

Midnight's Children's Children: The Novel II

The first significant fact about the "new" fiction is that the number of Indian English novels published during the last two decades easily surpasses the total output for any corresponding period earlier. But quantity, of course, does not automatically guarantee quality; hence attention must also be drawn to the increasing recognition and respect the new novelists are winning in the literary world today.

One obvious aspect of this recognition is the fact that far more Indian English writers are now being published abroad than ever before, and their publishers include prestigious firms on both sides of the Atlantic: Faber and Faber; Andre Deutsch; Heinemann; Alfred Knopf, Random House; Picador etc. In fact a full list of these will read like a directory of British and American publishers. Equally remarkable is the fact that today even a young Indian writer publishing his first book is readily accepted by a leading publisher abroad. Thus, Amit Chaudhuri's first novel, *A Strange and Sublime Address*, was published by Heinemann in 1991. One recalls how Mulk Raj Anand's first novel, *Untouchable* (now included in the Penguin Classics) was left untouched by 19 British publishers in 1935, before a word from E.M. Forster persuaded Lawrence and Wishart to accept it; also, how R.K.Narayan had to wait for the "Green(e)" light before his long and illustrious career could begin. This does not of course mean that Amit Chaudhuri is a better writer than Anand or Narayan, but -it certainly does indicate the ready acceptance of Indian English literature abroad now.

If recognition and respect come, can rupees (or pounds or dollars, to be exact) be far behind? One is told that Vikram Seth's novel, *A Suitable Boy* was sold to Faber and Faber for a sum of one million pounds, for the U.K. rights alone. (One understands that this has caused considerable heart burning in "Nativist" circles in Bombay and Calcutta, but let that pass.) But sales alone do not spell literary excellence; for one may well ask, *a la* Keats, "Where are the best

sellers of yesterday, aye, where are they?". The new novelists have proved their mettle by winning, in competition with writers whose mother tongue was English, several major literary awards, prizes and distinctions, a complete list of which will occupy many pages. To note only the most outstanding of these, two new novelists have won the Booker Prize, supposedly the British equivalent of the Nobel Prize: Salman Rushdie for *Midnight's Children* in 1981 (in 1993 this was adjudged the "Booker of Bookers," the best novel to have won the Booker Prize in its first twenty-five years) and Arundhati Roy for *The God of Small Things* in 1997. (R. P. Jhabvala too had won the Booker prize, in 1975, but she belonged to an earlier generation). Since then almost every novel by Rushdie has won an award in one country or another: *Spume* bagged the *Prix the Meilleur Livre Etranger* in Paris; *The Satanic Verses* was given the "Author of the Year" Award in Germany, and the Whitbread Prize for Best Novel; *Ilaroun and the Sea of Stories* qualified for the Writers Guild Award in England; *The Moor's Last Sigh* was adjudged "The Novel of the Year" in 1996, while *The Ground Beneath Her Feet* was considered the best book in the Eurasia region of the Commonwealth Writers Prize. Similarly, Rohinton Mistry's *Such a Long Journey*, which was short listed for the Booker Prize, received the Commonwealth Writers Prize for the Best book, the Governor General's Award, and the W. H. Smith Books in Canada First Novel Award in 1991. Vikram Seth's *A Suitable Boy* won the Commonwealth Writers Prize for the Best Book, and the W. H. Smith Award, in 1994. And more recently, Jhumpa Lahiri created history in becoming the first Indian author to win the prestigious Pulitzer Prize in the USA for her collection of short stories, *The Interpreter of Maladies* (1999). The novels of Rushdie, Roy, Anita Desai and others have also been translated into numerous European languages, thus setting the seal on their standing in the world of letters today. And this adulation need not any longer be taken as the traditional "White-pat-on-the-Brown-Back" syndrome, which has plagued Indian writing in English for a long time. Surely, there could not have been a collective will to condescension in so many, on such a large scale, in so many countries, at the same time.

Another highly significant feature of the new fiction is the way these writers handle the English language. The days of F. A. Anstey's comic "Baboo Jabberjee, B.A." dropping heavy linguistic bricks on white feet all over Calcutta are now part of the long-forgotten colonial story; now the Babu in question seems to be in a position to teach a thing or two to his ex-Prospero. Born in the days when the sun was

never supposed to set on the British empire (as Chesterton said, "this was because God wouldn't trust the Englishman in the dark"), when Queen Victoria was in her Buckingham palace and all was right with the world (in British perception), the older Indian novelists could not perhaps but be somewhat self-conscious in using the tongue of the august master. Each of the "Big Three" solved the problem in his own way. Anand boldly carried the battle into the enemy camp, by cocking a snook at Fowler and Company; he translated literally from his native Punjabi into English, and gave the language of Shakespeare and Dickens the pungent flavour of *sarson ka sag*. Raja Rao bravely declared, "We cannot write like the English. We should not" and tried to capture the rustic Kannada grandmother's breathless garrulity in *Kanthapura* and the stately rhythms of Sanskrit in *The Serpent and the Rope*. Narayan's method was subtler: he deliberately adopted a seemingly drab, colourless and almost journalistic style, so that the thrusts of his ubiquitous irony could prove all the more deadly.

Born and brought up in the post-colonial world, the new novelists, many of whom are a part of the great Indian diaspora, had no reason to feel self-conscious in handling the English language, which, for them, carries no colonial baggage; it is for them simply a tool - and a most resourceful and pliant one - which their education and upbringing have placed into their hands, and which they have thoroughly mastered, with the typical Indian flair for languages. One mark of this is the fact that most new novelists do not feel the necessity of appending to their novels an annotated list of Indian words in the text, explaining their meaning. One remembers how the American edition of Raja Rao's *Kanthapura* carried a 60 page long glossary of Indian words (at the instance of the publisher, one is told). Now neither publisher nor author regards this as necessary. The inference is clear: earlier, the Indian writer was supposed to go at least half way to meet his reader (in some cases, he even went three quarters). His successor today expects his reader to go all the way to meet him.

Where do the new novelists stand in relation to their chief predecessors? Curiously enough, the most outstanding of them do not seem to follow any of the "Big Three." Neither Anand's burning reformist zeal, nor Narayan's ironic apprehension of life, nor yet Raja Rao's metaphysical musing seems to provide a viable model to them. Their affinities are rather with that maverick of Indian English fiction: G. V. Desani's *All About H. Hatterr*, an exciting amalgam of fantasy, the absurd, comedy, satire and linguistic pyrotechnics. These were the fictional values which dominated post-colonial and post-modern

fiction also, especially after the rise of Magic Realism; hence most of the leading new novelists are Hatterr's children. If, as Hemingway said, "All modern American literature comes from one book by Mark Twain called *Huckleberry Finn*", it can be said that most of recent Indian English fiction has come out of the "too-large-for-him hat" of the headmaster of H. Hatterr's school.

Another significant way in which the new novel differs from the old is that it is more globalised. Anand, Narayan and Raja Rao have all lived in the West for a time, but barring a few exceptions, their primary engagement has been with India. Of course, Anand goes to France and Flanders in *Across the Black Waters* and to England and Ireland in *The Bubble*, and Raja Rao lives in France for long periods in *The Serpent and the Rope* and *The Chess-naster and His Moves*. Bhabani Bhattacharya sets the scene of his *A Dream in Hawaii* in that island. But the new novelists go much further. In Vikram Seth's *The Golden Gate*, not only is the setting entirely American, so also are the characters; and in *An Equal Music*, the scene shifts from England to Austria to Italy, his chief characters are English, and India is nowhere in the picture. In Joydeep Roy-Bhattacharya's *The Gabriel Club*, the setting is Hungary and all the characters are mid-European. And the grand finale of Rushdie's *The Moor's Last Sigh* takes place in a lonely tower room of a fortress in an Andalusian village in Spain. The younger novelists are thus citizens of "Cyberspace," though the ties that bind them to their motherland continue to be strong.

Salman Rushdie

The first of the new novelists to arrive was Salman Rushdie (b. 1947) whose *Midnight's Children* (1981) heralded a new era in the history of Indian English fiction. Rushdie's main assets are a vaulting imagination, which often makes the bizarre its business, a carnivalesque sense of the comic, and an irrepressible love of word-play. When these powers are under perfect artistic control, and are geared to meaningful central concerns, he produces his better work. On the other hand, when his imagination runs amuck, when his sense of the comic overcomes his sense of propriety (an occupational hazard for every comic writer - "The clown in me trips me awfully," Bernard Shaw once said), and when his word-play descends to the level of compulsive jesting, he seems to fall back on puerile puns, juvenile jokes and worn-out witticisms.

Rushdie's fictional art has been shaped by some highly significant factors. Born and brought up in Bombay, he spent the first

fourteen years of his life here, after which he was sent to England for higher education. He has lived there ever since. Childhood and adolescence play a major role in shaping a writer's mind. This explains why Rushdie has come to have a firm foothold in both India and the West. This must have evidently been reinforced by his study of history at Cambridge. Further, though a Muslim by faith, he has himself said, "My writings and thought have . . . been as deeply influenced by Hindu myths and attitudes as Muslim ones" (*Imaginary Homelands: 404*).

It is his hyper-active imagination that must have drawn Rushdie to surrealism, and its modern cousin, Magic Realism, a strategy which has patent affinities with the strong oral traditions and narrative patterns of Third World societies; and *All About H. Hatterr* must have shown him the immense possibilities of word-play in English. Rushdie's forbears are thus, Lawrence Sterne, Gunter Grass, Gabriel Garcia Marquez and G.V. Desani.

His first novel, *Grimes* (1975) shows Rushdie trying his hand at these various strategies, without mastering any. The protagonist is Flapping Eagle, an American Indian in search of his lost sister. He finally locates her on a Mediterranean island controlled by Grimus, a magician. The narrative is a hodgepodge of several myths and motifs, which do not seem to mix well. Thus, the name "Grimus" is an anagram of "Simurg", a great wise eagle in the Persian *Shahnama*; while the Rose which is the secret of Grimus's power, and the protagonist's guide Virgil (Jones) are obviously from Dante. And Sufi mysticism and Menippean satire make strange bed-fellows. In *Grimus*, Rushdie was evidently serving his apprenticeship.

How well he did this is suddenly apparent in *Midnight's Children* (1981), Rushdie's first major work and, in a sense, his best novel. It is a multi-faceted narrative, which is at once an autobiographical *bildungsroman*, a picaresque fiction, a political allegory, a topical satire, a comic extravaganza, a surrealist fantasy, and a daring experiment in form and style.

Midnight's Children is the story of Saleem Sinai, born on the midnight of 15 August, 1947: the time and year of the birth of the modern Indian nation. He therefore feels that he is "mysteriously handcuffed to history". The narrative opens with an account of the life of Saleem's grandfather, and the hero is actually born as late as on page 116 (which reminds us of the birth of Sterne's hero in *Tristram Shandy* in Volume IV of the novel). Saleem's peregrinations over the next twenty-five years include his experiences during the Bangla Desh

War in 1971 and the clamping of Emergency in 1975.

The narrative abounds in several instances of meaningful use of fantasy and symbolism. Thus, Saleem, who represents the new-born Indian nation is actually a changeling, the son of an Englishman and an Indian woman; Saleem is born with unblinking eyes and has to be taught to shut them, "for nobody can face the world with his eye open all the time". And out of the 1001 (a figure which clearly alludes to *The Arabian Nights*) children born on the midnight of 1947, exactly 420 die (this is the notorious number of the section of the Indian Penal Code dealing with cheating).

