

CHAPTER : II

THE ASCETIC IN THE INDO-ANGLIAN NOVEL : A BRIEF SURVEY

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In addition to my detailed study of the three major novels, viz., He Who Rides a Tiger (1954) by Bhabani Bhattacharya, Seasons of Jupiter (1958) by Anand Lall and The Guide (1958) by R. K. Narayan where the holy man himself is the protagonist, I would like to take a survey of a few more novels in which the ascetic figures only marginally and the theme of asceticism is an auxiliary or incidental one, with a view to gaining a wider perspective on the topic of my study. It is a brief survey of the novels with the theme of asceticism occurring in the Indo-Anglian novels right from 1882 to 1975. The novels are arranged chronologically.

Bankim Chandra Chatterji, the pioneer of the Indo-Anglian novel, is perhaps the earliest novelist to deal with the theme of asceticism. In his Anandmath (1882), originally written in Bengali and then translated into English, Bankim introduces Sanyasis (wandering ascetics) into the fictional narratives. The Sanyasi as a Guru, a Swami, a Yogi, a Mahanta or a Faquir figures often in this and other novels. This trend continues in the succeeding novels and stories of the Indo-Anglian writers. The character of the ascetic in its various roles and categories appears sometimes as a benevolent, sometimes as a malevolent and sometimes as a merely comic or ludicrous one.

Vasudev Sastri (1905) is an unfinished novel by B. Rajam Iyer. The skilful juxtaposition of humour and pathos in the novel makes it a very interesting reading. What strikes more to the reader is its characterization. Vasudev Sastri is

a great Vedantin in whom the author tries to combine noble ideals of Hindu religion and philosophy. He is a middle-aged man of fair complexion and well-proportioned limbs. His face has a calmness, serenity and luxuriant cheerfulness of a full-blown lotus flower. An ancient Rishi would have envied him. His eyes have an angelic expression of goodness. He does not depend upon anything outside for his pleasure and is never known to be excited by the worldly pleasures or pains. Thus, he leads a life of detachment with a view to reaching the state of a philosopher and ascetic.

My Brother's Face (1925) by Dhan Gopal Mukherji is a novelette dealing with the impressions of an Indian, now settled in America, who visits his homeland after a long time. The story's main concern seems to delineate the philosophical background of India. The author meets many saints from whom he hears words of wisdom and truth. He also describes his brother's career as a child, as a school-boy and as a youth. The story also seems to apparently aim at dealing with Indian politics but misses the target and gets diverted to philosophical teaching of the ancient Hindu values. It is one of the long stories in the series of jungle-life stories by Dhan Gopal Mukherji who is known for his interest in the depiction of wild life. The narrative is mostly dry and prosaic.

Mulk Raj Anand is all furious in his treatment of the holy (?) men. His holy men who are seen in the robes of priests are rank hypocrites and rogues. He has not a single good word to say about these priests. He exposes their insides without any reserve. His priests lack the requisite spiritual authenticity and sanctity and on the contrary, are the embodiments of

injustice, tyranny, hypocrisy and lechery. The priest in his Coolie (1933) seeks physical gratification under the pretence of performing a religious ritual to bring fertility to a childless woman. Pandit Kali Nath in Untouchable (1935), a hypocrite who complains of pollution at the touch of Bakha, a low-caste boy, starts swallowing his saliva at the approach of Bakha's buxom sister Sohini. He is a counterfeit holy man concealing his dark deeds behind the priestly robe. Anand waxes scornfully eloquent against these holy men and hence bears an impress of a propagandist and satirist.

In R. K. Narayan's The Bachelor of Arts (1935), Chandran, the hero, is circumstanced to disguise as a saint for some time amidst the villagers of Koppal. The gullibility of the villagers is manifested in their devout worship of this feigned saint. Narayan has portrayed the character in his usual natural, lucid and plain style.

