difference in terms of tradition, ancestry, values, consciousness of kind, memories and loyalties, plays a major role in their works. In other words, the ethnic minority writers in India show a penchant to prioritise the representation of their communities in their works, and thus their creativity is closely knit with their cultural identity and difference in a majority dominated country. One novel each is selected from each of the ethnic minority communities
mentioned above, although references are made to other works as well. They are Rohinton Mistry's *Such a Long Journey* (representing the Parsi ethnicity), Khushwant Singh's *Delhi* (representing the Sikh ethnicity), Allan Sealy’s *Trotter-Nama* (representing the Anglo-Indian ethnicity) and Arundhati Roy’s *God of Small Things* (representing the Syrian Christian ethnicity). These works are read primarily as expressive forms of diverse minority experiences, and their cultural traits, likes and dislikes, loyalties and affinities are looked into. These minority writers are not normally considered as minorities *per se* mostly owing to the economic and cultural forwardness of their respective communities, and their difference from such social outcastes like dalits, who are literally treated as the most wretched of the Indian soil; and these ethnic minorities are not as brutally oppressed as the dalits are. When an ethnicity becomes socially influential it is problematic to consider it as ethnic, and so all ethnic groups need not be subalterns. Thus it appears that the successful ethnicities need not always be subalterns in the strict sense of the term in which theoreticians use it, although they still have unresolved problems when they live in the cultural atmosphere in which another group is still more powerful and dominant. However, these groups also undergo experiences that make their existence problematic when they try to survive in a society eclipsed by the dominant concerns of a predominant society. Moreover, there are explicit traits in these groups that talk volumes about the condition from which these groups operate their sensibility, in their attempt to voice their otherness. Some noticeable trends such as a prick of being wronged, anxiety of cultural displacement and ethnic cleansing, a sense of being cut off from one’s own past and history, search for national identity, and a
penchant to voice the contribution made by the community to their host cultures, and so forth are pursued in each ethnic minority discussed in the dissertation. The dissertation would also be trying to make an analysis of the difference between the various minority expressions in the concluding chapter.

Before proceeding with the discussion of the community represented in the selected novels in each chapter, relevant details about the respective communities are incorporated, in order to make the analyses more clear. These details cover the origin of the community, its history in India, and the struggles and difficulties that the community had to deal with in the course its survival in India. The writers of ethnicity are found to be aware of all these factors, and they have included factual details of the community in their fictional works. Whether through fact or fiction, they engage in a practice of discourse with an aim to represent their community. The writers seem to have incorporated their individual and their community's approach to the general political processes taking place in the country. Often they are unhappy with the policies of the major political parties in India that neglect the small minorities. The ethnic minority writers are also aware of the diverse ways that the community adopted at different historical times as strategies for survival. At times they find fault with their community owing to the prevalence of some of the perverted practices that in turn spoil the stability of their communities.

Diverse cultural problems can be seen dominating these communities. The Parsis for example bear the pressure of their exile as a cultural memory in their life and works. Journey thus becomes a strong motif in them. Their writing thus emanate from a feeling of homelessness, which leads to self-deception, and
sometimes to paranoia and schizophrenia. They encounter a hostile world, which has deprived them of their home, pushed them to perpetual pondering over the imaginary homelands that they try to create in places where they live. But often their imaginary homelands get struck with the homogenising tendencies of their host societies, and the disruptive activities of some sections of the dominant community. In spite of these inclement conditions one remarkable quality that the Parsis achieved is perseverance that is they are optimistic enough to wait for a bright future when their agonies will end and happiness will be brought into the limelight.

