

CHAPTER : I

THE ASCETIC : SOME THEORETICAL CONSIDERATIONS

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Although a good deal of writing has been done on the ideal of asceticism in Indian creative writing in English in various literary forms such as fiction, poetry and drama, very few efforts have been made so far to make its critical evaluation with reference to the Indo-Anglian novel. There is no denying the fact that a large number of novels depict the 'man in the saffron robe' and there has been a continuous stream of his portrayals ever since the appearance of fiction in Indian Writing in English, say, right from Bankim Chandra Chatterji's 'Anandmath' (1882) to this day.

I

Asceticism, it can be said, is synonymous with renunciation which itself is an ideal and has been a recurrent theme in many Indo-Anglian novels. It is as old as, one might say, Indian culture or Indian civilization itself. Its treatment by the creative writers may differ, its explication by the scholars may vary but the practice of renouncing the world or taking to asceticism is a quite common feature of many characters in the Indo-Anglian novels. A perceptive critic like Uma Parameswaran rightly states :

"Since India is a land where mysticism walks side by side with realism, most novels with an Indian setting include a pious man steeped in the scriptures, and Indo-Anglians eager to woo and win the Western reader, invariably add an eremite in the dramatic personae".¹

A few other noted critics like Meenakshi Mukherjee and K. R. Srinivas Iyengar have taken a due note of the considerable amount of the portrayal of the ascetic in the Indo-Anglian

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novel. Meenakshi Mukherjee, in particular, in her scholarly book, The Twice Born Fiction (1971), has devoted a special chapter entitled 'Renunciation as an Ideal' to a thorough explication of the theme of Renunciation, which has become a beacon light for researchers. To quote Meenakshi Mukherjee :

"This is a fundamental and all-pervasive ideal of Indian life, an ideal that cuts across the boundaries of language and regional culture, and as such it becomes a motif that can be traced in Indo-Anglian novels profitably".²

II

Being a land of temples, shrines, gods, goddesses and godlike people, India is full of saintly figures that are an integral part of the social life that obtains there. One comes across references to the presence of sadhus, faquirs and bairagis in India in the travelogues of various foreign visitors. This is an evidence of the prevalence of sadhus in India since antiquity. It is not surprising therefore, that they figure ubiquitously in the Indo-Anglian fiction. The ideal of asceticism is discernible in the Indo-Anglian fiction as a recurrent and compulsive motif. Even writers who are seemingly indifferent to the spiritual aspects of life have not been able to ignore it altogether as this is an all-pervasive cultural feature. We can see how sometimes a saint that figures in the novel is made to embody this difficult ideal. The ascetic, however, rarely becomes the central character of a narrative. Usually, he remains in the background influencing the characters and shaping the events in their life. This influence can be either benevolent or malevolent or even a complex and ambiguous one. The Indo-

Anglian writer usually gives some representation to the saintly figure, while depicting the panoramic picture of the society of his concern. However, it is only in three Indo-Anglian novels that we find the saintly character to be in the focus. They are Bhabani Bhattacharya's He Who Rides a Tiger (1954), R. K. Narayan's The Guide (1958) and Anand Lal's Seasons of Jupiter (1958).

III

The term 'asceticism' is derived from a Greek word which means 'training'. The athlet was one trained; and one might be an athlet in virtue or spiritualism. Also there are various terms denoting approximately the same concept of renunciation and asceticism. The list may account for terms like ascetic, anchorite, hermit, recluse, Swami, Sadhu, Yogi (Hindu) dervish, faquir, bairagi (Islam) eremite, monk, nun (Jain), sage, saint, seer, prior, friar, palmer, mystic, minstrel, priest, ecclesiastic, clergyman and so on. There are, of course, different shades in their connotations but the species is the same. The term ascetic can be defined variously, e.g., a saint is one who is altruistic, a devotee of god, and a man of divine vision. The meaning of the word Sadhu is 'righteous', 'virtuous', 'detached', 'selfless', 'disinterested', 'unsociable', 'stoical' etc. The Mahabharata, the great classic of India, uses the word 'saint' to mean 'virtuous' and the Bhagvat purana uses it to mean a 'holy man' or a 'divine soul'.

IV

I think, it will be profitable to look at the paraphernalia and the way of life of the ascetic or his counterparts in India. India is a continental country and so legitimately the Sadhus belonging to different religions and sects have their own ways

of penance, austerity, vows, meditation, customs and codes of conduct.