In Kanthapura (1938) of Raja Rao, Moorthy is the spokesman of the ideal of renunciation. He is a young Brahmin boy who rises above the desires of the flesh and the fear of excommunication and the censures of his fellow beings. Being young, he has still to fight with himself to achieve equanimity. Moorthy's struggle with himself to attain this feeling of non-attachment or renunciation is explicit in his encounter with Ratna, a young widowed girl. His momentary anguish at being excluded from the social functions of the village and his instinctive revulsion on entering an untouchable's house exemplify his struggle within himself to attain renunciation. However, at such moments, Moorthy is swayed by his emotions and prejudices. He is still in the process of conquering his senses.

He is the village Mahatma leading the Gandhian revolution in Kanthapura. Raja Rao is poetic in his style.

Mohant Nandgir in Mulk Raj Anand's The Village (1939) is a typical Anand priest who smokes hemp, drinks bhang, punishes the villagers and indulges in fornification. It is his preoccupation to keep the village people unenlightened and always under his thumb so that they won't question his authority. He exemplifies the mockery of sainthood.

Men and Rivers (1945) by Prof. Humayun Kabir is, perhaps, one of the best contemporary novels. Among others, it depicts the character of a Muslim faquir whose ritualism is realistically described in a scene in which a young girl is exorcised of her possession by the evil spirit. The scene shows how the countryside people of India (here East Bengal) are superstitious, gullible and constantly under the grip of fake, rude and humbug faquirs to whom they approach for help and succour. The scene represents the inherent superstitiousness of the Muslims in the Indian subcontinent. Prof. Kabir's style is unartificial, lucid but gripping.

All About H. Hatter (1948) by G. V. Desani is written in a mock-serious style. It consists of seven episodes in which seven types of counterfeits make a fool of Mr. H. Hatter. It is supposed to be the autobiography of an Anglo-Malayan orphan brought up in India. As usual the holy robe exploits the faith and interest of the orthodox Indians. Hatter is an embodiment of the eternal dupe who is an easy prey to all the counterfeits. As Prof. Mehta rightly comments :

"The novel is simply fantastic. Nonsense and sense, irony and humour, philosophy and comedy, absurdity and sense,

lofty wisdom and sheer buffoonery are packed pell mell in the novel. The novel is a fantastic curiosity of a highly intelligent creative genius".<sup>1</sup>

The preoccupation of Mr. Desani throughout his All About H. Hatter is to expose the hypocrisy of the pseudo-saints, and in so doing, he in his sardonic style hits hard against the intellectual, social and religious charlatanism.

The Flame of the Forest (1955) by Sudhin N. Ghose is the fourth novel of his tetralogy. It has a young girl, Mynah by name, in the role of an ascetic. Mynah, the Kirtani, is a girl who sings of God and moves from place to place. She is not ambitious of renunciation but has had a mystic experience, a revelation in the Himalayas that has changed the course of her life. She comes in contact with the unnamed hero of the novel, an adolescent boy whom she addresses as Balaram. This Balaram is a confused rationalist and has no spiritual inclination. He is constantly afraid of Mynah's mystic moods. At first, he resists the temptation to join her as her spiritual companion but later on circumstances compel him to yield. The novel represents a female ascetic.

In his Waiting for the Mahatma (1955), R. K. Narayan gives a special treatment to the ideal of sainthood. In this novel, the Mahatma himself emerges to mitigate the sufferings of the villagers and to uplift the masses. Like Jesus Christ, he accepts death to redeem the sufferings of others. The Gandhian ideal of sainthood is artistically represented.

In Santha Rama Rau's Remember the House (1956), the mother is a character who renounces the possessions of this world, a rich household, an eminent husband, and a full family

life and lives like a nun far away from her place, in a town in Kerala where her Guru lives. In the Indian context it is quite an unusual affair of a married woman.

In The Dark Dancer (1959) of B. Rajan, Krishnan the protagonist, finds ultimate peace of mind through the sufferings of his own life. After the death of his wife, he is purged of his elemental impurities and changed throughout. He abandons his desire, passion and quest for happiness and ~~concern~~ concern for belongings and emerges a free and detached man. This detachment lends a proper dimension to his wandering soul and leads him to the realization of the 'Self' which is beyond the limited concept of happiness. He no longer worries about his identity or his aim in life. The tension and stress in his early life is replaced by detachment. The novel represents the Gita's ideal of a detached man.