The story is narrated in the first person by Saleem himself, and his garrulity makes for several digressions like the Paean to Dung and the "Fairy Tale of the Prince of Kif." Stylistic experiments, which remind us of *All About H. Hatterr*, mainly take the form of the "chutnification" of the English language, using several devices such as the use of Hindi and Urdu words, expressions, expletives etc ("O baba", "funtoosh"), bilingual echoic formations ("writing-shiting"), use of Hindi idiom *a la* Mulk Raj Anand ("who cares two pice"), bilingual puns ("ladies and ladas"), and dovetailing of words ("ononon").

But what makes *Midnight's Children* an outstanding work is the fact that it has a distinctly existential dimension. One central theme seems to unify all the elements of political fantasy, comedy and surrealism in the novel; this is the over-arching theme of Identity and its plight in a hostile world. The numerous ways in which Identity is made to suffer is vividly illustrated in the experiences of the protagonist. Identity is in turn, shown as a sham, as mistaken and confused, subjected to oblivion, fractured, dwarfed and reduced to animal level; as barren, sterile and totally lost. And since heredity is an essential element in Identity, some of these ordeals are repeated from generation to generation in the narrative which opens with the protagonist's grandfather and ends with his son.

If the political allegory in *Midnight's Children* concerns India, its sister nation, Pakistan, born at the same time, is the subject of *Shame* (1983). Here again, the political equations are quite clear. The protagonist is Omar Khayyam Shakil, a name which points to the Pakistani belief that it has greater affinities with Persia and the Middle East rather than with neighbouring India, in spite of the fact that a majority of the people of Pakistan are Hindus converted to Islam. He is the illegitimate son of three mothers and a British Officer. This obviously refers to the British Government's creation of Pakistan out

of three Muslim-majority provinces of pre-Independence India. Many major players in the history of Pakistan during the first three decades of its turbulent life, including Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto (Iskandar Harappa), and Zia ul Haq (Raza Hyder) appear here. The macabre end, in which Omar is killed by his own wife, who has turned into a man-eating beast, and his home destroyed in an explosion, is perhaps a dire warning that a nation born in hatred, and which has for the most part lived in an ambience of tyranny, violence and unrest, is bound to end the same way.

Apart from the political allegory, the narrative has other dimensions as well. The miraculous birth of Omar and the sudden transformation of his wife into a white panther clearly belong to the fiction of Magic Realism. The idea of a human being transformed into an animal is not new. In David Garnett's *Lady into Fox* (1922), a country gentleman's wife is suddenly transformed into a fox; her husband accepts her as she is now and continues to live with her until she is killed by hounds. This is fantasy as a sheer flight of the imagination, but with no symbolic dimension. It is this symbolic dimension that gives Rushdie's novel its powerful appeal.

Furthermore, as Rushdie himself says, "I am only telling a sort of a modern fairy tale". But here is a fairy tale with a big difference: an inverted fairy tale. In a traditional fairy tale, a frog is transformed into a prince, in the midst of the ringing of wedding bells; in *Shame*, the process is reversed, with tragic consequences.

The title, "Shame" suggests another possible dimension of the narrative. The Hindi word "*Aural*" meaning woman, comes from an Arabic word, which means: (a) something under a veil, any place of concealment and (b) private parts, genitals; the reference by implication to Woman and Woman's honour is plain. In all oriental cultures, Woman and Shame are associated in two diametrically opposite ways. First, it indicates a woman's honour, her decency and modesty. Ancient Hindus, who had a passion for classification, have listed eleven basic traits of woman, including modesty, along with beauty, tolerance, self-effacement etc. In fact, in a positive sense, Shame is associated with the Divine. Idols of *Lajja Gauri* (Lajja = Shame, and Gauri = Parvati, the consort of Shiva) are still found in Maharashtra, Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh. They symbolized female fertility and were (and still are) worshipped by barren women.

On the other hand, "Shame", in a pejorative sense, is equated with dishonour, loss of self-respect, humiliation etc. It is this pejorative sense that seems to be emphasised in this narrative of three decades of

a country united in a "macabre fellowship of Shame". Finally, *Shame* in a sense is also an impressive Feminist document, in that Sufiya Zinobiya's transformation into a ferocious beast perhaps suggests that in a country which reduces its women to less than second class citizens, Woman power will one day arise and slay the oppressor.

Rushdie's fourth novel, *The Satanic Verses* (1988), brought him considerable notoriety, and devout Muslims found it blasphemous. A *fatwa* was issued against him by Ayatollah Khomeini in Iran, passing a death sentence on him. In Chapter 53 of the Holy Koran, verses number 19 and 20 refer to Lat, Uzza and Manat, three deities worshipped by pagan Arabs in Mecca. According to a discredited *hadith*, these verses were followed by a verse glorifying these pagan idols; this verse, written under the influence of Satan, was never part of the Holy Koran. Rushdie is fascinated by this imaginary incident, and goes on magnifying it - the chapter "Mahound" opens with these pagan deities as daughters of the Devil, "Lat Manat Uzza, motherless girls laughing with their Abba." The section ends with the Prophet abandoning Gibreel, after bringing him the devil, and Gibreel is left trying to fight against "the three winged creatures." Rushdie no doubt meant this reversal (the Prophet brings the Devil to Gibreel instead of the angel Gabriel bringing the word of God to the Prophet) as a profound meditation on good and evil, but all he achieves is puerile word play which is highly offensive to Muslims.

The novel opens with an incident typical of Magic Realism: two Indians fall from an aeroplane on to the English coast and land unhurt. They are Gibreel Farishta, a superstar of Indian cinema, and Saladin Chamcha, an Indian emigre. The names are highly symbolic. "Gibreel", which is "Gabriel", represents the angelic (in Islam, Gabriel is the angel who brought God's Word to humankind), and "Farishta" means angel; and "Saladin" recalls Sultan Saladin, whom the Christians regarded as the evil enemy against whom they fought the Crusades. But as usual with Rushdie, the symbolism is actually multi-layered. For instance, "Chamcha" means a "hanger-on", a flatterer in Hindi, and his wife's name is "Pamela Lovelace" *a la* Samuel Richardson. Rushdie is quite self-conscious about his choice of names. In the portions of the novel which did the most to attract charges of blasphemy, he chooses the name "Mahound" for the prophet. "Mahound" was the name which medieval Christian writers used for Muhammad, identifying him with the Devil - Dante, for example, puts him in inferno. Rushdie writes a whole paragraph justifying his choice: ". . . has adopted, instead, the devil-tag the farangies hung round his

neck. To turn insults into strengths, whigs, tories, Blacks all chose to wear with pride the names they were given in scorn ..." (In fact, a detailed consideration of the symbolism of proper names in the novel will take an entire essay).

The ensuing adventures of the two Indians in England provide the occasion for the treatment of many subjects, including the problems of Indian immigrants in England, British politics (Mrs Thatcher becomes "Mrs Torture"), Islamic history and theology, and feminism. Both finally return to India to meet different fates. Gibreel, who had earlier won his laurels by playing Hindu gods on the screen (a dig at N. T. Rama Rao, the noted Andhra actor) makes a movie on Prophet Mohamed, and when it is a big flop, he shoots himself. Saladin, suddenly realising that his roots are in India, decides not to return to England.

In spite of its seemingly inexhaustible inventiveness (or perhaps because of it), *The Satanic Verses* is ultimately a confused book. In his irrepressible way, Rushdie tries to do too many things at the same time, allowing the narrative to run in too many directions, ultimately arriving nowhere. The nature of Good and Evil is an exceedingly complex subject. To unravel its intricate inter-connections is an arduous task; and it is certainly not made easy by periodic engagement with peripheral issues, however interesting they may be by themselves.

With the Damocles sword of the religious *fatwa* hanging over his heretical head, Rushdie was forced to go into seclusion and live under constant police protection in London. It speaks volumes for his courage, strength of mind and *sangfroid* that under these forbidding circumstances his creative powers remained entirely unaffected. In fact, in *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* (1990) he has written perhaps his most delightful novel. Rushdie is supposed to have, written the book at the request of his small son for a story, but here, as in the case of *Gulliver's Travels*, is a children's tale with an urgent message to the adults, a message on the issues of the liberty of creative imagination and the sanctity of the artist's freedom of expression. These questions were of pressing personal relevance to him then, and it is a mark of his powerful creative imagination that he transformed a seemingly insuperable difficulty into an invaluable artistic opportunity.

Haroun and the Sea of Stories opens in a manner typical of a children's tale: "There was once in the country of Alifbay a sad city." In this city lives Haroun, a small boy, whose Dither, Rashid Khalifa is a master storyteller. But his wife runs away with another man and he suddenly finds that his story-telling powers are also gone. He regains

them in the end after several adventures and a great war between the champions of the freedom of expression and their tyrannical oppressors. The story abounds in allegorical characters like Prince Bolo (speak), Princess Batchet (dialogue) and Khatam-shud (completely finished).

As an allegory *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* invites comparison with the earlier *Grimus*; and the comparison immediately shows how much ground Rushdie has covered during the fifteen years that separate the two novels. In *Grimus*, the allegory was vague, confused and unanchored in a specific cultural reality. In *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* these pitfalls have been successfully avoided. Devoid of digression, compact and unified in effect, this is perhaps the most focussed of Rushdie's novels, and as an allegory it is perhaps fit to rank with the best in the English language.

It is precisely this power of focussing that is missing in *The Moor's Last Sigh* (1995). All the usual ingredients of Rushdie's fiction are here: a large canvas; a narrative covering several generations; characters sporting different kinds of eccentricities; employment of thinly disguised real-life personages; Magic Realism; a conscious attempt to allegorise; and constant word-play. But these several elements do not seem to coalesce well enough to constitute a unified whole. This is probably because some of these ingredients appear to be merely routine gestures, rather than organic parts of the narrative.

Consider, for example, the curious fact that the protagonist, the "Moor" grows twice as fast as his biological age, owing to a casual wish made by his mother, so that he is actually born only four and a half months after conception, and he is sixty at the age of thirty. This idea is evidently borrowed from Gunter Grass, whose protagonist, Oskar in *The Tin Drum* refuses to grow after the age of three. Both are typical examples of Magic Realism, but in *The Tin Drum*, the protagonist's refusal to grow has a profound thematic significance; it symbolises, in a powerful way, the stunting of the intellectual growth of the nation during the totalitarian Nazi rule in Germany. Rushdie has not been able to invest the Moor's double-fast biological growth with a similar symbolic meaning. It remains little more than a clever gimmick.

The same objection must be taken to the putative parallel suggested at various places in the novel between the protagonist, the Moor and Boabdil, the last Moorish sultan of Granada. The protagonist's real name is "Moraes" which is shortened as "Moor", and his surname, "Zogoiby" means "unlucky" - an adjective which fits

Boabdil also, because with his defeat in 1492 ended the eight-hundred-year-old Moorish kingdom in Spain. The picture, "The Moor's Last Sigh" depicting Boabdil riding out of the palace of Alhambra also figures at more than one place. But the comparison is limited to superficial details like these, and is not rigorously worked out in symbolic terms, in respect of character and action. It would be uncharitable, but perhaps correct to suggest that Boabdil was an afterthought, which provided an attractive title, since the "Moor", like Boabdil, was destined to be the last of his line.