Some of the saints grow long hair, moustache and beard. Some keep their hair hanging down the head. Some have long and matted hair but in other cases it is formed into a rough coil at the top or is entirely shaved off. Some put on a loin-cloth and some are totally naked (especially Jain Digambar monks). Some keep a conch with them and others carve different figures on their body in sandalwood paste. A deer-skin or a tiger-skin serves as their matting. These are houseless (Aniketa) people for whom the sky is the roof and the ground is the matting. Generally, a temple, a cave, a grove, a sanctum or a resort is their abode.

The Sadhus carry a begging bowl, which in its simplest form is made of a hollowed-out coconut or a gourd, but is sometimes of brass, figured or otherwise ornamented, and furnished with a lid or a handle and also a waterpot, a trident and usually a wooden staff. The robes of the ascetics are ordinarily salmon-coloured, but sometimes other colours are preferred according to the sect or order to which they belong. Some ascetics bear ash-lines on their forehead. The ash-lines on the forehead are either horizontally or vertically parallel. Some ascetics besmear their whole body with ashes.

In the Digambara (Sky-Clad) sect, strict observance of rules demands that monks should wander naked. The Sadhus who do not retain an almsbowl use their cupped palms for receiving and eating food. They pay close attention to the five great vows ; (anuvratas) viz. the primary vows of abstinence from gross violence, gross falsehood, and gross stealing and

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contentment with one's own wife and limitation of possessions.

In the Law Book of Manu, the formal conditions and rules of ascetic life are set forth, and these are in large parts repeated, quoted, or amplified in the later Dharmasutras. It will be noticed that Manu confined the rights and privileges of the ascetic life to the twice-born. It will be interesting to quote here a few excerpts from these sources :

"A twice-born Santaka, who has thus lived according to the law in the order of householders, may go forth from the village into the forest and reside there, duly controlling his senses. Let him offer those five great sacrifices according to the rule, with various kinds of pure food fit for ascetics, or with herbs, roots and fruit. Let him wear a skin or a tattered garment; let him bathe in the evening or in the morning; and let him always wear his hair in braids, the hair on his body, his beard, and his nails (being unclipped)... Let him be always industrious in privately reciting the Veda, let him be patient of hardships ... ever liberal ... and compassionate towards all living creatures."

Then follow the directions regarding the sacrifices the ascetic must offer, and the kind and quantity of food he may eat :

"In summer let him expose himself to the heat of fires, during the rainy season live under the open sky, and in winter, be dressed in wet clothes, gradually increasing his austerities. When he bathes at the three Savanas (sunrise, noon and sunset) let him offer libations of water to the manes and the gods, and by practising harsher and harsher austerities, let him dry up his bodily frame ... let him live without a fire, without a house, wholly silent subsisting on roots and fruit ... chaste.



sleeping on the bare ground, dwelling at the roots of trees. Having thus passed the third part of life in the forest, he may live as an ascetic during the fourth part of his existence after abandoning all attachment to worldly objects ... after offering sacrifices and subduing his senses ... an ascetic gains bliss after death. Departing from his house ... let him wander about absolutely silent, and caring nothing for enjoyment that may be offered. Let him always wander alone without any companion, in order to attain (final liberation) ... He shall neither possess a fire nor a dwelling. He may go to a village for his food, indifferent to everything, meditating and concentrating his mind on Brahman. A potshred (for an alms^s bowl), the roots of trees (for dwelling) coarse worn-out garments, life in solitude and indifference towards everything, are the marks of one who has attained liberation. Let him not desire to die, let him not desire to live, let him wait for his time, as a servant for the payment of his wages ... let him patiently bear hard words, let him not insult anybody, let him not become anybody's enemy for the sake of this body ... entirely abstaining from sensual enjoyments, with himself for his only companion he shall live in this world, desiring the bliss (of final emancipation). Carrying an almsbowl, a staff and a water-pot let him continually wander about, controlling himself and not hurting any creature ... A gourd, a wooden bowl, an earthen dish or one made of split cane, Manu, the son of Svayambhu, has declared to be vessels (suitable) for an ascetic."