In The Serpent and the Rope (1960) of Raja Rao's, the final solution to all the problems in Ramaswamy's mind is sought through renunciation. It is almost an epic written in a grand poetic style, and almost encyclopaedic in its scope. Ramaswamy, the central character, is a research scholar who has studied the religious texts and has digested them. He is an introvert brooding over the meaning of life. He has his spiritual Guru in Travancore. He wants to liberate himself from his self and for achieving this what he needs is a Guru. At times, he feels detached and saintly and the very next moment he turns sensual and hedonistic. The novel is replete with philosophical discourses. Rama's wife, the French girl Madeleine, is another spiritual character in the novel. She turns to Buddhism. She undergoes all the bitter and sweet

experiences of life but tries to go beyond them through the observance of austerity. The novel is indeed an epic in spiritualism and philosophy.

Bhabani Bhattacharya's A Goddess Named Gold (1960) has a wandering minstrel who resolves the crisis brought about by a vicious cycle of misunderstandings among the villagers of Sonamitti. In fact, the crisis is the creature of the minstrel's brain. He is a large-hearted man, a sage with great power of doing good. Meera is another saintlike character with a ring of reformatory zeal and patriotism about her. The wandering minstrel, an incarnation of Gandhi, is Meera's grandfather about whose wanderings and activities very little is known. There is a certain air of mystery about him. Some believe that in his previous birth he was Atmaram, a disciple of a great sage living on the Himalayas. He is a benevolent minstrel and is a "veiled representation of the Father of the Nation"<sup>2</sup>, as K. R. Chandrasekharan rightly puts it. The minstrel assumes that only freedom is capable of bringing about miracle and not the Taveez (Talisman). The Taveez presented to Meera is only a symbol of freedom. The minstrel is a regular visitor at important fairs, gatherings and meetings. The Minstrel and Meera exemplify the Gandhian concept of sainthood. The story is an allegory.

The treatment of the theme of asceticism in Kamala Markandaya's A Silence of Desire (1960) is rather a complex and ambiguous one. At first, the Swami's influence appears to be malevolent because it breaks up a normal, happy, harmonious domestic life of the banker Dankar with his wife Sarojini. Sarojini, a traditional Hindu woman and an ideal wife, becomes



a devotee of the Swamiji to get a growth in her womb cured. In the beginning, Dandekar is enraged at this affair on account of his suspicion of some obscure relationship between his wife and the Swami. But when he approaches the Swami, he himself feels calm and detached from the day to day humdrum life. The Swami has a solace to offer even to a sceptic like Dandekar. He is the supporter and benefactor of a hundred destitutes and ailing people and feeds them from the gifts he receives from people. The complications are resolved at the disappearance of the Swami. However, the question whether he is a saint or a charlatan still remains unanswered. The Swami functions not as an individual who lives his own life, but as a public figure for the fulfilment of certain needs of <sup>the</sup> society. He satisfies the needs of the people who badly need an object of faith. It is the 'social function' of the Swami that counts and not the 'spiritual' one. According to Uma Parameswaran, the ascetic in A Silence of Desire is a true ascetic and hence she admires the novelist for giving such a 'fine portrayal' of a saint. The Swami has no attachments. He claims to give solace to the destitutes, and no one who meets him is disappointed. He comforts people without too many words. Dandekar, who goes to accuse the Swami, finds himself accused.

The Silver Pilgrimage (1961) of Anantanarayan M. is overpacked with philosophical discourses and consequently deprived of the story element. It is a travelogue on Prince Jayasurya's pilgrimage to Kashi. The overload of philosophy overbears the artistic and the aesthetic finesse of the novel.

The major concern of Mulk Raj Anand in his The Road (1961) is 'social protest'. He tries to give vent to the trials

and tribulations of the untouchables; his attempt is to draw attention to the injustice done to the untouchables by the caste Hindus. Asceticism, of course, is one of the auxiliary themes of the novel. Pandit Suraj Mani is the temple authority who is all the while engaged more in the village politics than in his holy duties. Anand exposes the wretched old Brahmin who is misplaced in the holy temple. The pandit is an old lecher, a "crafty Brahmin dog" who neglects his duty in the temple and keeps lingering at the public well where he has an opportunity of observing the beautiful young girls of the village. The following passages, for instance, reveal the character of the pseudo-pandit.