The Ground Beneath Her Feet (1999), Rushdie's latest novel, stands apart from all his other narratives in that it is his first attempt to deal with the theme of love. Vina, a singer, is the woman the ground beneath whose feet is worshipped by her lover, Ormus Cama. Rushdie implies a symbolic parallel between a modern love story and an ancient legend: the story of Orpheus and Eurydice. The names of Rushdie's lovers are symbolic. "Ormus" is a variation on "Orpheus" and "Cama", a common Parsi name also recalls "Kama", the Hindu god of love. "Vina" is a musical instrument, and music plays a crucial role in the narrative. There is an interesting twist given to the old story. Ormus, injured seriously in a car-crash, lies in a coma. Vina who has been separated from him for long, gets to hear his latest song, "Beneath Her Feet," and hastens to be at his bedside and he revives. So, in Rushdie's narrative, it is Eurydice who brings Orpheus back from the dead, and not the other way round. Finally, the lovers are separated for good, when Vina disappears, literally swallowed up by the "ground beneath her feet", in an earthquake in Mexico.

The chief weakness of the novel is that the lovers fail to come to life. It is extremely difficult to portray romantic love credibly in this hard-headed age of ours, where even the word has become devalued (the London barmaid calls you "luv"); and perhaps only lyricism of the highest kind can make the feat possible. Rushdie's attempts in this direction lack conviction:

How shall we sing of the coming together of long-parted lovers separated by foolish mistrust for a sad decade, reunited at last by music? Shall we say they ran singing through fields of asphodel and drank the nectar of the gods . . . ?

This tissue of conventionalities becomes all the more unconvincing when one remembers that Vina continues to flirt with her friend Rai all the time, and on the night previous to her death, she has had a man warming her bed.

Emotion is hardly Rushdie's strong suit; fantasy, irony, and satire are. It is hardly surprising therefore that the minor characters, who afford him ample scope to exercise his powers, are much better realized: Cyrus, the pathological killer, called "the Pi llowman" because he smothers his numerous victims with a pillow; Pilo Doodhwala, involved in a goat-scam, and Ormus's father, a sham-barrister, who is finally exposed. The weakness at the heart of the narrative is compounded by the excessive, and at times puerile word-play (e.g. "Cut the throats of your goats and turn them into coats").

Just past the age of fifty, Salman Rushdie should have many more years of creative writing before him; and the recent easing of the deadly *fatwa* should make for more congenial conditions of work. Meanwhile, Indian English literature owes him much. Known earlier only for a few prominent writers, and studied in a few universities abroad, Indian writing in English has now won far wider acceptance, not only in English-speaking countries, but in the wide world also, through translations. And it was Rushdie who showed the way by his bold "chutnification" of English.

Other Practitioners of Magic Realism

Apart from Rushdie, there are quite a few contemporary novelists who have employed the technique of Magic Realism, with varying degrees of success. The experiment succeeds best when the novelist uses the technique to present a meaningful vision of life. But in the absence of this, it merely becomes a currently fashionable literary device which amuses, but does not enlighten.

This dichotomy is illustrated in two well-known novels of this period: *The Circle of Reason* (1986), the first novel by Amitav Ghosh (b.1956), and Shashi Tharoor's (b.1956) *The Great Indian Novel* (1989), also a first novel. Ghosh's protagonist is a Bengali orphan called "Alu" (potato) because his head is shaped like one. His real name is "Nachiketa", which reminds us of the enterprising young boy in *Katha Upanishad*, who pursues the god of Death, importuning him to reveal to him the secret of existence. Alu is forced to run away from his village, because he is falsely accused of being a terrorist. His peregrinations take him to the Middle East, moving as he does from alGhazira, a small Persian Gulf town to Cairo, the Sahara and finally Algeria.

The narrative teems with many interesting, and in some cases eccentric, characters. Alu's uncle, Balaram, a school teacher, is an enthusiastic student of phrenology and is always busy, measuring

heads with a huge pair of callipers, and making solemn predictions thereby. He is also a passionate believer in the virtues of carbolic acid, which he thinks is a panacea for almost everything. Then there is Jyoti Das, the police officer, who is investigating Alu's case. He is an avid bird-watcher, and when he fails to find any evidence against Alu, he resigns from the police force and gives himself up to ornithology. The middle eastern characters, very rare in Indian English fiction, are sharply etched. They include Zindi, the large-hearted "madam", who takes Alu under her wing; Nuri, the one-eyed egg-seller, and Kulfi, one of Zindi's girls who dies while acting in a Tagore play.

Several incidents are in the vein of Magic Realism. Alu, fascinated by the loom, wants to be a weaver. But his thumbs shrivel and atrophy, making it impossible for him to weave. Perhaps there is an implied reference here to the story of Eklavya, the tribal in the *Mahabharata* who learnt the art of archery by worshipping a statue of Dronacharya, the great martial arts teacher of the Pandava and Kaurava princes. The Guru demanded Eklavya's thumb as payment, because he wanted Arjuna to have no rival, that too one of the wrong caste. Alu too is of the wrong caste - society disapproves of a higher caste boy learning to weave. Then his thumbs grow back miraculously. And when he is trapped in the basement of a multi-storied building, which collapses, he is saved by the sewing machines there, which he has gone to salvage.

In spite of its wealth of character and incident, *The Circle of Reason* fails to generate adequate thematic substance. The tripartite division of the narrative into *Satwa*, *Rajas* and *Tamas*, which refer to the three universal qualities in Hindu thought, and the allusion to Nachiketas raise visions of a strong under-pinning of serious ideational significance, which the actual narrative finally belies. Ghosh's subsequent novels: *In an Antique Land* (1992), *The Calcutta Chromosome* (1996) and *The Glass Palace* (2000) show him attempting different strategies; in fact, no two novels by him are alike in tone and spirit. These novels will be considered in their proper places later.

One of the finest examples of post-modern fiction in recent Indian English literature is Shashi Tharoor's first novel, *The Great Indian Novel* (1989). The title itself is a take-off on the ancient Indian epic, *The Mahabharatu* ("The great narrative of India"). By a daring stroke of imagination, Tharoor finds uncanny correspondences between the chief characters and events in the three thousand year old epic and the leading political figures and developments in modern

Indian history. These correspondences are not mechanically worked out; they are suitably modified, sometimes hinted at rather than fully spelt out; and on occasion they are given an ironic twist in a spirit of self-mockery, which is so characteristic of post-modernism. Thus, the venerable Bhishma, the son of Ganga in the epic becomes Gangadppta, a Mahatma Gandhi-like figure; but Gandhi's great Salt-march, which shook the foundations of the British empire in India, becomes the rather comic "Mango-march." Duryodhana, the wicked son of King Dhritarashtra in the epic is "unsexed" to become a woman: Priya Duryodhani, who stands for Indira Gandhi; the evil she did being the breaking up of the Congress party and the gagging of democracy during the infamous Emergency.

The narrative is rich in comic invention of various kinds. Comic verses are interpolated from time to time, to remind us of the original epic, and word-play is continuous and usually of a high order. The witty titles of the books themselves set the proper tone for the diverting narrative: "The Rigged Veda"; "The Bungle Book", "Midnight's Parents" etc. *The Great Indian Novel* which effectively demonstrates how the technique of running a continuous parallel between antiquity and modernity can illuminate both, is easily one of the most outstanding novels of the period.

Another novel which demonstrates the use of going back to the past is *The Memory of Elephants* (1988) by Boman Desai (b. 1950). This is the story of Homi Seervai, a young Parsi scientist in the USA, who invents a machine which can activate the part of the brain in which memories are stored. After frustration in a love affair, he tries to use the machine to re-live his memories of love, but something goes wrong with the machine, and he begins to re-live the past, not only of his family but also that of his entire race, from the time of the collapse of the great Persian empire to the flight of the Parsis from their land to seek shelter in India. The fantasy here is perfectly credible, given the first premise, and is put to significant use - viz. an encapsulation of Parsi history, life, culture and character.

In his second novel, *Asylum, USA* (2000), Desai tries his hand at comic extravaganza. The protagonist, Noshir Daruvala, is a young Parsi student in Chicago who must get a green card or be deported to Bombay. He gives Barbara a thousand dollars to marry him, so that he becomes an American citizen, but discovers that she is a lesbian with a live-in woman-lover. Later, he meets Blythe, but she too has a boyfriend and so he lurches on from one woman to another. As he himself tells us in one of his (rare) serious moments, "Ttie women ...

in this story ... were less a tribute to my powers of attraction as I liked to think than to my troubledness ... they too were troubled.... we were linked by our troubles". But this serious aspect of the story is not realized adequately, because it is engulfed by flippant gestures like frequently gratuitous dove-tailing of words, *a la* Rushdie ("hewasthefirsttoaskher"), and the non-use of quotation marks in dialogue throughout with an entire page full of these marks at the end, to supply the deficiency. Devices like these yield more facetiousness than genuine comedy.

A fellow Parsi, Farrukh Dhondy (b. 1944), tries to make fantasy subserve the needs of comic extravaganza in his *Bombay Duck* (1990). The most credible part of this rather footloose fantasy is the "Book of Xerxes Xavaxa Hoax Xtraordinaire" dealing with the exploits of the resourceful Parsi, Xavaxa, one of whose more or less crazy schemes is a baby-smuggling racket in London.

The extravaganza is even more boisterous in *The Revised Kamasutra* (1993) by Richard Crasta. The sub-title reads: "A Novel of Colonialism and Desire with Arbitrary Footnotes and a Whimsical Glossary." This is the sexual odyssey of Vijay, a small-town, middle class boy from South India, whose sexual propensity begins at the age of seven and finds its full flowering when he goes to the USA as a young man. Crasta's word-play is often resourceful and reminds us of Desani and Rushdie. (e.g., "I am in the well, thank you"; "offences against pubic peace"; two girls named "Erecta and Ejecta" etc). *The Revised Kamasutra* is a rollicking recital of a comedy of rampant sexuality.

Fantasy may use reality as a spring-board, but an uneasy mixture of the two is sure to create problems for both the writer and the reader. This is what seems to have happened in *A Clean Breast* (1993) by G.J.V. Prasad (b. 1955). The narrator one day suddenly finds in a glossy magazine the photograph of a huge female breast, with one hair growing near the nipple, and recognizes it, with horror, as that of his wife. But having had its fling with fantasy, the novel reverts to social realism, and seems to fall between two stools. The successful sustaining of fantasy is far more difficult than its creation.

Paradoxically enough, fantasy cannot thrive, if it severs its connection with reality altogether; for if realism reflects reality, Magic Realism only refracts reality; it is simply Realism reflected in the turbulent waves of a river in spate. Indrajit Hazra's *The Burnt Forehead of Max Saul* (2000) illustrates this. Max, a middle-aged man, is found lying semi-naked on a garbage dump; removed to a

hospital, he lies in a coma for several months. His "burnt forehead" (which is reminiscent of the head-injury of Desani's hero in *All About H. Hatterr*) probably accounts for the hallucinations he is subject to ("what happened around Max didn't happen"). His escapades include shop-lifting; trying to organise the escape of a friend from jail by the bizarre device of hiding him in a large piano and even committing a murder. He tells us at the beginning of his narrative that his father has asked him to locate the mysterious Serai but at the end it is revealed that his father has been dead for years and that Serai never existed. The only specific touch of reality comes at the end: "I raise my arms to smell the horse odour of my armpits." Hatterr's story raises larger questions such as colonial consciousness, appearance and reality, and at the end he arrives at a philosophy of life. Max's hallucinations remain mere fantasies, without any ulterior significance, though some of his adventures do generate black humour.