The Jain ascetics, in particular, are practitioners of extreme religious austerities. Among the Jain, spiritual liberation (Moksa) is normally achieved only by a monk (sadhu)

or a nun (sadhvi) who has received initiation into an ascetic order and who observes a severe code of conduct governing every aspect of his or her spiritual and mundane activities. Their initiation involves the plucking of the hair by the roots. Thereafter, the ascetic retains only a minimum of necessary possessions, like a loincloth and an upper garment, usually white, an alms-bowl, a peacock feather duster to brush away insects from the path without doing harm to them, a cloth to strain drinking water and a cloth-mask to wear ~~over~~ the mouth (mukha-vastrika) to prevent accidental inhaling of insects.

Almost similar is the ritualism with the Buddhist Shravakas and Shravikas.

These ascetics strive to control their emotions and to minimise their bodily needs. Although rules differ among sectrian groups, the monks generally eat only once a day, never take food or drink after the night fall, do not eat roots, and do not travel in public transport. The underlying basis for most of the rules is 'ahimsa' (the vow of not to inflict injury on any form of life, even unwillingly). Tapas (physical and spiritual austerity) is also considered of great value in purging the soul of the past sins and preventing the influx of new karman.

In spite of the diversity in their ascetic practices, the Sadhus have one thing in common, and that is their ceaseless efforts to attain the state of the Supreme Being and their readiness to offer intense devotion for its accomplishment.

It is quite interesting to note that not all the Sadhus

are sadhus in flesh and blood. The holy saffron robe, for some, is a convenient disguise—especially for criminals, convicts, tramps, destitutes and petty thieves—because by so doing they are able to conceal their identity and at the same time, for them, it is a source of two regular meals a day. Also there are fraudulent people and charlatans who frequently try to pass for sadhus. These counterfeit holy men or in other words, the pseudo-eremites, sometimes outnumber the genuine ones.

V

I think, it is beneficial to look at, in brief, the spiritual and philosophical make-up of the Indian culture to gain a proper perspective on the ideal of asceticism. The Upanishads are the earliest speculative elaborations in prose and verse, of the Vedas. Of fundamental importance to all Hindu thought is the equation in some of the Upanishads, of atman (the self) with Brahman (the ultimate reality), summed up in the Chandogya Upanishad by the phrase 'tat tvam asi' (that are thou). The nature of morality and of eternal life is discussed in Katha Upanishad, in the tale of Nachiketas, who visits Yama, the God of the dead. The other themes are transmigration (discussed in the Chandogya and the Brihadaranyaka Upanishads) and causality of creation. The Vedanta is the orthodox system of Indian philosophy that forms the basis for most modern schools of Hinduism. The fundamental Vedanta texts are the Upanishads, the Brahma-Sutras (also called Vedanta-Sutras) and the Bhagavadgita (The Lord's Song). The Gita in particular, presents a detailed discussion of the Sthitapradnya in whom we can trace the origin of an ideal ascetic.

The Sthitapradnya of the Gita is synonymous with the

jivan-mukta of the Yogavasistha. He is not necessarily a man who has totally renounced the world or the mundane affairs. He could very well be a man living among the activities and temptations of life and doing many things that the common men do, and still be different internally.

In India, ascetic practices have been very widely prevalent from times immemorial. The mortification of the body and the self-inflicted penances associated therewith, have been habitually carried to lengths beyond any thing familiar to other peoples. Tradition and legend have united to glorify the ascetic whether human or Divine. Religion as elsewhere has sanctioned and encouraged his devotion. The ascetic has always been held in the highest esteem and his claim to seek his livelihood from the public by ways of gifts and alms is universally acknowledged. The ascetic has always exercised a considerable influence on the life and literature of the land. The reverence for the saint or sadhu arises out of the popular faith that he is almost an incarnation of the Divinity, that has attained the state of being that others can only dream of. One can make an incidental distinction between sadhus who exert a benevolent influence and sadhus who exercise a malevolent influence on the society. Of course, whether people derive the good influence from him or not often depends on the nature of the people themselves. In the Indo-Anglian novel, as in Indian literature, the ascetic is a very recurrent character. With this background in mind, now let us explicate the theme of asceticism as it occurs in the Indo-Anglian novels with special reference to the three novels in which the ascetic figures as the central character.

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1. Uma Parameswaran, A Study of Representative Indo-English Novelists (1976), Vikas Publishing House, Delhi, P. 97.
2. Meenakshi Mukherjee, The Twice Born Fiction (1974), Heinemann, Delhi, P. 102.