The search for a national identity and a desire to utter the bygone myths and legends of the community are major themes in Anglo-Indian writings. Novels like Allan Sealy's *Trotter- Nama* (1988) and G.D. Desani's *All About H. Hatter* (1972) bring out poignant accounts of the Anglo-Indian community's strategies to counter the attempts of being stereotyped; and the members of the community experience a life of cultural hybrids with the predicament of being 'neither this nor that'. Allan Sealy incorporates into his fictional imagination the personalities who shaped the Anglo-Indian history from 17th century to the present day with focus on the changes that came over the community in the long run. The community is to be understood in the different phases of its history viz., the period of the East-India Company, the era of British regime and the post-colonial age. Although the community has got acculturated into the Indian life and culture, it has been treated as what Nirad C. Choudhury calls "half caste minorities." (255)
The Sikh community has been severely wounded by the Operation Blue Star and developments like Anti-Sikh riots in Delhi in 1984. For a long time owing to the involvement of some Sikhs in the Khalistan movement the Sikhs were under the surveillance of the system of power in India. However, in spite of all the adverse conditions the Sikhs remained true to their faith, without ever seeking to forgo their distinct cultural practices. Khushwant Singh, although is not rated as a pious Sikh, has shown tremendous interest in expressing his emotional attachment to the community. It is quite clear from his novels that Sikhism gave him a desired cultural identity that gave meaning to his existence as a writer in India. He made himself a spokesperson of the community, but the extremist Sikhs did not like his attitudes and opinions. Like all other writers of ethnic minority origin in India, Khushwant Singh also prioritised his community over everything else in his fictional works.

Arundhati Roy wrote only one novel, *The God of Small Things*. Her identity in India as an activist fighting for the rights of the suppressed classes can be seen reflected in her novel as well. She offers her filiations to her community by critiquing its caste bound structure, and establish that it is because of the caste based, patriarchal power centres within and outside the community that has led to problems that have encroached into her community. Although the community occupies a high social status equivalent to the caste Hindus, it is disturbed by a series of problems starting from ethnic dilution, migration, power struggles, anglophilia and so on. They encounter two prominent majoritarian systems in Kerala, the dominant Hindus, and the Catholic Christians who try to question the legitimacy of their faith.
In general, most of the ethnic minorities in India do not possess a well-defined system in everything. It is, however, because of the interactions with the other cultures and the influence of the dominant Hindus in India, that the ethnic minorities reached a position of having no resolve to a lot of problems. It seems that they did not get ample opportunities in India to develop structured communities, as they were forced to forgo certain of their customs and practices. The Parsis for instance have very few Towers of Silence in India that limits their religious rituals related to death. Because of the prevalence of the caste system the Syrian Christians could not assert their Christian identity, as caste status has dominated their religious consciousness. Sikhs probably are different in this case. They assert their identity by means of dressing and observing their religious rituals wherever they live or work. The organizational structure of the Anglo-Indian community in India is so weak except in places like Calcutta where they live in large numbers. All these problems find their place in their literary works. The other issues that find berth in their writing include the internal problems and power struggles within the community, fear of ethnic erasure, tendency to resist cultural nationalism, the subdued status of women in most of the communities, adoration of foreign cultures, migration, empathy for other minorities, and fear of the loss of their history.

The study undertaken in this dissertation is evidently sociological in nature, and therefore it can be categorised as largely belonging to the realm of sociocriticism. Culture is addressed through literature, with a view to finding the articulations of identity issues of the minor communities. As instances of minor literature, the ethnic minorities use their language with a difference. Theirs is a
secondary use of the language. As Bogue wrote, “Minor literature is a minor usage of language, one that may be practiced across a wide range of discourses, including those commonly classified as secondary, avant-garde or marginal,” and therefore, “[w]hat is essential to note is that the theory of minor literature entails ontological claims about the nature of language and its relation to the world.” (108) Their use of language has definite sociological purpose, as the primary focus is on representation. They are to be treated as counter narratives, which they employ as a means to contest the dominant reality and the framework of assumptions. The study here is partially ethnohistorical and ethnocritical. An ethnohistorical literary criticism is closely associated with anthropology, history and literary criticism. And this is true about the studies of literary works of the ethnic minorities in India. As ethnocriticism can only be founded on ethnohistorical descriptions of the community, one has to set out with materials of anthropological, historical and cultural materials in this enterprise (see Krupat 5).

Works Cited


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