The Magic Realism technique may give the novelist the widest possible scope for the exercise of imagination, but in that process, he always stands in danger of losing his hold on the structural values of fiction. This is what happens in *Beethoven Among the Cows* (1994) by Rukun Advani (b. 1955). The eight chapters of the book are actually so many separate short stories linked together loosely by the two protagonists who are twins, and all the events are seen through their consciousness. The action covers a period of three decades, from 1962, the inglorious year of the war with China, when the twins are born, to 1992, which witnessed the infamous demolition of the Babri Masjid. The fantasy produces strange results: Elizabeth Taylor comes down from the cinema screen to meet the twins, and later, she suddenly merges into the historical Eliza Taylor, who was in the besieged residency in Delhi during the Mutiny of 1857. The comedy operates at various levels, the most notable of which is the stylistic one. Advani makes deft use of parody, caricature, witty allusion and word-play. The character of Professor Lavatri All-theori, "the Moby Dick of the American Academy" is of topical interest, as a caricature of a wellknown modern Indian critic long settled in the U.S.A. We are told that in her Women's Movement, "Lit.crit" becomes "Lit.Clit". In the absence of a hard, central core, however, *Beethoven Among the Cows* remains a charismatic chaos of a book.

Looking Through Glass (1995) by Mukul Kesavan (b. 1957) is slightly better organized. The narrator, a young photographer, accidentally falls off a railway bridge and loses consciousness; when he comes to, he discovers to his surprise that he is now back in the

nineteen-forties. He acquires a Muslim foster family in Lucknow and goes again through the political vicissitudes of the entire decade, including the last phase of the Freedom Struggle and the Partition holocaust. Fantasy now seems to run riot: Muslim Congressmen, who oppose the Quit India "resolution" of August 1942 suddenly disappear, and the degree of their disappearance is in inverse proportion to their commitment to the Congress. Some just become lighter-skinned, others translucent like Inayat Khan, who finds himself totally naked. The famous film-star, Yusuf-bin-Ansoo (_ "child of tears" - an obvious caricature of Dilip Kumar, Yusuf Khan in real life, a wellknown Indian Muslim film-actor, called the "Tragedy King") looks into the mirror (probably to assume the right expression), and then somehow, the actor vanishes but his mirror-image remains. All this is, no doubt, highly imaginative and extremely entertaining, but its final impact remains limited. localized and sporadic. Incidents such as these form a loose chain of events: they do not ultimately come to constitute a thematic whole, as in *Midnight Children*.

The larger the canvas, the more difficult it is to control it and harness it to a solid central concern. *Red Earth and Pouring Rain* (1995) by Vikram Chandra (b. 1961) illustrates this. In this long and ambitious novel, the action moves from India to the U.S.A. and back, and covers two centuries (the nineteenth and twentieth), and the characters include historical personages like de Boigne, head of Scindia's artillery; George Thomas and Begum Samru - both wellknown adventurers; Hindu gods - Yama, Ganesha and Hanuman; and even a monkey, who, we are told, was actually a bright Brahmin boy in a previous birth. The narrative moves jerkily, with flash-backs and "dash-forwards" and there are numerous surrealistic effects, as when the gods Ganesha and Hanuman, and the protagonist, Abhay together watch the popular Hindi film, *Amar Akba,; Anthony*. We are carried along swiftly in the headlong current of this fantastic narrative, but by the time we reach the end, we find ourselves saying, "but there seems to be no 'figure in the carpet' after all."

Embarking on a fantasy is like riding a tiger, you can't dismount without being doomed; *The Narrator* (1995) by Makarand Paranjape (b. 1960) demonstrates this truth. The narrative opens promisingly, with the protagonist, a University lecturer in English undergoing a most curious experience: there is a sudden emanation from his mouth, which soon assumes a transparent human shape. It is probably his own uninhibited self. He calls it "Baddy" (suggesting both "buddy" and "Biddy" - a short form of "Libido"). It's soon transmogrified into

Badri(nath), a self-made businessman, who proposes that the narrator and he should author a film-script together. After this, the story of the film, the doings of the narrator and the goings on of Baddy get mixed up until one is left wondering which is the text and which are the subtexts. The numerous authorial asides, such as those on the art of fiction, and the one on "those stupid and carping reviewers ... who suck up to any author who has been published in England or America, but piss on those published in India. Poor, misguided sods" only compound the general amorphousness. It is all very clever and witty; it is a pity it could not be more.

Magic Realism is a jealous mistress. Once you set up house with her, social realism becomes an unwelcome guest there. *An Angel in Pyjamas* (1996) by Tabish Khair (b.1966) provides an example. The author describes the book as "anything-but-a-novel" written by a plurality of authors: "there might even be more of me - one who tries to write a novel, one who writes this book, one who is in this book, one who is in and out, and so on and so forth." This arouses great expectations of experimental fiction, which however are sadly belied soon. The first part of the narrative, which is in the realistic vein, tells the story of the marriage of Yunus Shaikh, a young journalist, to Farida. In the second half fantasy enters, and renders the first part virtually redundant. Yunus now meets the nineteenth century poet, Ghalib, in twentieth century Delhi. The narrative gets side-tracked into the story of Sukha, an innocent Sikh peasant, unjustly accused of being a terrorist. Here again, what begins with a realist whimper, ends with a fantasist bang. In jail, Sukha suddenly develops a halo around his head, levitates and just flies away.

Another novel that fails for a similar reason is *Ravan and Eddie* (1995) by Kiran Nagarkar (b. 1942). Thirteen-month-old Rama falls from the fifth floor of a Bombay chawl straight on the head of Victor, a young mechanic; the poor man falls down and dies, though the child survives miraculously. Its mother starts calling it "Ravan" now, to ward off the evil eye in future. Ravan and Eddie, Victor's son who is almost of the same age, grow up together, but each in his own world. A narrative which made such a spectacular beginning now settles into the grooves of social realism. There is a half-hearted attempt to enliven it by digressions, like the one on the Hindi film-world and the Portuguese colonisation of parts of India, but these appear to be merely excrescences. The author informs us that the novel was originally written as a screen-play. That, indeed, explains a lot.

One of the earliest forms of fantasy which is as old as Aesop's

tales is the Animal Fable. *The Crow Chronicles* (1996) by Ranjit Lar (b. 1955) belongs to this genre. The protagonist is a white crow from Bombay, who migrates to a bird sanctuary, seizes power from the ruling eagle there, and becomes a dreaded dictator called, "Khatarnak Kala Kaloota Kawa Kaw Kaw." His henchmen have equally meaningful names: "Depraven Craven Raven," the Prime Minister; "Dr Thappad Maro Sala," -the Chief Interrogator; and "Buddhhoo Bandicoot," Chief of Intelligence. A Resistance movement launched by the smaller birds ultimately destroys the tyrant's power, and he flies off to the Himalayas. While the correspondences with the human types are maintained consistently enough, the fable lacks the grounding in a specific political milieu which makes the satire in Orwell's *Animal Farm* so devastating. Nor does it possess the existential dimension that gives Swift's picture of the Yahoos in the last part of *Gulliver's Travels* its formidable power.

Another animal fable, which seems to be more ambitious, though far less achieved, is *The Last Jungle on Earth* (2000) by Randhir Khare (b.1951). This is both a dystopia and an animal fable. It is a vision of the world, after the last Great War has been fought, leaving the earth in ruins. The few human beings that survive are now called "Animen", and are despised by the animals, who are dying for lack of water on the devastated planet. Kenyoba, an African elephant, Hindona, an Indian pachyderm, and Columbus, a tortoise from the Galapagos island, form a team which goes out in search of water. After several adventures in which they encounter different animals, they at last find "The Last Jungle," which is also the "first", as it promises renewal of life.

As a dystopia, the narrative would appear to be deficient in the kind of rich specificity which accounts for the power of major modern anti-utopias like Orwell's *1984* and Huxley's *Brave New World*. As an animal fable too, *The Last Jungle* lacks the symbolic dimension of *Animal Farm*, though there are occasional touches suggesting that the novelist is aware of the possibilities in this direction, as for instance, his depiction of the great Rat King, Thrile, who is greeted as 'Hile, Thrile' by his minions which recalls Hitler and his Nazi hordes ("Hile, Thrile" is an anagram for "Heil, Hitler").

The Novel of Social Realism

In spite of the fascination for Magic Realism in recent times, fiction of social realism still flourishes, and will perhaps always flourish, because the novel, born of social reality, may deviate from it, but will always

continue to find external reality an eternal source of substantial artistic material. It is therefore hardly surprising that in the heyday of Salman Rushdie and Magic Realism, we have an equally strong school of social realism led by Vikram Seth (b. 1952), whose *A Suitable Boy* (1993) won almost as much attention on its publication as *Midnight's Children* had done a dozen years earlier.

A Suitable Boy is a novel of large dimensions in the tradition of *War and Peace* and *Middlemarch*. As the title indicates, the central action of the novel is concerned with the search by a middle-aged society lady, Mrs Rupa Mehra, for a suitable bridegroom for her daughter Lata. Her search ends successfully when Lata finds Haresh Khanna, a young tanning expert quite suitable. But the main strength of the novel lies not in the business of match-making, but in the depiction of the social panorama of the decade after Independence. The stories of half a dozen families are brought together to create the panorama. These families are connected either by marriage ties as in the case of the Mehras and the Chatterjees, and the Mehras and the Kapoors, or by friendship like the Kapoors and the Khans; and there are sub-plots, with their own characters as well.

The wide social sweep of the novel gives Seth a chance to portray life in the fictitious northern State of "Purva Pradesh" in its various aspects. The rivalry between Mahesh Misra, a minister, and his bitter foe, L.N. Agarwal, brings the political scene to life, especially because it recalls the rivalry between the followers of Nehru, and those of the traditionalist, Purushottam Das Tandon, during the 'fifties. Among the aspects of the social scene revealed are the life and culture of the old north Indian aristocracy, of which the old Nawabsahib of Baitar is a typical representative; the world of the courtesans, like Saeeda Bai; Hindu-Muslim relations and their eternal fragility, with the threat of violence always hovering over them; and the unsavoury politics in academic circles, of which young Pran Kapoor, a university lecturer, has a bitter taste.

For a novel of more than thirteen hundred pages, *A Suitable Boy* has a surprisingly well-ordered structure. There are indeed very few passages and pages which the reader is tempted to skip, like the discussions on the Zamindari Abolition Bill, and the description of religious festivals and rituals etc. Impressive as Seth's achievement is in *A Suitable Boy*, one wonders whether the very nature of his central theme has not hamstrung him in his engagement with a social milieu. Society is a fluid entity, and social forces can best be presented against changing times. On the other hand, match-making is a very limited

activity, severely restricted in both space and time. That is probably why Jane Austen, who also took up the theme of match-making in *Emma*, did not attempt to make it an extended family chronicle. Austen's novel has a strong moral underpinning. This dimension is altogether missing in *A Suitable Boy*, in spite of its realism and readability, which alone are not enough to make a novel a major work of fiction.