"Pandit Suraj Mani devoutly lifted the triple cord from his waist upward to the shoulder and adjusted it around his left ear, where it had already been wrapped for the duration of the ceremony of evacuation. This movement gave him just the time he needed to appreciate the contours of Rukmani's figure."<sup>3</sup>

And also note :

"Pandit Suraj Mani's eyes caress the curves of her body with the concentrated lasciviousness of old age. Then he begins deliberately to mutter his breath. Ram ! Ram !"<sup>4</sup>

This is the peak of hypocrisy that the Pandit reaches. A few more quotations will suffice to stamp the pandit as a hypocrite :

"After he had cooled down enough, he felt he should stop the ablution but he had hoped that one or two of the village women would come to draw water and see him bathing- especially because his body was showing transparently through the muslin loincloth".<sup>5</sup>

And also note:

"Tell your father that, Bhiku, has gone to Dhooli Singh's field," he said, "These Chamar boys are up to mischief..."<sup>6</sup> These are the words from the mouth of the holy (?) priest. In fact, a priest like him must have equal consideration for all, but this Pandit is a hypocrite puffed up with the pride of priesthood. Anand lashes him with his lash of satire.

In Anita Desai's first novel, Cry The Peacock (1963), Maya is the central figure, and her husband Gautam, a passive and detached intellectual, is somewhat bewildered by her hypersensitivity. Gautam is a busy lawyer. Cultured, rational and practical as he is, he is too much busy with his mundane affairs to fulfil the demands, partly emotional, partly spiritual, of his young wife. Maya's belief in the stars' prophecy and the decrease of fate and her whimsical spiritualism flabberghast him. Consequently, they lead a nightmarish life. This reminds us of the couple in the A Silence of Desire.

In The Cat and Shakespeare (1965) of Raja Rao, Govindan Nair is a developed version of Moorthy in Kanthapura. He no longer struggles with himself in the pursuit of non-attachment. Govindan Nair, a ration office clerk, is a comic metaphysician whose speech is a mixture of philosophy and humour. Prof. Iyengar calls the novel a 'metaphysical comedy'. The higher spiritual wisdom (Paravidya) pervades his speech. The other parallel character, Ramakrishna Pai (who is the narrator), is also a spiritualist like Nair. The novel appears like a spiritual fantasy and at many places remains beyond the comprehension of the reader. In the words of Prof. Iyengar, it is an Upanisad, part narrative, part speculation.

The Vendor of Sweets : (1967) by R. K. Narayan is a story of a loving father who ultimately gets disillusioned by his sons ingratiitudes. Jagan, the sweet vendor, coming from the lowest stratum of society, is a philosopher in his own way. Not only does he sell sweets but also his philosophy. He happens to be a follower of Mahatma Gandhi and the Gita. After his disillusionment with his family life, Jagan meets a bearded old man, a carver of stone-statues, and goes to his mountain retreat and sees the garden and the temple without an idol and decides to buy the place. He asks the bearded man to complete the idol of Goddess Gayatri and settles down in that remote retreat in the recesses of the Mempi forest. He hands over the management of the sweet shop to his cousin. The story is a vivid account of the Ashram life of the sweet vendor,—an age-old practice of the sadhus of the past.

In her A New Dominion (1972) Mrs. R. P. Jhabvala aims at presenting a European view of modern India. The West is represented by three girls viz., Lee, Margaret and Evie who have come to India in a spiritual quest. Then there are in the cast, Raymond, a tourist guide, and Miss Charlotte, a Christian missionary. While the three girls are looking for miracles, god-men and Swamis to bring balm to their tormented souls, Raymond cannot appreciate India and Miss Charlotte is busy with educational reforms and economic security in India. Lee and Margaret and Evie identify themselves with the Swamiji who, for them represents the soul of India. The Swamiji is a magnetic personality with whom Lee has even sexual experiences. The Swamiji's pompous behaviour and the hateful elements of his characters are clearly portrayed. But Lee is a blind believer in



introducing an ascetic in their novels, keeping the western audience in view.

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