Seth's second novel, *An Equal Music* (1999) is a bold experiment. The narrative is set entirely in the West, and all the characters are European. Earlier, he had attempted the same experiment in his novel in verse, *The Golden Gate* (1986), where the setting was California. The title, "An Equal Music" is drawn from Donne's description of a state of being where there shall be "no cloud, nor sun, no darkness nor dazzling but one equal light, no noise nor silence, but an equal music ... one equal communion and identity ... One equal eternity." An "equal music" therefore is music which has attained perfection; and since "music is the food of love," it plays a major role in a narrative of love lost and found and finally lost again.

The lovers, who are obviously intended to be "more equal" than others are Michael Holme, a young music student in London, and Julia, a fellow student whom he meets in Vienna, where they both study music. A misunderstanding separates them, and when he is able to locate her ten years later in London, she is married and the mother of a boy. Love revives for a time, but finally Julia opts for marriage, husband and family.

So commonplace a narrative couldn't have been redeemed even by heavenly music. In fact, music, which was obviously supposed to play a major role in the narrative, actually becomes a fatal liability, because the frequent discussions of technical aspects of Western music, with their own jargon, become virtually inaccessible to the common reader (especially the non-western one). Again, Seth, like Rushdie in *The Ground Beneath Her Feet*, fails to muster adequate emotional intensity to make a more or less conventional love story credible. Perhaps, a discerning reader could have even predicted this: one remembers that in *A Suitable Boy*, a love-scene between Lata and her lover comprises an exchange in which there are such stylistic gems as: "I love you" ... "I love you too". Never was love expressed, perhaps, in more banal terms; and love and banality go ill together. Fiction of social realism has several ramifications. When the narrative is restricted mainly to a particular ethnic group it has a distinctive flavour of its own. Realism sharply focussed on a distinctive

social section, bound by ties other than those of ethnicity, creates its own world. Political and historical fiction generate their own ambience; and so does regional fiction, which has the additional advantage of the setting being so evocatively realized that it becomes a fictional value in itself. And when the main emphasis is less on action than on the depiction of states of mind, on the apprehension of their own experience by the major characters, realism travels inward. Recent fiction illustrates all these major trends.

The Parsis form a minuscule ethnic group in Indian society, but they have written evocatively about their people and culture. (Curiously enough, Muslims, several times larger in number, have seldom done so, with very few exceptions: but this is obviously an issue for sociologists to investigate.) Perin C. Bharucha's *The FireWorshippers* (1968) was perhaps the earliest example of Parsi fiction. Boman Desai's *The Memory of Elephants* has already been considered as a novel of Magic Realism. Social realism has attracted more Parsi novelists. *Trying to Grow* (1990) by Firdaus Kanga (b. 1959) is a semi-autobiographical novel by a very unusual protagonist: a boy born with bones as brittle as glass (hence his nickname: "Brit", a short form of "brittle"). He breaks his legs eleven times before he is five, is undersized and confined to a wheel-chair. Several cures are tried without much success, including the blessings of a miracle man called "Wagh Baba" who is finally exposed as a sex-crazy fraud. Kanga writes with remarkable objectivity and a total absence of self-pity, and observes the social scene acutely, as when he records the typical Parsi way of snapping the middle finger and the thumb to ward off the evil spirit, the importance of the number 101, and the habit of translating literally Gujarati idiom into English ("Spoil him, until one day he sits on your head"). Occasionally there is a subtle touch, as when the crippled protagonist tells us, "I always saw people from down up; that was the view from my chair."

Rohinton Mistry (b. 1952), who lives in Canada, has written two novels in which Parsi characters play a major role: *Such a Long Journey* (1991) and *A Fine Balance* (1995). The "long" (and hard) "journey" is the life of a middle-aged, middle class Parsi bank clerk living in a Parsi tenement in Bombay. His humdrum life is suddenly disturbed when his best friend is involved in a bank fraud, in which he too unwittingly becomes a partner. He is lucky enough to go scot free, but his friend dies in mysterious circumstances in prison. These events are obviously based on the notorious "Nagarwala Case" during the regime of Indira Gandhi. More appealing is the detailed picture of

middle class Parsi life in Bombay. We hear the "metallic clatter of pots and pans ... nibbling at the edges of stillness" in the tenement-houses, as the day dawns and we see the clerk at prayer: "he recited the appropriate sections and unknotted the kusti from around his waist. When he had wound all nine feet of its slim, sacred hand-woven length, he cracked it whiplike: once. twice, thrice. And thus was Ahriman, the Evil One, driven away."

A Fine Balance is a much longer work, but is perhaps far less achieved. The "Fine Balance" is that between hope and despair, and the major characters experience both, until ultimately, life is seen to go on, in spite of everything, including the suicide of one of them. The setting is the mid-seventies, when a state of Emergency was proclaimed, suspending the fundamental rights. Mistry's picture of the excesses of the Emergency is graphic, but in his understanding of the lives and mores of the rustics he betrays an urban expatriate's ignorance at its worst. He shows two village untouchables learning (of all things) tailoring, and actually becoming practising tailors. That their teacher is a loveable Muslim old man is another suspect touch, reminiscent of Hindi films, with their machine-made plots selling national integration. Mistry is predictably on surer ground in handling his chief Parsi characters, Dina Shroff, a lonely middle-aged Parsi woman and Maneck Kohlah, a sensitive young man.

Parsi life in Bombay is also the theme of Ardesir Vakil (b. 1962) in his *Beach Boy* (1997), the story of a middle class Parsi boy in Bombay. Cyrus Readymoney is, in many ways, a typical urban teenager, interested primarily in food, films and flirtation, but he is also blessed (or cursed) with a high-flying imagination, which compels him to fantasize all the time. Vakil's style has a strong visual quality, but there are so many factual inaccuracies in his depiction of the Indian scene that one suspects it is a case of an expatriate writer trying to jog half-forgotten memories of things with which he has lost touch long ago.

Like the Parsis, the Anglo-Indians are another minuscule minority in India. Their best representative in Indian English literature so far was Ruskin Bond, who belongs to a previous generation. In I. Allan Sealy (b. 1951), they now have an even more effective spokesman. Sealy's *The Trotter-Nama: A Chronicle* (1988) is a rollicking family chronicle blending history, legend, digressions and humour of various kinds. The title alludes to medieval eastern chronicles of kings, like the *Shahnama* and the *Babarnama*. The book tells the story of seven generations of the Trotters, the descendants of

a French mercenary who settled near Lucknow in the eighteenth century. It ends with most of the Trotters migrating to England and Australia, after Indian Independence.

While Sealy is, on the whole, faithful to historical fact, it is clear that he is not writing a conventional historical novel. His is a postmodernist narrative, with an open form. Devices like the mock-heroic and parody are employed frequently, and the style shifts register accordingly, recalling *All About H. Hatterr*. The digressions comprise passages from archival material, dictionary entries and even recipes, including one on "Trotter-curry". Its tremendous verve, vitality and inventiveness make *The Trotter-Nanza* one of the most enjoyable novels-of the period.

Sealy's second novel, *Hero* (1990), is a departure from the Anglo-Indian theme, but he returns to it, though partially, in *The Everest Hotel: A Calendar* (1998). This had been once an exclusive hotel in the small town of Drummondganj near the Himalayan foothills, but now it has fallen on bad days and been converted into a home for the unwanted. The owner, Jed, is a ninety-year-old eccentric AngloIndian, once an avid mountaineer, and supposed to be working on his *Druinrnonaganj Book of the Dead*. Ritu, a young nun, arrives to look after Jed, and spends a year here, during which she makes the disturbing discovery that life in this seemingly isolated and quiet place is far more complicated than what she expected. The author claims that the division of the narrative into six parts is modelled on Kalidasa's *Ritusannhara*, but the thematic equation between the stages of development in the narrative and the changing seasons has not been adequately established, though Sealy's descriptions often have a lyrical quality.

The worlds of bureaucrats and business executives often touch each other at more than one point, and both by their very nature invite satirical treatment. *English, August: An Indian Story* (1988) by Upamanyu Chatterjee (b. 1959), is one of the most appealing of these, as indicated by the fact that it has been made into a film. Young Agastya Sen is known as "English August" to his friends, "August" being the Anglicisation of "Agastya", and "English", a snide reference to his admiration for everything English. As a probationary officer in the Indian Administrative Service, Agastya is posted to a small town, where he finds life utterly boring, his colleagues dull, and his work mechanical. He seeks release in drugs, drinking and masturbation. Another way of seeking amusement is to invent preposterous lies about himself and circulate them among his associates. (He tells one

that his wife has cancer, and another that he can't marry the girl of his choice because she is a Muslim). Finally, he finds that he himself does not know what exactly he wants: "He wanted nothing, it seemed only peace, but that was too pompous a word." The satire on bureaucracy has its mordant moments, but the book finally leaves us wondering whether the protagonist's existential angst is not after all a routine gesture of conformity to modern cynicism, rather than an adequately motivated state of mind.

Sequels are dangerous animals; they often end up by devouring their begetters. Chatterjee's sequel to *English, August, The Mammaries of the Welfare State* (2000) appears to prove this unwritten law of letters. We meet here "August", eight and a half years later, and discover that like the Bourbon kings, he has "learnt nothing and forgotten nothing." He still finds his work as dull, unrewarding and even useless as ever, but his only solution to his problem is to run away from it, by taking as much leave as the state of his bank balance will allow. The callow youth as an unheroic hero can be a figure of charm; he is less so, when one finds him unchanged after a decade of experience of life.

The chief saving grace of *The Mammaries of the Welfare Slate* is that it offers a much more varied picture of bureaucracy than *English, August*. Chatterjee takes us on a whirlwind tour through the "Blunderland of Babudom," and employs several comic devices to pinpoint its absurdities. Bureaucratic red-tape, corruption, nepotism and sheer pig-headedness are expertly pilloried. There is sheer farce, as when we are told that the Secretariat is infested by three thousand monkeys which outnumber the clerks, and that a convenient method of reducing paper-work is a periodic outbreak of fire in the office. There is exuberant word-play throughout, especially the humour in absurd acronyms, as in "BOOBZ" (Budget Organization on Base Zero). Delightful as all this is, one cannot help feeling that *The Mammaries of the Welfare State* would have become a far more meaningful novel, had the author focussed his efforts more on the depiction of the mind of his protagonist than on the milieu.

Ashok Banker's *Vertigo* (1993) deals with the world of Jayesh, a young marketing executive, whose colleague, Meera, represents the "new", emancipated working woman. The characters, including Jayesh's alcoholic mother, tend to be as one-dimensional as the King of Spades, and the style, staccato and frequently colloquial, deepens the general impression of mere reportage. Banker's second novel, *Byculla Boy* (1997) reveals a far more delicate touch; it shows the

plight of a sensitive boy, the product of an unhappy marriage between a Hindu father and a Christian mother.

Nalinaksha Bhattacharya's *A Fistful of Desire* (1997) is a diverting account of how red tape is used by bureaucrats as a potent weapon. Chaturvedi, a senior bureaucrat uses all the tricks in the bureaucratic book (including those in the Appendix as well) to harass Hilda, the wife of a British anthropologist, who is reported as lost in the Andaman Islands. The expedition to search for him has to be cleared by the Home Ministry, the Ministry of External Affairs, the Department of Culture, the Anthropological Society of India, and the Directorate of Tribal Welfare. On top of it all, the concerned clerk is discovered to be on leave.

In N.K. Singh's *Stripped Steel* (1997), the tone is far more serious, but the fictional values far less in evidence. Young Ripu, an executive trainee at Rajnagar Steel Plant soon becomes aware of the gulf between management theory and practice, and is shocked at the spectacle of personal aggrandisement and corruption, one-upmanship and caste-politics that unfolds before his eyes. As a senior executive himself, Singh knows the whole field thoroughly, but his language is often poor, and he compounds this by interspersing the narrative with gratuitous verses which are worse than his frequently ungrammatical prose.

Bureaucratic corruption is also highlighted in *Making the Minister Smile* (1996) by Anurag Mathur (b. 1954), but the East-West theme which is central to it perhaps necessitates the inclusion of the novel in another group to be considered later. Bureaucracy is at the centre of Mathur's "*Are All Women Leg Spinners?*", asked the *Stephanian* (1998). Mr. Thakur here is that rare thing - an efficient, honest and hard-working bureaucrat, but since he has no political godfather, nor bureaucratic mentor and no influential businessmanfriend, he is an easy target of a minister's anger. He is shunted off to an obscure post, and is given an office actually situated in a toilet. Another interesting character is Baby Loon, a three-year-old precocious girl, whose father, mother, grandfather and grandmother are or were all government servants. Naturally, she lisps in bureaucratese and speaks like a "government press release." Her normal response to any question is: "I will apply my mind to it."

But it is in *Scenes from an Executive Life* (2000) that Mathur's satire is at its sharpest. In tracing here the graph of the rise and fall of Gambhir Kumar, a brilliant marketing executive in a private corporation, Mathur unfolds the drama of jealousy and ambition,

private feuds and cut-throat competition among colleagues and rivals. The satire here is more concentrated also because there are no distracting sub-plots as in his two earlier novels.

The academic world does not seem to have interested the Indian English writer much, and we have had nothing so far comparable in this genre with C.P. Snow's *The Masters*. P.M.Nityanandan's nostalgic account of college days in South India, *The Long, Long Days* (1960), and M.V. Rana Sarma's rather colourless *The Farewell Party* (1976), the reverie of a senior professor on the day of his retirement, were perhaps the only campus novels before 1980. There are now three more additions: *The Atom and the Serpent* (1982) by Prema Nandakumar; D.R. Sharma's *Miracles Happen* (1985); and *The Drunk Tantra* (1994) by Ranga Rao (b. 1936). Prema Nandakumar's novel will be considered in the chapter on the Women Novelists; and *Miracles Happen* is so pedestrian in every way that one is tempted to classify it as one of the increasing number of publications whose chief value is to swell the catalogue of Indian English literature.

The Drunk Tantra fails for less ignominious reasons. It hardly fulfils the great expectations raised by the author's first novel, *FowlFilcher* (1987), a boisterous, picaresque chronicle, in which the footloose hero plays many parts, and is, in turn, a dog-catcher, a drugsmuggler and a politician's factotum, enjoying each role with uniform zeal. The boisterousness is still there in *The Drunk Tantra*, but it is far less controlled. The protagonist, Hari Kishen (justifiably nick-named "Hairy") is a jovial college lecturer who finally becomes a principal, and is tipped to be a vice-chancellor. A victim of priapism, he embarks upon a sexual odyssey filled with fantastic adventures. But the narrative, moving sometimes on the realistic plane and at other moments on that of Magic Realism, falls between two stools. The thin but vital dividing line between genuine comedy and mere facetiousness is also frequently crossed.

The world of the cinema had not figured noticeably in Indian fiction in English earlier, except for R.K. Narayan's *Mr. Sampath* (1949). Now there are at least two notable presentations: Allan Sealy's *Hero* (1990) and Shashi Tharoor's *Show Business* (1991). Sealy records the progress of a South Indian film-star from the cinema to active politics, ending with a prime-ministership. The absurdities of both worlds are pilloried expertly. For instance, the titles of the hero's films always begin with a "K", which is supposed to bring him luck; so we have concoctions like *Khichadi Khoon Ki* and *Kabooterbaaz ka Khwab*. Similarly, he wins his seat in parliament by doing a novel

national integration stunt. He takes an ordinary bucket, fastens it to a strong rope and lowers it into the great "North-South Rift". The narrative is appropriately structured like a film and divided into three parts entitled "Entrance", "Intermission" and "Exit"; while the chapters are named "Flashback", "Cliff-hanger", "Song" and "Dance".

Show Business also sports a film-script structure, each part being called a "Take". The hero, Ashok Banjara, resembles the Indian film star, Amitabh Bachchan, and many events in his career parallel Bachchan's own experiences. There are amusing parodies of Hindi film songs and scenarios. It is all immensely witty and funny, but rather superficial. At places Tharoor throws out thoughtful observations, like those on the curious affinities between Hindu religion and Indian cinema (both are agglomerative and eclectic; and the Hindu concept of cyclic time repeating itself is reflected in the repeated variations on a few basic themes in Indian films) and the Indian world-view and Indian Cinema (the Indian film is only an idealised representation of the Indian attitude to the world). These are acute insights, and had Tharoor developed them and given them an important place in his narrative, *Show Business* could have become a far more meaningful novel. As it is, it is only an amusing one.

The political theme had been very prominent in Indian English fiction before and just after Independence, and though an older novelist like Chaman Nahal returned to it in his Gandhi Quartet ending with *The Triumph of the Tricolour* (1993), it appears to have ceased to be of urgent concern to most novelists now. The satirical portraits of Ministers, Sevak Chand and Balak Kumar in Anurag Mathur's *Making the Minister Smile* and "*Are All Women Leg Spinners?*" *Asked the Stephanian* respectively are convincing enough, but these two novels are not political fiction. The most advertised political novel of the last two decades is P.V.Narasimha Rao's *The Insider* (1998; revised and enlarged edition 2000), which had held out high hopes of an Indian English Disraeli appearing on the scene, when it was in the press. These hopes were soon belied. As a true insider in the Indian political process, and a close witness to many momentous political developments during the last four decades, Rao could have certainly been expected to give us many new insights; but obviously declining the challenge, Rao offers us nothing which any well-informed observer of the Indian political scene does not know. Caution was Rao's watch word as Prime Minister; but while caution may enable one to keep one's chair for five years, caution is not such stuff as quality fiction is made of. Rao's protagonist, Anand, is an idealised portrait of himself,

and many other characters recall real life politicians. There are pages where the sprawling narrative becomes merely a recital of historical events. On the whole, what seems to be missing is the creative element which makes for the difference between genuine political fiction and mere reportage.

The world of diplomatic missions abroad had been scarcely touched upon earlier, except in Aamir Ali's *Via Geneva* (1967) and Ahmed Ali's *Of Rats and Diplomats* (1985). Kiran Doshi's *Birds of Passage* (1998) is a worthy successor to these novels. Like Narasimha Rao, Doshi, too is an "insider" in his own world of diplomats; he is an officer in the Indian Foreign Service, having worked for a number of years in missions in several foreign countries. He demonstrates how an insider with an eye for telling detail and a sharp comic sense can bring his own particular world to life. The novel has several hilarious scenes, including the one about the unexpected visit of a Swami, reportedly close to the Prime Minister, to Washington. A lunch hosted in his honour must have some prominent American guests; but there is no time to invite them. American employees of the Indian embassy are then made to dress up and impersonate dignitaries, including the Vice President of the U.S.A.

Two very unusual political novels are *Gestures* (1986) by H.S. Bhabra and *The Gabriel Club* (1998) by Joydeep Roy-Bhattacharya (b. 1962). Not only are they set entirely abroad, the characters in them also are entirely non-Indian. The central character in *Gestures* is Jeremy Burnham, a British career diplomat, now in his eighties, whose autobiography the novel purports to be. The setting changes from one European city to another, and the picture of diplomatic circles in Europe is detailed and authentic. The eventful decades of the nineteenthcenties and 'thirties in Europe, the rise of Mussolini and Hitler and the growth of anti-Semitism during the period are evoked effectively.

The Gabriel Club is a small non-Communist secret society founded in the 'seventies in Hungary and soon broken up. Seventeen years later, the surviving members of the club are reunited, leading to a struggle between those who had collaborated with the Communist regime, and those who had resisted it. Roy-Bhattacharya, who has lived in central Europe for a number of years, is completely at home with Budapest and his Hungarian characters.

The historical novel has always had its practitioners, beginning with Mirza Moorad Alee Beg, whose *Lalan the Beragan or the Battle of Panipat* appeared in 1884. During the last twenty years, at least half a dozen prominent historical novels have been published. Sudhir

Kakar, distinguished psychologist, has now tried his hand at fiction. *The Ascetic of Des ire* (1998) is set in the fourth century and deals with a very unusual subject: the life of Vatsyayana, the celebrated author of that classic of eroticism, *The Kamasutra*. "The Ascetic of Desire" is actually the title of a journal kept by a pupil of Vatsyayana, in which the Master's life-story is reconstructed from periodic dialogues between the two. Some interesting facts emerge: Vatsyayana's mother was a well-known courtesan, and probably knew more about the act of love than her own son who was a sexual novice. But, by and large, the narrative reads more like a treatise than a work of achieved fiction.

On the other hand, *In an Antique Land* (1992) by Amitav Ghosh shows how history can be enriched by imaginative reconstruction without damage being done to historical fact. The narrative deals mainly with Bomma, a low-class Indian, bought as a slave by a Jewish merchant who comes to India in 1130 A.D., and lives in Mangalore for seventeen years, before returning to Egypt. The book turns into a travelogue when Ghosh recounts how he came across a reference to Bomma, when he had gone to England to do research in social anthropology. He actually went to Egypt to investigate the matter, and he records his encounters with the Egyptians, which generate much humour, arising mainly out of cultural misunderstanding. The narrative moves back and forth from India to Egypt, and from the twelfth to the twentieth century. *In an Antique Land* is much more than a historical novel.

Kiran Nagarkar is best known as the author of an experimental novel in Marathi, *Saha Satte Trechalis* ("Seven Sixes are Forty-three": the English translation by Shubha Slee has this title). His first attempt at historical fiction, *Cuckold* (1997) comes as a huge disappointment, because there is nothing experimental about it. Set in the sixteenth century, this is the story of Bhoj Raj, son of the great Rajput king, Rana Sanga. Bhoj marries Meera, the saint-poetess, who has dedicated her life to the worship of Krishna. She tells her husband that she is already betrothed to Krishna, hence the title "Cuckold". In his Afterword, the author tells us, "The last thing I wanted to do was to write a book of historical veracity. I was writing a novel, not a history." But the story of Meera has been told so often that it now leaves hardly any room for artistic invention. Nagarkar is perhaps more at home with the existential angst of a modern hero than with the marital woes of a sixteenth century prince.

From sixteenth century Rajasthan we move to seventeenth century Maharashtra in *Govind* (1996) and *Govind, Shivaji S Warrior*

(1997), both by H. Ratnakar Rau (1914-1995). These historical exercises are of the usual "Drum and Trumpet" and "Velvet and Brocade" variety, clearly modelled on Scott, without, however, the felicities of the creator of *Ivanhoe*.

Early and mid-nineteenth century colonial India is the setting for Eric Prabhakar's *Maderia at Sundown: A Raj Trilogy* (1990). The book actually comprises three separate novellas, The first, "The Outcaste Lovers," is the story of the marriage between an Englishman and a Bengali girl. In the second, "The Pioneers Disobliged," the central theme is the establishment of tea-plantations in India by the British; and the iniquities of the indigo plantations form the chief subject of "Law, Order and Penury", the third part. That they deal with a period largely neglected in the fictions of the Raj is perhaps the sole distinction of these narratives, which are mostly pedestrian in conception and indifferent in execution.

Mandeep Rai's *In the Shadow of the Pines* (1996) also breaks new ground in that it tries to explore the private life of Lord Dalhousie, normally known only as a diehard imperialist, armed with his Rhadamanthine "Doctrine of Lapse."

Once Upon a Raj (1992) by Gustasp Irani (b. 1947) shows how a refreshingly new approach can make a much-explored field yield an abundant harvest. The Indian princely state under British rule has been the subject for countless novels so far. Irani approaches the theme in a cavalierly irreverent manner, combining comedy and satire, farce and horse-play. Prince Vir, busy philandering and drinking in London, is suddenly summoned back to his State in India' by his father to contract a marriage of political convenience. He tries to escape his fate by resorting to several stratagems, which land him in one mess after another, but finally he does succeed in returning unscathed to his "women, wine and the weed" in London. Royal traditions and conventions, the mandatory tiger-hunt, stolen treasures, palace intrigues and the inevitable tensions between the Prince and the British Resident are all given a farcical colouring.

Like the Raj world, the much-discussed theme of the nexus between the East and the West appeared to have exhausted most of its possibilities, until the appearance of Anurag Mathur's *The Inscrutable Americans* (1991), which is one of the most delightful novels of the period. This is an account of a one-year sojourn in America of Gopal, a gauche Indian youth from a small town in North India. Armed with customary semi-urban prejudices and misconceptions about America and the Americans, Gopal blunders through the country,

unselfconsciously parading his very Indian English and dropping linguistic and social bricks on unwary American feet, from the time he lands on American soil up to the moment he boards the flight home. (For instance, when the Customs officer tells him "Watch your ass", Gopal's reaction is: "This is wonderful. How he is knowing we are purchasing donkey?"; and when at an airport toilet, the black attendant holds out his hand for a tip, he shakes it vigorously and invites him home.) *The Inscrutable Americans* administers a much-needed literary jolt to a theme which had perhaps been treated a little too solemnly so far.

In a later novel, *Making the Minister Smile* (1996), Mathur returns partially to the same theme, but with a difference. He now shows a young American, the son of an industrialist, coming to India. Sequels, it has wisely been said, are fatal; this novel corroborates the belief. Chris Stark's inevitable reaction to India's strange mixture of poverty and pelf, idealism and cynicism, private cleanliness and public dirt, is along entirely predictable lines. The delicacy of touch and the subtle humour of the first novel now give place to rather crude satire, especially in the depiction of bureaucratic and ministerial corruption.

But the international theme still does continue to provide the customary prop to a love story. The title of *The Romantics* (2000) by Pankaj Mishra (b. 1969), probably alludes to the quest for the Romantic ideal of love of the protagonist, Samar, a Brahmin youth from North India. He travels with Catherine, a French girl, with whom he has a passionate but all too brief affair. After it ends, he settles down as a teacher in a small school in the Himalayan foothills. The European characters, Catherine, Miss West the Englishwoman living in Benares, and Mark, another expatriate, are not adequately realised. Nor is Samar's quest projected with sufficient complexity and intensity. Curiously enough, far more credible is Samar's friend, Rajesh, a student leader, with his politics of violence in the university campus.

Chains (2000) by G.B. Prabhat is another recent novel dealing with the East-West nexus, but from another angle. The "chains" are those of cultural norms which the protagonist, Janakiratnan, discovers lie cannot break. He is very much of an Indian when he arrives in the U.S.A. as a youth; but when he returns to India years later as a senior executive, he cannot shed the ethics and the mores he has absorbed in the U.S.A. Unfortunately, a major part of the narrative is occupied by matters of corporate business, which should be of interest only to the initiated.

Regional fiction, a genre of which R.K. Narayan is perhaps the greatest exponent in Indian English literature, continues to flourish for obvious reasons. A country so vast and varied, and displaying such tremendous diversity of regional traditions and culture cannot but produce regional fiction displaying rich variety. For reasons which need to be investigated, the South has left a much stronger mark in this area than the North, the ancient land of Tamil Nadu leading the field.

Kasturi Sreenivasan's *The Light' from Heaven* (1990) makes a striking beginning, with the protagonist, Balan, a Tamil Brahmin youth, resolving to renounce his Brahmin identity and break his traditional sacred thread, because heavy reservations for the backward castes prevents him from getting admission to a medical college, in spite of his high marks. He leaves home, actually becomes a sweeper - the lowest of the low - and even marries a sweeper girl. Here was a theme with a great potential. But the complete transformation in Balan's life and its far-reaching psychological effects have not been depicted with adequate subtlety and power.

Children of the Street (1994) by M.C.Gabriel is open to the same criticism. This is a rather flabby chronicle of South Indian rural life, showing the changes in the life of a small village with the arrival of a money-lender and merchant, who proceeds to exploit the villagers. The changes are observed through the eyes of young Baliah, and one wonders whether this was not a wrong choice, for a boy's understanding is bound to be extremely limited.

One of the most interesting of the regional novels is Manohar Devadoss's *Green Well Years* (1997) with the ancient temple town of Madurai as its setting. This is an account of the growing years of Sundaram, a bright boy, the son of a doctor. There is nothing particularly unusual about his childhood joys and sorrows, his pranks and exploits. But it is the ambience of the temple and the town that gives them a peculiar charm. The twenty graphic sketches of the temple and the town and its environs were perhaps not necessary, though inevitable, for Devadoss is also an artist of note. One cannot, however, justify the inclusion of a sixteen page long account of the history of Madurai. It gives the novel the aspect of a guide book, which it could have well done without.

Another Tamilian, P.A. Krishnan, covers the history of four generations of an Iyengar family in the course of a century in *The Tiger Claw Tree* (1998). The detailed account of old religious rituals and the fanatically fought sectarian feuds make the social chronicle appealing.

The author's refusal to translate Tamil words into English, however, does not make things easy for the non-Tamil (let alone Western) reader, who does not enjoy the rare privilege to be a Tamilian. Thus, when the author tells us that Ponna, a fabulous cook, has made "*Parappu, uppuchchar, ... satrainudu, vazhaikkai, and avial*", non-Tamilian taste buds are likely to remain unstirred. (There is no glossary either, in keeping with recent practice.)

Tamil Nadu's neighbour, Kerala, is not far behind. The hilly region between Tamil Nadu and Kerala is the setting for *Kunjaram Hills* (1984) by S.Gopalan. This is actually a historical novel set in the early nineteenth century, but it is not so much the history as the geography that one remembers; while it is not geography but sociology that dominates in P.Thomas's *The Death of a Harijan* (1984), a narrative with a singularly unprepossessing title. Kerala's varied landscape (but strangely enough, not its seascape) seems to fascinate its writers. Amanuddin Khan's *A Way Through the Woods* (1997) tells the story (the autobiographical flavour of which cannot be missed) of an aristocratic Muslim's love for the daughter of a British planter. The love-story runs in conventional grooves, but Khan's lyrical descriptions of the Travancore highlands are memorable. Recently, Shreekumar Varma, great-great grandson of the artist Raja Ravi Varma, and grandson of the last ruling Maharani of Travancore, has published *Lament of Mohini* (2000), a story of five generations of an aristocratic Kerala family, which could have gained considerably by a more taut construction.

Apart from S.Mokashi-Punekar's *Nana's Confession*, already considered in another context earlier, Karnataka is represented by K.B. Ganapati's *The Cross and Coorg* (1993), with its tell-tale subtitle, "Christian Saga in Coorg" and Jaideep Prabhu's *The Middle of Life* (1998), the story of a large family of Roman Catholics in the coastal town of Mangalore. And Andhra Pradesh has a solitary notable representative: *The Vultures* (1984), a study of rural life by Vasudeva Reddy.

Goa is the scene for two novels: *Angela's Goan Identity* (1994) by Carmo D'Souza who tries to grapple rather unsuccessfully with a large subject: the breakdown of the feudal system in Goa after its integration with India. Victor Rangel-Rebeiro's *Tivolem* (1998) has a much smaller range, but a far larger share of literary values. This quiet chronicle of life in a sleepy little village in Goa in the nineteen-thirties has something of the unruffled charm of *Cranford*. Village festivals

and rural superstitions, the eventful interaction between neighbours, the exploits of the village thief, and the clash between the old colonial mores and the new democratic values - all these add colour to the seemingly drab diurnal routine of the people of Tivolem.

Orissa's chief fictional spokesman is Manoj Das, whose *Cyclones* (1987), a study of rustic life, has already been considered. Nikhil Khasnabish recounts the troubles of Assam in his *For Existence* (1996).

There is a very strong contingent of Bengali writers among recent novelists, but the work of some of them like Upamanyu Chatterjee and Amit Chaudhuri can hardly be grouped under the capacious umbrella of regional fiction, since their emphasis is primarily on how their characters react to their experience, and not on the milieu as such, though the sights and sounds of Calcutta do come to life in Chaudhuri's novels. But a novel like *Hen? and Football* (1992) by Nalinaksha Bhattacharya may safely be classified under regional fiction, since it deals with an aspect of Calcutta which is peculiar to it: women's football clubs. The regional ambience is also strong in Mukunda Rao's *The Mahatma* (1992). Rao certainly gives us a feel of both the Noakhali milieu and the "moment", with painstaking attention to detail. This cannot, however, be said about his treatment of Gandhiji's strange sexual experiments during this period; he does not tell us anything new, nor does he attempt a fresh interpretation.

The North figures prominently in *In the Light of the Black Sun* (1996) by Rohit Manchanda and P.V. Dhamija's *Beyond the Tunnel* (1997). The first is set in a coal-mining town in Bihar, which is observed through the eyes of Vipul, a school boy. It demonstrates how sharp childhood perceptions are. We see with Vipul the coal-dust lying on everything like "an extra skin," and join him in his game of killing mosquitoes, and keeping the score too. *Beyond the Tunnel* is in a sense a campus novel, but the picture of the rural institute near Delhi here is not distinctive enough; the rural ambience makes a greater impact.

The Punjab unrest has been mirrored in Raj Gill's *Jo Bole* (1983), and Partap Sharma's *Days of the Turban* (1986), considered earlier. Less appealing is *Nation of Fools* (1984) by Balraj Khanna (b. 1940), the story of the coining of age of Omi, the son of a sweet vendor, who plies his trade in a village near Chandigarh. The time is the nineteen-fifties, when the Punjab had not yet become the boiling political and social cauldron it was fated to be twenty years later. In *Sweet Chillies* (1991), Khanna deals with the later period, but with a

less sure touch than Partap Sharma.

Amitav Ghosh's *The Glass Palace* (2000) annexes a new territory to Indian English fiction. Set in Burma, along with India, it tells the story of the deposition of King Thebaw of Burma in 1885 by the British, who then interned him in Ratnagiri, in Maharashtra, where he died two decades later. There are two other strands in the long narrative. The first concerns Rajkumar, a Hindu orphan who comes to Burma at the age of eleven, and rises to become a big businessman. He marries Dolly, one of the waiting maids of Thebaw's queen. In the second, we meet Uma, wife of the Collector of Ratnagiri. She later becomes an active member of the India League in London. The book is thoroughly researched, but the Thebaw story comes to life in a way the other two do not; and the chronicle aspect of *The Glass Palace* seems to overshadow the fictional one.

While the novel of social realism has flourished, its opposite, i.e., the fiction of the interior landscape of the mind has also had some able practitioners. Amitav Ghosh, whose versatility is enviable, has produced in *The Shadow Lines* (1988) a novel entirely different from his earlier *Circle of Reason* (1986) and the later *In an Antique Land* (1992). The "Shadow Lines" are the lines that divide people and nations and they are often insubstantial like shadows; but they can create a lot of misery and even death, as in the case of Tridib, the protagonist, who is killed in a communal riot in East Pakistan. The motif of the lines that divide begins with the partitioning of the family house in Bengal and is repeated with variations as the narrative ranges over four countries including India, East Pakistan, Sri Lanka and England. Perhaps the picture of family life in Bengal, seen through the eyes of the narrator when he was a child is far more evocative than the larger concerns to which he turns later.

After the mordant satire in *English, August*, Upamanyu Chatterjee turns to a far more inward-looking narrative in *The Last Burden* (1993). This is the unbearable burden of family ties, as Jamun the protagonist comes to realise when he returns home, after being informed that his mother is critically ill. Bitter and sweet memories of the past mingle with the tensions and irritations of the present. This could have made for an absorbing drama in the theatre of the mind; but Chatterjee, who had written such crisp and limpid prose in his earlier novel, now chooses, for some reason, to employ a leaden-footed style, with Latinized diction, chockfull of recondite words like "edaciously" and "crapulous".

The Shadow Lines and *The Last Burden* have at least a recognizable narrative framework. In the four novels he has published so far, Amit Chaudhuri (b. 1962) seems to dispense with the narrative altogether. *A Strange and Sublime Address* (1991) is a novella with nine short stories added to it. It is an impressionistic account of a Bombay-bred Bengali boy's visit to Calcutta during a vacation. Everything appears to him to be new and strange, and every little discovery a revelation to be recorded meticulously. In *Afternoon Raag* (1993), the boy is now a student at Oxford. His sojourn at the university, and his childhood memories of Bombay and Calcutta form the staple of the book. The entire action in *Freedom Song* (1998), which deals with middle class life in Calcutta has perhaps been neatly summed up in these words of the narrator: "They woke, slept, talked. They eked out the days with inconsequential chatter." Some of the descriptions are certainly evocative. but the narrative seldom rises above mere notations of quotidian preoccupations.

Cast in the same mould, *A New World* (2000) presents middleaged Jayojit, a failed husband, who has come home with his schoolboy son, to spend a summer vacation with his aged parents. He whiles away his time doing nothing in particular; his mother over-feeds him; his father snores away and his son plays with his plastic dinosaurs. We are even given the important information, at one place, that Jayojit "had begun to feel the first movements in his bowels and was oddly grateful and relieved."

"Delicate," "lyrical," "elegant," "sensitive," "evocative," "charming," "enchanting," - are some of the adjectives which reviewers, both Indian and Western, have used in praise of Chaudhuri. While there are passages in his work which do qualify for this praise, it is a moot point whether his fiction does not ultimately suffer from the limitations which the work of Dorothy Richardson and Virginia Woolf also betrays. Of course, unlike these two, Chaudhuri does not use the stream-of-consciousness technique, but his passion for the notation of life lived from moment to moment is akin to theirs. The difficulty with this kind of fictional fare is that it delights in small doses, but palls after larger helpings, raising the question, "What does it all amount to?" And, "who reads Richardson now?", one may ask, while Woolf, highly praised at one time is today only a minor experimenter. It will not do to invoke the name of Marcel Proust either. Its vast social range, its wealth of characters, the unity given to it by the main themes of Love and Time have made *Remembrance of*

Things Past a classic of fiction in which the passing moment is turned into eternity. In the total absence of all this, the novelist is in the danger of dwindling into merely a literary Autolycus, "The snapper up of unconsidered trifles."

Two more inward-looking novels have appeared recently: *A Short History of Everything* (1998) by Gautam Bhatia (b.1952) and *The Blue Bedspread* (1999) by Raj Kamal Jha (b.1966). Ram, in the first novel is born after Independence and goes through all the normal (and some abnormal) problems and pains of adolescence, including a growing sexual awareness which produces incestuous thoughts, and the sudden realization that Atma Ram, the family servant, meant more to his mistress than a servant should. The narrative, however, has very little of the immediacy which a chronicle of childhood and adolescence should normally have. *The Blue Bedspread*, like *A Short History of Everything*, is a "memory novel," but here the memories of the narrator are sadder and even more sordid. They include being abused by a drunken father, and an uncomfortable, incestuous relationship with his sister. The "Blue Bedspread" in the title becomes a symbol of escape into a more pleasant world of imagination for both the children. Raj Kamal Jha's evocation of the past is far more sensitively done than Bhatia's, but the attitude of his protagonist to his abnormal experience remains intriguingly ambivalent, raising suspicions of masochism.

Akhil Sharna's recently published *An Obedient Father* (2000) has been described in the blurb as "an astonishing character study ... recalls Dostoevsky's guild-ridden anti-heroes." The "achieved content" of the novel, however, fails to justify this tall claim. The private life of Ram Karan, the protagonist, is tainted by his repeated rape of his own daughter, while in his public life he is an extortionist, collecting bribes for a political leader. Only the establishment of a firm symbolic equation between the two lives of the protagonist could have invested the narrative with adequate meaning and power. In the absence of it, *An Obedient Father* only succeeds in becoming, at best, an exercise in titillation.

A new genre, vi.:, Science Fiction, has recently been added to the repertoire of Indian English fiction, and appropriately enough, the pioneer here is a distinguished scientist: Jayant Narlikar (b. 1938). In *The Return of Vaman* (1989), Vaman is a self-replicating robot; *The Message from Aristarchus* (1992) tells an even more exciting story, beginning with the dropping of an infant on to the earth from a dying planet. Narlikar's style is rigidly functional, but what is sauce for the

scientific goose is not sauce for the literary gander. Narlikar is no Isaac Asimov (at least not yet); but he has certainly planted the IndianEnglish flag on hitherto unexplored territory.

The most versatile of recent Indian English novelists, Amitav Ghosh, has produced in *The Calcutta Chromosome* (1996) what is in a large measure a science fiction novel. In fact, it won the Arthur C. Clarke Award in 1997 as the best novel in this genre, though the narrative has other dimensions as well: it has distinct elements of dystopia, mystery and ghost story in it. At the centre of the narrative is Ronald Ross's well-known research on the malarial parasite. The novelist shows how an unlettered, destitute Bengali woman intuitively understands the malaria problem, and how she even goes beyond it, by using her homely remedy successfully as a cure for syphilis. The story moves from the nineteenth century to the twenty-first, the scenes dealing with which make use of computer jargon ("Let me feed a little factoid into your data base"). The sudden disappearance of Murugan, the greatest authority on Ross, on his visit to Calcutta, and the search for him add an element of mystery to this strange, many-pronged narrative.

The "Mystery novel," or fiction of espionage is also gaining ground. Earlier, the only respectable example of it was Manohar Malgonkar's *Spy in Amber* (1971). He has now written two more: *Bandicoot Run* (1982) and *The Garland Keepers* (1987), both against the background of Indo-Pakistan tensions. They both prove once again that Malgonkar is a superb story-teller. Notable among other examples of this genre are: K.R. Rai's *Telltale Teeth* (1982); N.C.Menon's *Mystery on the Mountain* (1986); *The Hunt for K* (1992) by Ramesh Menon; Ashok Banker's *Ten Dead Admen* (1993); and Shashi Warner's *Night of the Krait* (1996), *The Orphan* (1998), and *Sniper* (1999). Vikram A. Chandra's *The Srinagar Conspiracy* (2000) employs the format of a thriller to study the Kashmir problem. *The Mandala of Sherlock Holmes* (1999) by Jamyang Norbu (b. 1944) describes the adventures of Holmes in Tibet; the narrator is Hurree Chunder Mooket jee, a character in Kipling's *Kim*. Norbu perfectly recreates the peculiar English Hurree Chunder would have used if he had played Watson to Holmes. This graceful literary tribute to Kipling's *Kim* and Arthur Conan Doyle tells us a lot about Tibetan life and culture.

Earlier, the only significant children's writer was Ruskin Bond, who has to his credit more than thirty books of stories and poems for

children, including *The Blue Umbrella* (1968) and *Grandfather's Private Zoo* (1969). The last two decades have witnessed a significant growth of children's literature. In addition to novels like Rushdie's *Haroun and the Sea of Stories*, Farrukh Dhondy's *Poona Company* and Narlikar's *The Return of Vaman* which can be read with profit by children and adults alike, there are a number of books specifically for children. Arup Kumar Dutta's (b. 1946) novels like *The Kaziranga Trail* (1980), *The Blind Witness* (1985), *Revenge* (1986), *Crystal Cave* (1987), *Smack* (1990) and *Trouble at Kolongjarn* (1997) can go a long way in weaning Indian children away from Enid Blyton. Partap Sharma (b. 1939), playwright and novelist, has published four children's books, including the popular series on Dog Detective Ranjha which appeared as a cartoon strip in the children's magazine *Tinkle*.

Novels dealing with areas of experience largely unfamiliar to the common reader include: *The Flags of Convenience* (1982) by Dilip Mukerji which introduces us to the world of international shipping; J.C.Bhatt's *The Jagmohan Millions* (1982), in which we find ourselves in the world of big business; and Deepchand Behary's *That Others Might Live* (1990) which is unique in the annals of Indian English fiction in that it tells the fascinating story of the problems of the early Indian immigrants in Mauritius.

Among other novels of the period may be mentioned: B.L.Vohra's *The Thorn* (1983); Kewlian Sio's *What a Vieiv* (1985), a novella, the unprepossessing title of which does no justice to its expert portrayal of adolescent experience, redolent of a mood of nostalgia, so characteristic of this author; Sanjib Datta's *The Judas Tree* (1985); Akhileswar Jha's *Lessons in Love* (1988) and *The Motorcycle Mafia* (1995); Aniruddha Bahal's *A Crack in the Mirror* (1991); Banomali Goswami's *Circles of Hell* (1991) and *Untouchables* (1994) - a novel which (not unsurprisingly) compares extremely unfavourably with Mulk Raj Anand's novel on the same subject, which is now one of the classics of the world of fiction; Dilip Thakore's *Succession Derby* (1991), a highly entertaining picture of the corporate world, and its philosophy of one-upmanship, which would have been a far better novel but for the author's obsession with sex; R.K. Laxman's *The Messenger* (1993), a novel dealing with a young journalist's dilemmas, the best thing about which is the cartoon on the cover; R. W. Desai's *Frailty, Thy Name is Woman* (1993), which is probably the first Indian English novel written entirely in the epistolary form; Vijay Singh's

Whirlpool of Shadows (1993); Jayabroto Chatterjee's *Last Train to Innocence* (1995); the travel writer Pico Iyer's *Cuba and the Night* (1996) set in Cuba; Tahir Shah's *Sorcerer's Apprentice* (1998); and *A Diplomatic Encounter* (1999) by S.K.Banerji. Two promising first novels published recently are: *The Beauty of These Present Things* (2000) by Avtar Singh, and *Bombay-Wallah* (2000) by Shiv Sharma, the Bombay ambience in both of which leaves a deeper impression than the characters.

Note

Rushdie, Salman. *Imaginary Homelands: Essays and Criticism 1981-1991*. London: Granta, 1991.